Don’t Want to Live Forever

by Bruteaous

Summary

AU. Maggie Sawyer was born in Nebraska in the 1896. Through a freak accident, Maggie becomes biologically immortal and lives through the Twentieth Century appearing perpetually in her mid-twenties. By the time she meets Alex Danvers, she’s lived 120 years, but nothing can quite compare to loving Alex.

Notes

This is as much a character study of Maggie as an Alex/Maggie romance. It gives her a background that I don’t necessarily wish she had in the series as it is, but as someone she could possibly be given a different world and a different set of rules. The story spans several chapters. Maggie will meet and love a few women before she gets to Alex- who we all know is her last and best love in every way. I took some liberties with history, predominantly that women soldiers were allowed to fight in both World Wars. Please leave a comment after reading and let me know if there is interest for this to continue.
“Keep up, Maggie or I’m going to beat you!” Eliza shouted behind her.

Maggie swung her arms faster at her sides and her shoes dug deeper into the slightly frosted earth of the road beneath her feet as her pace increased. The schoolhouse had just let out for the day and Eliza’s father and brothers were preparing to herd their cattle in for deworming in the early spring so they hadn’t been able to come into town to bring them home from school. There was a light dusting of frost on the ground, but not so much that Maggie and Eliza couldn’t race each other home safely. For most of the three mile stretch, Maggie kept pace with her best friend, her own darker hair flowing in the chill breeze next to Eliza’s blonde locks. Both of their builds were similar, both slim and relatively short in their homespun wool dresses, both the resolutely robust children of westward homesteaders.

Maggie and Eliza had been friends since they were old enough to speak. They’d shared everything from their first words to toys to one another’s secrets. Even now, as they raced along the road towards their families’ houses, the warm bursts of air exiting their lungs mingled together in the frigid atmosphere as they ran connecting them in yet another way. Maggie’s shoulder brushed Eliza’s as she gained the advantage in the last few feet before they both stopped at the rail fence separating their families’ properties, bent over and panting.

“I win!” Maggie shouted, once she’d caught her breath.

Eliza straightened, her light blue almost grey eyes meeting Maggie’s dark brown ones and glinting mischievously.

“This time,” Eliza panted, grinning in a way that made Maggie’s stomach flip. “Next time, I’ll have you.”

“You’ll always have me, Lizzie.” Maggie said, feeling her heart beat faster in her chest, thumping loudly in her ears as her insides swelled with feeling for the other girl.

“And you’ll always have me,” Eliza smiled back with a carefree wink.

“Eliza, come in now! The table still needs to be set for dinner!” Eliza’s mother shouted from the steps of their house.

“Gotta run,” Eliza said, racing off in the direction of her home.

The other girl turned around and shot Maggie another brief dazzling smile once and, twirling dramatically, made to do her impression of a curtesy before her mother shouted again and Eliza leapt up giggling and disappeared into her house.

Maggie brought a hand up to her chest and leaned heavily back against the rail fence as she tried in vain to quiet the racing of her heart. Her increasing fondness for her best friend was growing harder and harder to ignore. Maggie tried to tell herself that it was the same type of love that all best friends should share for one another, a platonic love, but in her heart, Maggie knew it was
more than that. It’d struck her one day while they were eating lunch on the benches behind the schoolhouse and the remainder of a molasses cake had stuck itself stubbornly to one corner of Eliza’s mouth after they’d finished.

_I wish I could kiss that cake off from her lips_, Maggie had thought then, _like a sweetheart would kiss her, but girl’s sweethearts are always boys aren’t they?

Since that afternoon in November, Maggie had been haunted by her growing feelings for Eliza and the knowledge that they weren’t the type of feelings that she was allowed to have for another girl her own age, however, one large part of Maggie’s heart dared to hope against hope. If Maggie was feeling this way, then might Eliza too share her feelings? How could it be that love could be discovered by one heart and not felt by the other? When Eliza’s eyes met Maggie’s, she could imagine their shared love connecting them like an invisible length of twine and if that love were to be true—and Maggie knew that it was—then how could it ever be perceived as wrong? Maggie had never heard of such a romantic love between two women, but that didn’t matter to her. Her brother Dominic didn’t believe that it was a woman who first bicycled around the world, but just because he wouldn’t believe Maggie and had never heard of it firsthand didn’t mean that it wasn’t true.

_I need to tell her_, Maggie thought, shuddering slightly as a chill wind whipped her dark hair into her face and seemingly cut right through the solidness of her entire being. _What have I got to lose?

After a few more minutes silently staring at the pinewood planks of Eliza’s house, Maggie climbed over the fence and scurried up the short hill to her own.

OOOOOOOO

Maggie’s mother had made beef, cabbage, and potato soup for dinner with soda biscuits. It was a common enough staple of their diet, but not so common that Maggie had grown tired of eating it. Even so, she found she had no stomach for food tonight. She and Dominic sat on one side of the table. Their father sat at the head and their mother served all of them, only sitting down at the end when everyone else had a bowl of hot soup and a few biscuits to themselves. They ate in silence for a while, taking more interest in the warm meal than in conversation among themselves until Maggie’s father noticed that she wasn’t eating.

“What’s wrong with you, girl?” He asked in that gritty straightforward voice Maggie had always feared even when she was too young to know what that voice meant.

“What’s wrong with you, girl?” He asked in that gritty straightforward voice Maggie had always feared even when she was too young to know what that voice meant.

“Nothing, Papa.” Maggie answered quietly.

“MmHm,” he hummed, patting down the tobacco into the pipe beside his bowl on the table.

He did this rhythmically every night until the tobacco had been packed as unyielding as clay in a pot, then he sat the pipe back up on the tabletop and stared down his nose at Maggie, dark eyes boring down into her own not with curiosity, but with a firmness that always made Maggie sit a little straighter in her seat.

“Why aren’t you eating?” He asked again.

Maggie looked down into the bowl of soup in front of her and picked up a piece of floating cabbage with her spoon then let it drop limply back into the murky liquid below. She could feel her
entire family’s eyes on her at this point and it made Maggie want to curl up into a ball and hide. She’d never liked being the center of attention. It usually meant bad things.

“I’m talking to you girl.” Her father continued, only his voice had a darker edge to it.

“Maybe she’s just tired from studying all day at school.” Her mother interjected cheerfully. “Did you study hard today at school, Margaret?”

“I—” Maggie started, but was stopped from finishing by her father.

“What’s studying at school have to do with not eating the food you put in front of her?” Her father bellowed unnecessarily. “when I was her age there wasn’t even a schoolhouse in this town to go to! I worked with my step-father with the cows from sun up until sun down. School’s a waste of time for a girl if you ask me. She should be out learning how to look after a husband—”

“We had a test at school today.” Dominic piped in. When their father leveled an angry look at him for being interrupted, the boy’s dark eyes—so like his sister’s—dropped down to his soup. “Well, we did. A grammar test.”

“A grammar test? Oh that’s lovely! And how did you both do on the test?” Their mother asked, seemingly delighted to be spared another one of her husband’s rants about the world and how it was going to hell in a handbasket.

“We won’t find out until Monday after the teacher grades them.” Maggie said, before bringing a spoonful of soup up to her mouth. It was lukewarm now, but if the act of eating kept her father from being angry with her, she would gladly suffer a few mouthfuls.

“What do you need with grammar anyway? Can you eat grammar? Can you plow the fields with it?” Their father argued, pushing away his empty soup bowl and chewing a biscuit nosily as crumbs littered his off brown work shirt.

“Mrs. Kopchovsky says grammar is very useful.” Dominic said defiantly. “She says we need it to make sure we can articulate our thoughts and so as we don’t look like fools when we go off to University in big cities like Omaha.”

“And where does she think anyone around here is going to get money to send their children to university in Nebraska City? Waste of time and money, if you ask me. The stupid bitch.” Their father grumbled.

“Robbie! I won’t have language like that in front of the children,” their mother said, in her calm even voice.

“I’m going to check the locks on the barn doors.” Their father grumbled, standing up and stuffing his pipe into his pocket which left no question as to why he was actually leaving them. “Maybe when I come back, there’ll be a piece of raisin pie waiting for me instead of the contempt of my over-read wife and ungrateful children.”

The front door slammed and Maggie’s shoulders sagged in relief. Their mother stood, busying away their bowls and utensils. When Maggie finally raised her eyes from the tabletop some time later, her mother was standing between her and Dominic.

“Shall we have that pie now, dear?” Her mother asked, gently using one hand to brush Maggie’s bangs out of her eyes.
They’d each eaten a slice of pie and been ushered up to their room to sleep. The second floor of the homestead only had two rooms. One their parents occupied and one that Maggie and Dominic had to share. Dominic had crawled into the bed on his side of the room and turned out his light almost immediately, but instead Maggie sat down at the desk in the middle of the room that they each used for schoolwork. She pulled out her composition book from one of the drawers and—after making sure that Dominic was indeed turned away from her—pulled out the Valentine’s Day card she’d picked up from the general store her grandparents owned with her mother earlier in the week. Josie Sawyer was a romantic at heart—one of the things Maggie had inherited from her—and she always insisted that her daughter participate in the Valentine’s Day festivities at her school, which usually involved bringing a card with an apple or a sweet cake a girl had baked to the boy of her choice.

Maggie had always avoided celebrating the holiday at school. Eliza would tease her about it, but the truth was that there was never a boy Maggie liked enough to waste the card on and, the cakes her mother made her bake, Maggie usually ate herself or gave to Mrs. Kopchovsky at the start of the day.

Not this year, Maggie thought as she looked at the card.

The back was blank and on the front was a picture of two angels against a blue sky with butterfly wings, painting a red heart on a golden easel. Beneath their feet, it simply said in scrolling script, “To My Valentine…” She hadn’t picked out the card, but if Eliza felt the same way about her, Maggie was sure the glittery tackiness wouldn’t matter. She opened the middle drawer, pulling out the Waterman fountain pen her brother had been given for Christmas. Dominic hadn’t used it yet so it was still wrapped in wax paper in its box. Maggie carefully unwrapped it and filled it with ink from a well on the desktop. When the painstaking process was done, Maggie closed the reservoir and turned the card over.

With a courage that was only in her heart, Maggie began to pour out her feelings.

The next day, Maggie waited for Eliza to come out of the schoolhouse. She’d carried the Valentine card to school with her in her mathematics book, but hadn’t been able to bring herself to give it to Eliza in person over the course of the day not even while her fellow classmates did so to their own valentines. Maggie had meant to, but every time Eliza looked at her with those perfect blue eyes or with the corner of her lips turned up mischievously in that charming way that made Maggie’s heart speed up and butterflies rise up in her stomach, she lost whatever bravery she’d hoped to have.

Finally, the lunch bell had wrung, Eliza had gone back into the building and Maggie had seen her chance. She’d stuffed the card in Eliza’s lunch pail and taken her seat again. When the lessons for the day were over, Maggie had grabbed her books and her wool overcoat and waited out in the schoolyard for Eliza to gather her things like usual…only Eliza hadn’t come out to meet her yet. Maggie waited ten minutes, then fifteen, then twenty, then twenty-five. Finally, as the sun began to go down, Maggie walked back inside the schoolhouse. All of the other students had already left, only Mrs. Kopchovsky remained, who was busy washing the chalk board. She looked up when she
heard Maggie’s boots against the floorboards.

“Margaret, what are you still doing here?” the teacher asked, settling her hands on her hips, but not in a challenging way.

“I’m waiting for Lizzie, um, Eliza Wilke.” Maggie said, scuffing one of her feet against the floorboards nervously. “Do you know where she is?”

“She filed out with the other students, ahead of you I think.” Mrs. Kopchovsky said, wiping her hands on her skirt. “Maybe her mother needed her home early?”

“Maybe,” Maggie shrugged, not believing it for a second.

Eliza had always waited for her. Ever since they were little girls.

Maggie walked home that night alone for the first time that she could remember since she’d started school. The late winter cold that was usually kept mostly at bay by the sturdy woolen jacket her mother had bought her, seemed to burn its way through her clothes as if Maggie were naked. When she passed the Wilke’s homestead, lights were on beyond the curtains. She considered running up onto their front porch—the place where Eliza, Maggie, and Dominick would play Tiddlywinks on summer mornings after breakfast—knock on the door and ask for Eliza, but the cowardly part of her knew that wouldn’t be a good idea. If Eliza hadn’t waited for her, there had to be a reason.

Maybe she’d been too afraid to tell Maggie how she felt in person too? Maybe she’d gone home because she needed to collect her courage before she saw Maggie again? Maybe she hadn’t even read the card yet?

Maggie didn’t know. All she knew as the tears welled up in her eyes and pain flared in her chest was that her heart was breaking.

OOOOOOO

Friday night dinner was always a special occasion in the Sawyer household. Sunday dinner was still celebrated after church as with most families, but Maggie’s mother had come from a family that was a little more well off than the one she’d married into, a family that celebrated personal achievement with parties and small celebrations. So Josie had decreed that every Friday night dinner in the Sawyer household would be one in which her children could celebrate the end of all of their hard work during the school week and the beginning of the weekend. A roast was prepared with potatoes and carrots and onions. The heavenly smell spiraled up the stairs to Maggie and Dominic where they waited in their room, each occupying themselves in a different way. Dominic was reading an issue of Boy’s Adventure World magazine and Maggie was doodling on the back cover of her composition booklet with a lead pencil. She doodled things that usually wouldn’t hold her interest: cartoon hearts with arrows shot through them, a crossword with hers and Eliza’s names fatefully intertwined…

That’s when the knock at the door came.

It was loud and insistent and repetitive and Maggie felt a sudden foreboding in her stomach. She could hear the sound of the front door as it opened and a man’s voice shouting.

“What in the world?” Dominic said, as the sound of shouting grew louder as another man’s voice
joined it, undoubtedly their father’s.

They could hear certain words that travelled through the floors and walls easier than others. The words “daughter” and “pervert” carried easily to Maggie’s ears.

*Oh, God…* Maggie raced out of her seat and down the stairs like a shot.

“IS THIS HOW YOUR RASIING YOUR DAUGHTER?! TO BE A SICK UNNATURAL ANIMAL?!”

“What is this even about?” their mother asked, clearly confused.

“You Bastard, get the hell off my land!” their father bellowed belligerently from a chair in the corner.

Mr. Wilke took a deep breath and shoved a battered piece of colored paper into Josie Sawyer’s hands. Even from her awkward vantage point at the top of the staircase, Maggie recognized the Valentine’s Day card she’d left in Eliza’s lunch pail now in her mother’s hands. Icy fingers closed around Maggie’s heart and her throat began to tighten. Eliza didn’t love her and worse…she’d denounced Maggie to her parents.

“She’s 14!” Mr. Wilke said, shaking his finger at Maggie’s mother. “My daughter is 14 and you let that hussy of a daughter of yours corrupt her!”

Maggie’s view of the scene unfolding obscured as her eyes filled with tears. She’d known the Wilke’s her entire life. They were like a second family to her. The fact that Mr. Wilke was standing at their front door spewing insults about her hurt more than Maggie could have imagined it would. She didn’t know what burned hotter in her chest: anger at Eliza for betraying her, her shame for being unnatural, or her own humiliation for ever allowing herself to believe that anyone let alone a girl as beautiful as Eliza Wilke could love her back.

What had she expected would happen? An acceptance of love and a supervised outing with Eliza with her parents who would linger supportively in the wings? Family dinners where both of their parents would enthuse the virtues of their Sapphic daughters?

None of that would have happened. *It was all just the fantasies of a girl so in love she went blind,* Maggie told herself, her vision blurring with more tears as her mother turned the card over in her grip carefully and read the love note Maggie had written on the other side.

Maggie could hear the words she’d agonized over for hours ringing once again in her head as clear as they had been when she first settled on them:

*Dearest Lizzie,*

*I feel like a fool for even thinking to write this note to you or that any note I may write to you now could ever hold a candle to what I feel when our eyes meet over a school book or through a window pane. One flash of your beautiful smile and I am yours. You are everything to me, Lizzie. I have spent and will gladly spend the rest of my life loving you as you deserve to be loved, but first things first.*

*Be my sweetheart, Lizzie? Please be mine as I am yours.*

*Love forever,*
In that moment, Maggie felt like a spectator in the story of her own life, like she was somewhere outside of her body somewhere, floating above the conflict between her parents and Mr. Sawyer like a cloud and Maggie wanted nothing more than to float away, but the look of horror her mother shot her after reading the letter tethered her to the stairwell again.

Their father and Mr. Wilke scuffled lightly in the foyer before their father had Mr. Wilke by the collar of his work shirt and pushed him through the still open doorway.

“Get out and stay out!” their father shouted after him before slamming the door. Then he turned to his wife, “what was that madness all about, Josie?”

Their mother didn’t say anything. Instead, she stared down at the floor boards and clutched the card in her hands in a white knuckled grip. Finally, she found her voice again.

“Margaret Ellen Sawyer, come down here this instant.”

Maggie felt her feet carry her down the stairs. She felt more than heard her mother telling her father what she’d done. The intonations of his infuriated insults drowned out his actual words in her ears. Her wool jacket was shoved into her arms and before Maggie knew it she was being pushed out the door just like Mr. Wilke had been. The sound of the door shutting behind her was the loudest sound on the evening air. It followed Maggie like a shadow as she walked along the dirt roads in the waning sunlight. Trails of tears and snot froze on her face and just when she thought she was in so much pain she might die, her feet continued to carry her to a house on the edge of town.

And that was how Maggie Sawyer ended up on her Aunt Tilda’s doorstep.

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TBC...
I have to confess something. Tilda’s reaction as Maggie comes out to her may seem untimely for the early 1900s and that may be because it was the reaction I wish my mother would have had when I first came out to her in college. I wish I had had someone, anyone, who had been willing and able to tell me that what makes you different is what makes you wonderful, but eh, doesn’t everyone in the LGBTQA community? The quote Aunt Tilda uses is from Natalie Clifford Barney (1876-1972) who lived openly in Paris as a lesbian in the early 1900s and whose salons, I imagine Tilda being a frequent visitor at considering her background acting in the US and Europe. Please enjoy the read and leave a comment on your way out if you would like to see the story continue or with constructive criticism. Knowing people are enjoying this story gives me the motivation to continue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Trigger Warning:** This chapter has points that may be difficult to read or triggering for people who deal with anxiety and/or have been bullied in the past. There are two scenes, one where Maggie has a panic attack basically, and another where Maggie is bullied by her peers. If these scenes may be triggering for you, feel free to skip them. Your health is more important to me than you reading them if they may prove harmful to you in any way.

Maggie’s Aunt Tilda lived in a bungalow on the edge of town that her grandparents had built when they’d founded the first general store in the area. She was, by all accounts, the most eccentric personage in Blue Springs, Nebraska. She’d lived most of her adult life in big cities around the country and abroad in Europe and had only returned to the small town where she was born after she’d been unable to continue her previous life for reasons known only to herself.

Everyone in town had a story about Matilda Darling and Maggie had heard them all at one point or another as gossip repeated in hushed tones between her mother and grandparents. According to hearsay, Aunt Tilda once danced all night at a country club in St. Louis and posed for a photograph while swimming in the club fountain in nothing but her bloomers. She’d lived in so many places that no one knew the proper count. Rumor had it she’d had a torrid affair with young Alfie Vanderbilt and that she’d once put a cigarette out in a man’s face when he’d given her vaudeville performance a rude review. Rumor had it that she’d been the mistress of a great artist in Paris and had given birth to a child that hadn’t survived. Rumor also had it that she’d returned to Nebraska in disgrace though there could only be rampant speculation as to why.

Whatever the truth of her life, Maggie hadn’t known what to expect from Aunt Tilda when she’d arrived on her doorstep, brokenhearted and alone, but Maggie’s aunt had taken one look at her and ushered her inside the house without first asking who she was or why she’d come. Maggie assumed her aunt must have recognized her.
Maggie had always had the darker traits of her mother’s family and Matilda was her mother’s sister so maybe that had been the reason she’d been so accommodating to the girl. Either way, it had been a godsend to be brought in from the cold, wrapped in a crocheted blanket, and led over to a padded chair by the fireplace where she was handed a cup of steaming lavender tea.

“So what’d you do?” Aunt Tilda asked quietly from the settee across from her, regarding Maggie up and down. “You look like you got into a fight and lost.”

Maggie sat still, holding her tea cup in her hands almost reverently. It looked like real china—the kind that was worth more than everything in her parents’ entire house—and Maggie was afraid to drop it. So she clutched it a little tighter to herself and let the soothing warmth of the liquid within reheat her numb fingers.

“I fell in love,” Maggie rasped out, feeling emotion swell in her sore throat and tears begin to sting the corners of her eyes all over again.

“I take it your parents did not approve?”

Maggie just nodded her head mutely.

“Who was it?”

“My best friend E—Eliza Wilk—e,” Maggie confessed through a sob.

“A girl?” Tilda asked, tilting her head in surprise.

Maggie just nodded again, letting new tears finally fall as she feared the worst. She lowered her eyes to the rug on the floor, praying to someone, anyone that she wouldn’t be thrown out again. Where would she go? How would she survive on her own? It was Nebraska in the dead of winter after all.

“Well, you are full of surprises, aren’t you, Margaret?” Tilda said, chuckling and taking a sip of her own tea.

“You’re not upset?” Maggie asked, confused and hopeful all at once.

“Upset? Oh, pish posh,” Tilda scoffed before sipping her tea again. Then she put the china cup and saucer down carefully on the end table beside the settee and leaned slightly forward, resting her elbows on her knees in a very uncommon posture for a woman. “My good friend Natalie once said, ‘when you're in love you never really know whether your elation comes from the qualities of the one you love, or if it attributes them to her; whether the light which surrounds her like a halo comes from you, from her, or from the meeting of your sparks.’ She’s an avid lover of women in Paris, you know. A professed sapphist since the earliest age.”

Maggie remained quiet, focusing on breathing and controlling the swell of complex emotions welling up in her chest. There were other women out there like her? She wasn’t really just some unnatural animal like Mr. Wilke had said?

“You’re not alone, darling girl.” Tilda continued, reaching out and clasping Maggie’s hands between her own kindly. “Outside of this town in the great wide world, love takes all forms. Some women love men, yes, but men also love other men and women love other women. It is only small hearts and even smaller minds who choose to believe that love must have a sex or a color or even a bank account.”

At the last remark, Maggie chuckled despite herself. The act helped relieve the pressure in
Maggie’s chest a little and she found that she could breathe easier now. The way her Aunt Tilda was looking at her, full of warmth and acceptance made tears bloom in Maggie’s eyes for a whole different reason.

Relief.

Maggie felt relieved for the first time since she’d slipped her Valentine’s card into Eliza’s lunch pail that afternoon and hoped for the best. It seemed like an almost foreign feeling in the wake of everything that had just happened to her.

“Shakespeare said love is blind for a reason, Margaret.” Tilda went on casually, “there is no shame in following her wherever she may lead you.” Then she stood and brushed her hands on her skirt with a sense of finality. “Now that we have that settled, have you thought about where you’re going to go from here? Do you have a place to stay?”

Maggie’s full heart sank just a fraction lower in her chest.

“No—no,” she sputtered.

Aunt Tilda nodded her head solemnly like she’d expected that.

“You can stay with me for the time being. We’ll figure the rest out in due time. Follow me.”

Aunt Tilda led her out of the sitting room through an archway and into a foyer that was larger than Maggie’s whole dining room, kitchen, and entrance way altogether. She couldn’t help staring in awe at the polished oak fittings separating the walls and the ceiling and, what was even more impressive, the walls weren’t painted. They were covered in a wallpaper pattern that looked like it had come out from the tail end of the last century and a girlish part of Maggie longed to stretch out her fingers and run them along the velvet green flowers inlaid over the golden background, but she restrained herself.

At the back of the foyer was a staircase that curved so smoothly upwards that it might have been a snake arching its back. Tilda noticed the expression of awe on Maggie’s face and smiled as she led the way up the stairs.

“My grandparents had lofty ambitions when they’d built this place. “ Aunt Tilda said. “They’d hoped this little settlement they’d poured their money into would rise up out of the dirt like St. Louis or Atlanta, but this squalid backwater town simply stopped developing at the turn of the century and has now begun to atrophy. Only the rodents maintain continuing delusions of grandeur in Blue Springs.”

There were at least three doors peeking out of the hallway stemming from the landing at the top of the staircase from what Maggie could see. Two on the left and one on the right. One was probably Aunt Tilda’s room, but what were the other two? Aunt Tilda started walking again. She stopped by the second door on the left and twisted the brass handle, stepping into darkness for a moment. Maggie waited as an oil lamp was lit and the room was bathed in off yellow semi-illumination. The walls were paneled wood like the hallway they’d come down, simpler than the foyer downstairs and yet smarter than anywhere Maggie had ever slept in her life. Tilda set the lamp down on a long wooden vanity table with a mirror as tall as Maggie herself. There was an oak armoire with four drawers in one corner and in the center of the room was a large bed with an iron bedframe.

“This will be your room for right now. Mind the sheets. I don’t know how much dust there will be. This room was last used when Jesus was a boy so expect the unexpected.” Tilda said, settling
her hands on her waist like a foreman doling out duties. “The room just beside this one is mine and
the door across the hall leads to the bathroom which has a water closet installed. Also, if you do
need anything, Margaret dear, you’ll have to make sure to speak up. I’m not the overly nurturing
type of woman who thrives on child rearing and has mastered the practice of reading minds to
come with it. What do you think of the room? Will it do?”

Maggie walked inside tentatively. A floorboard creaked noisily, but that was the only sound as she
studied the walls and the vanity table with its three compact drawers.

“It’s wonderful. Thank you.” Maggie said.

And really it was.

“Do you have anything else with you other than the clothes on your back?” Aunt Tilda asked
finally, watching Maggie move curiously about the room.

“No, I wasn’t able to take anything with me.” Maggie answered, sitting down on the bed.

A small cloud of dust rose at the commotion, but not overmuch that it would bother Maggie while
she slept.

“We’ll tackle that next.” Aunt Tilda said, moving back towards the door. “Sleep well, darling girl.
Tomorrow is another day.”

Before Maggie knew it, the bedroom door had been closed, she was alone again with her thoughts,
her recently shattered heart, and the promise of a whole new life ahead of her.

OOOOOOO

The next day, two things happened.

First, Aunt Tilda grabbed a shotgun from a cabinet in the foyer after breakfast, loaded it in the
kitchen, and went out the side door with it on her shoulder telling Maggie, “Bar admittance to any
and all strangers at least until I come back.” Two hours later, Aunt Tilda returned in her yellow
Peugeot 125—one of the few automobiles in town—with one large steamer trunk in the back that
held stuffed within it every earthly possession Maggie had owned since childhood.

“Those are my things,” Maggie sputtered, combing through the familiar clothing and keepsakes all
packed into the trunk haphazardly. “How’d you get them?”

Aunt Tilda put the break down on the car and hopped out into the dirt, reaching for the shotgun
still on the passenger side once she was on her feet.

“I asked nicely,” Tilda said, sling the shotgun across her shoulders and walking back towards
the house.

The next thing that happened once Maggie’s things had all been settled into her new room, was
that Aunt Tilda told her in no uncertain terms she was going back to school come hell or high
water. Maggie had never been one to argue with her parents, but her humiliation and heartbreak
still blazed so brightly throughout her entire being that all she saw when she closed her eyes were
sparks and all she felt was pain.
“I can’t go back to school. Not now and not ever, “ Maggie disputed, while Aunt Tilda stirred a pot of diced tomatoes mixed together with canned corn and green beans on the cast-iron stove.

“Why ever not, kitten?” Aunt Tilda gestured to another mason jar on the table, this one full of what looked like pickled red onions. “Would you hand me that jar, dear? Lord knows there isn’t a kitchen god made that your Aunt Tilda can’t burn down, but hopefully those onions will see this soup put right. Either that or you and I are going to be miserable. You were saying, darling?”

“Eliza told her parents about my feelings. That’s how my parents found out about us.” Maggie explained, frantically. “I’m sure it’s all over town by now. I can’t show my face at school again, I just can’t.”

“I empathize with your predicament, Margaret, really I do, but you can’t run forever and I’ve seen enough of the world to know that you will want to be a part of it someday. I know the small minded denizens of our sleepy hamlet tend to frown upon a good education, but believe me when I tell you that you are going to need it if you intend to get the hell out of here.”

“You just don’t understand!” Maggie cried, dropping into a chair and burying her head in her hands on the table. She felt defeated.

“I do actually,” Aunt Tilda countered, emptying the entire mason jar of onions into the soup and wrinkling up her nose at the pungent aroma. “In more detail than I feel comfortable going into with you at the moment. Look, I’ll make you a deal: you go back for a day and if Johanna or Mrs. Kopchovsky or whatever her name is these days can’t keep those ungrateful ingrates she teaches in line, then we’ll make some changes.”

“What changes?” Maggie asked, perking up a bit, lifting her head off of the table.

“That remains to be seen, dear, but just fair warning, anything I do seldom goes unnoticed.”

Aunt Tilda covered the stew pot and wiped her hands on her apron. She settled comfortably into the chair across from Maggie and folded her hands in front of her on the table. They sat in awkward silence for what seemed like forever, but was probably only a minute or so. Finally, Aunt Tilda, slapped her hands down restlessly on the tabletop.

“Well, this is terribly boring.” Aunt Tilda groaned, leaning back in her chair. “Is this how other people live their lives? How sad.”

Maggie suppressed a chuckle. She didn’t actually know anything about Aunt Tilda yet, but from what she was learning about her, her aunt enjoyed being theatrical. She leaned into every rumor that Maggie had ever heard about her and seemed to confirm them all simply by being a woman who was so different than any other Maggie had ever met up to this point in her life that she could believe Aunt Tilda doing every wild thing the people in town believed she had. She’d only spent a day in her aunt’s house and already Maggie had watched her load a shotgun, retrieve everything Maggie had owned from her parents’ presumably at shotgun point, and drive an automobile unlike anything that anyone owned in the county like it was the easiest thing in the world. Aunt Tilda was definitely not a woman of her time and Maggie had never been so grateful for something in all her life.

“We could talk?” Maggie volunteered as she watched her aunt’s hands continue to drum on the table to a tune that could only be heard in her head.

“About what, dear?”
“Ourselves,” Maggie said, shrugging as Aunt Tilda stopped drumming, “Other than that you’re my mom’s sister, I know next to nothing about you.”

“Hm,” Aunt Tilda hummed, tilting her head to the side, some of her dark hair falling loose from the messy bun at the back of her head to flutter down over her ears. “I can’t say I’m surprised at that. Josie and I—we haven’t really spoken in years. Not since her marriage to your father in fact.”

“Why is that?” Maggie asked, suddenly curious.

“Back when we were girls, your mother and I used to talk about what sort of lives we’d live when we were grown. Every day we would dream of travelling someplace different, someplace like Dicken’s London or Dumas’ France. We vowed to see all the world and to never become ordinary women.” Tilda explained, with this wistful far away expression. “Our mother was always reading stories to us in the front parlor of our home. One day I decided to write a story of my own and Josie and I acted it out for our parents in their store. The customers thought it was so charming that our father had the story published in the Blue Springs Gazette.”

Aunt Tilda bit her lip as she stared into space and reminisced. As Maggie listened, she took a moment to study the woman in front of her. Her skin was tan like Maggie’s own, her eyes were a lighter brown, and her hair was as black as the coal their father hauled in from town to heat their homestead. Judging by the lack of wrinkles and signs of wear on her aunt’s face, she was probably in her thirties somewhere, not much younger than Maggie’s mother, but it was in their eyes, that Maggie noticed the real difference. Maggie’s mother—even when she smiled—seemed to have this tired, fatigued dimness in her expression, but her Aunt Tilda’s eyes had this mischievous shine to them no matter what she was doing.

“I grew enamored with the attention.” Aunt Tilda continued dreamily. “I’d memorize poems from books of my mother’s and recite them on the walkway outside of our store for pennies. After a while, I decided that was what I wanted to do, tell stories for all the world to see. My mother gave me money to try my luck with a travelling theater troop in Lincoln. After a year touring through every state and territory, I’d joined a vaudeville act in New York and it wasn’t long after that when I received a letter from Josie, letting me know she’d been proposed to by your father. You wouldn’t know it to look at him now, but young Robbie Sawyer had a certain Irish charm about him when we were school children together and I guess your mother decided at some point that he would be enough for her in all of his disheveled glory. I was disappointed in a way, that she’d let go of her dreams, but I suppose I shouldn’t be, after all, here you are.”

“You’ve really been to New York City?” Maggie asked in awe. “Wait, you went to New York and you came back here? Why?”

Maggie’s aunt only chuckled at her enthusiasm, but before Maggie could ask more questions, the pot on the stove began to boil over. Aunt Tilda cursed loudly in a continued stream of words as she hopped up from her seat, yanked a dish rag off of the counter, and tried for all she was worth to move the pot off from the stove to the countertop without causing further damage. Maggie watched with wide eyes as Aunt Tilda scurried almost inhumanly fast across the wooden floor in her stocking feet—nearly sliding before dumping the pot in the sink once she was close enough with a loud crash.

Maggie sat stock still as Aunt Tilda let out an undignified huff of air from between her lips and settled her hands on her waist as she looked down at their ruined supper.

“Well, that was anti-climactic. What do you say we drive into Beatrice for supper? The hotel there has this lovely little restaurant I frequented when I stayed there.” Aunt Tilda suggested. “Grab a hat from the wrack in the foyer. I’m driving.”
The next morning saw Maggie emerging from her bedroom under a cloud of dread.

She’d put on her favorite blue dress in hopes that it would help somehow—put her more at ease maybe—but it hadn’t worked. Maggie stood in front of the mirror in her bedroom and stared at her reflection. She didn’t see the once carefree girl she’d been looking back at her, but a battered impersonation of her former self. Fear, cold and hard, crystallized in her belly and made her heart constrict in her chest and her lungs want to heave.

She couldn’t do this. Whatever made her think that she could? She couldn’t! She couldn’t go back.

Aunt Tilda’s voice floated impatiently up the stairs, “Margaret, while arriving fashionably late is never a bad thing, I think you’re cutting it a little close this morning.”

Maggie stared at her reflection and stared trying to stem the rapid rate of her breathing. Her lungs were working so hard that it was as if she were running down the road to her parents’ homestead and she thought of that afternoon not so many days ago when she and Eliza had raced one another back to their houses after school. She thought of the way Eliza’s blonde hair had fanned out behind her as she ran and of how the girl’s radiant smile had reached her eyes. Immediately, Maggie felt her chest contract painfully tight as if someone had tied a hemp rope around her middle and pulled and pulled and pulled.

She felt the wetness on her cheeks before she realized that she was crying. Before long whatever air she was able to inhale was choked out in painful, incoherent sobs.

Then she felt a soft touch on her face and suddenly Aunt Tilda was standing in front of her, trying to center her attention.

“Margaret, look at me,” Aunt Tilda commanded, resting her hands on both sides of Maggie’s face. “Focus on me and take a deep breath. In and out. In and out. Good.”

Even though it hurt, Maggie took in great gusts of air, held them a second, then exhaled through her sobs. After a few minutes of this, she felt her muscles relax as her sobs subsided.

“Listen to me, Margaret. I know today will be hard for you, but there are so many ways it could go, there isn’t much reason to agonize over the way everything might play out. Life goes on. We’ll make it work.”

“Eliza doesn’t love me,” Maggie said, her voice broken and hopeless. “How can I face her? I feel so ashamed. I should have just kept my feelings to myself.”

“You’ve done nothing wrong.” Aunt Tilda reminded her gently. “Hell, most people twice your age don’t have half of the courage you’ve displayed in the last couple of days. You’re stronger than you know, Margaret, and today you’re going to show your peers in that one room school-dump that you won’t be beaten down by their mean-spirited rumblings. You just have to get out of the front door first.”

“What do I do if they make fun of me?”

“You can make fun of them back, that was always my favorite approach, or you can ignore them
and hold your head high knowing that all you did was bare your heart to the world and that will never be a sin.”

Maggie nodded her head and sniffled pitifully.

She didn’t feel strong or confident or worthwhile. She felt wrung out, emotionally and mentally drained. How could she go back? Maybe it wouldn’t be as bad as she thought. Maybe it would be worse. Either way, Maggie wouldn’t know until she left her aunt’s house and it was the not knowing that tied her stomach up into knots. Despite all of the fear and apprehension flooding her senses, there remained a constant optimistic yearning within Maggie, a pinning for the girl she’d fallen in love with. No matter how shattered her poor heart was, Maggie wanted to see Eliza again. No, she needed to see Eliza again if only to figure out how things went so wrong between them, how one of them could be so in love and the other could not.

Maggie swatted at the moisture on her cheeks, “I think I’m ready to go.”

Aunt Tilda nodded and pulled Maggie in for quick hug. Maggie clung to her only family left in the world, letting the encouragement and comfort the embrace offered fortify her heart against what was surely coming for her.

OOOOOO

The Peugeot’s radiator sputtered and burbled, letting out short mechanical belches every few miles as they drove.

Aunt Tilda had re-dressed herself in what she’d called a ‘driving outfit’, but it was the sort of clothes Maggie had never seen another woman wear before: white cotton breeches, knee high brown boots, a white wool fitted jacket for the cold, a white stock tie that encircled her neck with a fancy opal stickpin, and a brown leather driving cap that held her dark hair out of her face as they sped along. When Aunt Tilda had first emerged from the bathroom in that outfit after Maggie’s panic attack had eased, Maggie’s eyes had almost bugged out of her head she had been so surprised, but Aunt Tilda had only shrugged her shoulders and said, “Might as well give your classmates something else to talk about while we’re at it. It’ll keep the stink off of you for a while longer at any rate.”

The Peugeot let out one stout cough that shook Maggie out of her thoughts. When she looked up, she saw dozens of small heads peeking out of the approaching schoolhouse windows facing the road she and Aunt Tilda were driving down. Maggie searched the curious features of each child in vain for a flash of familiar white blonde hair or soft blue eyes, but to no avail. Her Eliza was nowhere to be seen.

Aunt Tilda pulled back the break and parked the car right in front of the schoolhouse. Maggie looked down at her hands in her lap, feeling the stares of every kid in town boring into the side of her face as painfully as if each pair of inquisitive eyes were wood screws.

“Once you’re through that door, the worst part will be over.” Aunt Tilda whispered from beside her.

Maggie nodded minutely and—with a resolve she didn’t know she had in her—she stood from her seat and stepped down into the dirt.
The door to the schoolhouse opened then and Mrs. Kopchovsky walked out into the yard towards them. Maggie stood beside the car and waited while the teacher strode forward. Mrs. Kopchovsky raised her hand above her eyes to shield them from the midday sunlight as she came to a halt beside the vehicle.

“Good afternoon, Margaret and Tilde. It’s good to see you alive and well. You’d been gone from town so long, rumor had it an imposter came back in your place.” Mrs. Kopchovsky said, smiling.

“Johanna,” Maggie’s Aunt nodded her head with a wink. “I trust you have my niece’s best interests at heart?”

“You know I do,” the schoolteacher replied, more earnestly than Maggie had expected. “That’s why I thought it best that she was escorted inside.”

“You’re a good egg, JoJo.” Aunt Tilda winked again, then bent low towards Maggie. “Remember, you didn’t do anything wrong. Hold your head high, Margaret. Toodles all.”

With that Aunt Tilda released the brake and she and the Peugeot were racing down the road again. Mrs. Kopchovsky guided Maggie towards the schoolhouse and the waiting students within.

OOOOOOOOO

The whispers of the other children had died down as soon as Mrs. Kopchovsky led Maggie over the threshold. Everyone had turned to look at her except for the one person Maggie desperately wanted to see her. She’d been ushered past Eliza’s seat in the middle of the room toward a desk in the front row, which was supposed to keep Maggie close enough for the teacher to monitor, but as soon as Mrs. Kopchovsky turned her back, the whispering started anew.

It began low enough in volume that it was almost unnoticeable and then—like the swell of a tidal current—the hushed murmurs began to ebb and swell throughout the room until Mrs. Kopchovsky couldn’t talk over it anymore and shushed them. Then the cycle would continue at full speed and repeat itself, over, and over, and over again.

Through it all, Maggie sat in her chair, her fingers gripping the edge of her seat so hard it almost hurt.

Several times, she tried to subtly glance behind her to see if she could catch Eliza’s eye, but every time she was met with condemnatory giggles and the gut-wrenching image of Eliza, pale and listless, stiffly rooted to her place, staring unseeingly at the desk top in front of her. She looked more tired and worn down than Maggie could ever remember seeing her. Even on the rare occasions when Eliza had been ill, she’d always put a smile onto her face for Maggie’s benefit and insist she was fine even when she clearly wasn’t.

She was always putting me first, Maggie thought, how could it be then that she doesn’t love me?

Maggie wasn’t simple. She knew there were different types of love. There was the love a parent had for their children or the love a child held for a beloved family pet, or even the begrudging love a sibling had for another sibling. Then there was the most famous kind of love—the kind of love written about in all the songs and poems of the world—the kind of love that could leave someone breathless.
That was the kind of love Maggie had for Eliza…but that wasn’t the kind of love Eliza had for her. Maggie may not have done anything wrong, as Aunt Tilda was keen to remind her, but she felt like she had because she’d loved Eliza the wrong way. It hadn’t been intentional or malicious or careless even, but it was unwanted all the same by the other party the way an unannounced guest was unwelcome in the home of their host. Despite herself, Maggie felt guilty and dumb for allowing herself to fall in love with her best friend even though she wasn’t sure—that given the chance—she would’ve been able to stop herself in the first place.

She needed to talk to Eliza, to explain herself, to set things right again, but how could she do that in the middle of a crowded classroom?

Maggie turned slightly in her seat, just enough so she could see Eliza out of the corner of her eye. Eliza was sitting much the same way as before only this time her shoulders were hunched, tense and then Maggie noticed them: Artie Wainwright and Ricky Miller.

Artie was a tall, lanky boy of 16 who always dressed in layers as if he were wearing every piece of clothing he owned on his back no matter what the season: a thick black coat over an ill-fitting hand knitted sweater and topped off with a spotted necktie knotted lopsidedly around the mouth of the sweater. Ricky was younger, 12 maybe, but he had a mouth on him like a foghorn and always wore fingerless gloves as more of an expression of personal style than to keep his hands warm. Both boys made up Blue Springs’ most successful team of bullies. They were the scourge of every new student no matter what the age and the ever waking nightmare of any kid too timid to stand up for themselves.

Ricky stretched over his desk from where he was sitting directly behind Eliza, the oversized tweed eight sided cap on his head falling into his eyes, and poked her in the back with his index finger. She tensed up, but otherwise ignored him. Artie—sitting in the desk to Eliza’s right—leaned over and gave her ear closest to him a flick. Eliza flinched, but didn’t stop him or tell him off, just took it like some sort of punishment. Artie shared a conspiratorial chuckle with Ricky and then did it again and again Eliza didn’t make any attempt to stop them.

After sharing another laugh, Artie leaned in a fourth time. Just as he brought his hand up to flick Eliza in the ear, an illustrated copy of *Mather’s History of America: Second Edition* slammed into the side of his face, causing Artie to almost fall out of his chair while he struggled with a mouthful of painted pages.

“You’ll leave her alone if either one of you know what’s good for you.” Maggie said, standing from her seat and turning around.

Maggie had always hated bullies and whether or not Eliza loved her back, no one picked on her best friend for any reason.

“Margaret!” Mrs. Kopchovsky’s voice floated down from the front of the room.

The whispers swelled into to guffaws and jeers. Eliza sunk lower in her seat and, despite having the courage of her convictions, Maggie felt the blood rush to her cheeks as she stood defiantly for all the room to see.

Ricky stood up from his desk too and sauntered into the middle of the aisle.

“Way to stick up for your *girlfriend*, Sawyer!” Ricky taunted

The class erupted into an uncoordinated slurry of laughter and Maggie felt their collective joy at being cohesively normal coat her ears like a cold winter sleet.
“Richard, sit down!” Mrs. Kopchovsky ordered, but she was ignored.

“Dyke, dyke, take a hike!” Ricky started chanting quickly followed by Artie. “Dyke, dyke, take a hike!”

Soon enough, the whole classroom was shouting the insult at the top of their lungs like a hateful mantra, exuberant light in their eyes and jubilation radiating in their expressions as they denounced the outlier in their midst marking the one who didn’t belong to their number as though she were as despicable as Cain.

For the second instant in Maggie’s life, time seemed to slow down to a crawl before her eyes and she witnessed the scene unfolding as if she were a spectator in her own life, not the focus of it. The raucous jeering surrounding Maggie faded from her ears as if she’d just lifted the tonearm on a gramophone and suddenly she saw and recognized them—the faces of neighbors, children of people her parents sat with at church, children who had played hide and seek with Maggie and her brother in the aisles of her grandparents’ general store on hot summer afternoons, and even her own brother, Dominic—all were accounted for and all were as happy in their slow motion ridicule of her as if it were the fourth of July and bursts of fireworks were exploding in frescos of bright colors against the night sky over the Big Blue River. Mouths hung wide open, eyes watered, hands were thrown into the air with abandon, and fists pounded on desks to their own tempos. Suddenly, Maggie didn’t recognize her classmates anymore. They were no longer her peers, but frightful caricatures of themselves.

_They’re like monkeys in a zoo, Maggie thought. They know me. Why are they doing this?_

Maggie felt a slow pressure against her shoulder and fully came back to herself just as a Math book suddenly slammed into her clavicle. Then another book hit her, this time square in the chest. Another narrowly missed he left ear. Maggie raised her arms to protect her face as her classmates lobbed more textbooks. She felt the beginnings of what would surely be bruises tomorrow form on her torso, her abdomen, her arms and her legs. Before Maggie was able to formulate a way to get herself out of this mess, someone spoke up above the chanting and the almost threadbare voice of Mrs. Kopchovsky.

“Stop! Stop it!”

The chanting died down immediately into silence and Maggie opened her eyes.

“Please…” Eliza said in this small broken voice that didn’t sound like her own. “Please. Just stop.”

Maggie felt her heart lurch forward in her chest at the words. For a moment, Eliza stood by her seat, though Maggie hadn’t seen her stand, then she was moving, running down the center aisle towards the schoolhouse door and out into the still bright afternoon.

“Lizzy, Lizzy, wait!” Maggie called after her.

Maggie didn’t stay to see the room descend back into hateful murmurs. She raced down the aisle and into the schoolyard. She looked around and finally spotted Eliza some distance away still fleeing through a farmer’s frozen field, stumbling over uneven clods of mud. In a burst of speed, Maggie bolted after her, feeling the cold winter air burn her lungs as she struggled to catch up.

“Lizzy!” She shouted as loudly as she could. “Lizzy, please stop!”

But Eliza didn’t stop, not right away at least. She ran and ran and ran, finally halting only when her muscles had tired and she was fighting to draw in enough breath to stay upright. Maggie managed
to catch up to her and stopped, gasping for air. They both stood, cheeks flushed, bent over in the
mud of Mr. Emory’s fields together in their emotional and physical exhaustion. Finally, when
Maggie could breathe easily again, she straightened and took a step closer to the other girl.

“Don’t, don’t come near me!” Eliza shouted, scrambling a few steps away.

“Just tell me why,” Maggie asked, quietly. “Why don’t you love me the same way I love you?”

“It isn’t natural, Maggie.” Eliza choked through hurried breaths, “I care for you, but…but as a
former friend. Nothing more.”

Maggie nodded her head and took a deep breath. As much as her heart ached, she could accept that.
Wait…did Eliza just say former?

“Former friend?” Maggie asked.

Eliza didn’t look her in the eyes, instead staring somewhere off to the side as she said the words
Maggie never imagined she would ever have to hear in her life: “We can’t continue as we were… I
don’t want to see you again. I’m sorry.”

With that, Eliza turned around and began running again, this time in the direction of her family’s
homestead and this time Maggie let her go.

OOOOOOOOO

Maggie didn’t go back to the schoolhouse, nor would she ever step foot in that room again, she was
determined. The sun above her disappeared occasionally behind a grey cloud casting the land
below into shadow. Everything seemed to Maggie like something out of a Kandinsky painting.
Nothing made sense and the world around her was dark and unbearable. She walked to her Aunt’s
house in a haze of grief and disillusion. If her heart had been broken before, it truly was crushed
beyond repair now. Tears—she didn’t know she still had the ability to make—froze against her
cheeks and by the time she’d entered the home, her entire body was numb.

“You’re home early…” Aunt Tilda commented from the entrance to the kitchen, but stopped short
once she saw the look on Maggie’s face. “What happened?”

Maggie wanted to tell her, but found that she couldn’t form words. Instead, her feet carried her to
the sofa in the sitting room where she dropped down and buried her face in her hands. She sobbed
quietly for a few seconds before she felt a hand on her shoulder, then one on gently prying
Maggie’s own fingers from her face.

“Margaret, what happened?” Aunt Tilda repeated softly.

“They…called me a Dyke and threw books at me. Mrs. Kopchovsky couldn’t stop them. Eliza did
and then she…um…she told me she didn’t want to see me again.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, darling girl,” Aunt Tilda said, kissing her forehead as she started crying again.
“It’s okay, it will be alright.”
When Tilda hugged her, Maggie clung to her, knowing full well that it would never be okay again.

She went up to her room without lunch after that, despite Aunt Tilda’s objections, and snuggled under the quilt on the bed. For the rest of the night and the next day, Maggie remained curled up under her blankets, refusing food and water. She slept when she could and ruminated on where her life had gone so wrong when she couldn’t. Minutes ran into hours until Maggie couldn’t tell what day it was and didn’t care to know. She’d given herself over to complete despair until one morning, she heard the sound of nails being pounded by a hammer nearby and got up. Down in the foyer, there were a few large crates already nailed shut and two men in overalls Maggie didn’t know who were lowering the pewter floor lamp that had been by the front door into another crate filled with straw.

“Oh, Margaret. You're up.” Aunt Tilda said from the foot of the stairwell, where she stood in a pair of trousers she had made herself and her knee high driving boots.

“What’s going on?” Maggie asked, taking the steps slowly.

“I’ve decided to rejoin the wider world, for both of our sakes.” Aunt Tilda, explained settling her hands on her hips. “Four years ago, I moved back to this town thinking my life as I knew it was over just as you feel yours is now. I have had the great fortune to have led a life that has not been constrained by geography. You should be able to live such a life as well, Margaret.”

“So…we’re moving?” Maggie asked reaching the bottom of the stairs.

“Out of this hellhole, yes.” Aunt Tilda confirmed.

Maggie took in her surroundings. The sofa and the chairs in the sitting room were covered in white sheets as was the china cabinet by the entrance to the kitchen. All of the bookcases had been emptied of books. The house seemed somehow freer and lighter than Maggie had known it in her stay there, less Victorian in a way. Aunt Tilda—who had stepped briefly out of the room—reappeared beside Maggie holding a thick slice of bread slathered with molasses in a cloth.

“Eat this and change your clothes.” Aunt Tilda ordered cheerily, handing the slice of bread to Maggie. “Once the sitting room has been locked up Mr. Emerson and Mr. O’Brien will bring your trunk down, so be ready.”

The sun was still high in the sky when they left the house for the final time. It wasn’t until she and Aunt Tilda caught the train from the neighboring city of Beatrice that would take them to Chicago that Maggie finally felt herself smile again.

That was the last time Maggie Sawyer set foot in Blue Springs, Nebraska.

Chapter End Notes

Next stop: Gotham :)
The Gravity of Love

Chapter Notes

Hey Guys! I am so, so, so sorry that it has taken me almost 6 months to update. Life happened and I haven’t handled it so well. Moving on, so this chapter has a different structure than the first two. It will be split between the Alex/Maggie story and flashbacks of Maggie’s life before Alex and how she came to be immortal basically. All future chapters will have this structure. Read, enjoy, and let me know what you thought of it on your way out. :)

National City – June 2016

“Ma’am,” Vasquez said, from her computer console. “Target has made contact.”

Alex stood beside Susan, with her hands on her own hips as she watched the ring surrounding the red’ dot on the main screen pulse brighter the further it moved inside of the building their DEO vans were currently staking out in the old shipping district.

“Send in strike team one,” Alex ordered.

“Team one, you’re clear to enter the warehouse.” Vasquez spoke into her headset.

Six blue dots tracking the vitals and movements of members of Agent Li’s team appeared on the screen, quickly maneuvering around flat gray lines meant to represent walls, drawing closer and closer to the red dot in the center of the building’s digital blueprint.

There was the sound of a door being broken down, combat boots stomping over concrete, and voices shouting to ‘get down, get down, get down.’ There were sounds of a scuffle as Alex imagined their agents wrestling the Korugarian smuggler to the ground and then finally:

“Target is secure.” Agent Li assured, “returning to base.”

Alex took a deep breath and stared down at her boots in an uncharacteristic show of boredom. Being a DEO agent was one of the most exciting and dangerous professions out there and Alex
was usually never bored, she never had the time to be. However, ever since J’onn had refused to clear her for active duty after her latest near miss with death, she’d been going stir crazy at DEO headquarters for what felt like days on end.

“That went as well as could be expected,” J’onn said, stepping up beside Alex.

“Too well,” Alex muttered under her breath, wishing secretly that something had gone amiss so she might have been able to intercede.

“Do I sense that someone’s a little bit restlessness, Agent Danvers?” J’onn asked with a knowing grin.

“You’re psychic. You tell me.” Alex shot back, annoyed.

“Alex. You almost died four days ago. Hell, your heart stopped for a minute before Kara revived you so technically you were dead.” J’onn said seriously. “It’s alright to take a few days to recuperate before rushing back out into the field. Kara and I both agree that this is what’s best for you.”

“Kara and I both agree to what?” Kara asked, landing right beside them in her Supergirl suit.

“My death by boredom.” Alex said, running a hand over her face tiredly.

“Huh?”

“She’s upset because she can’t go out into the field yet. I told her you and I both agreed that this was the best course of action,” J’onn explained, regarding Alex in the same paternal way he had since the day he’d bailed her out of jail and recruited her into the DEO.

Alex rolled her eyes and Kara glared at her, threatening hours of endless admonishment if Alex chose not to listen to them.

“Alex,” Kara said, with a hint of warning.
“All of my medical tests checked out. I’m fine,” Alex defended weakly.

“Alex,” Kara said again, this time louder, her expression fixed into a pout and her eyes pleading in a way that Alex could never say no to.

“Fine,” Alex replied, her shoulders drooping in defeat. “I’ll rest for another day or two, but after that I am back on active duty.”

Alex fixed J’onn with a determined look that left little doubt that she would be back in the field within the week despite her family’s overprotective efforts to keep her safe and after a tense moment of silence he nodded, giving her his blessing. Kara let out a deep breath, not looking all too pleased at the idea of her sister going back out into harm’s way, but resigning herself to the fact that it was who Alex was and Kara would support her because of it no matter what.

“So be it, but just to make sure you hold to your promise you will be taking the next two days off on paid leave.” J’onn ordered.

Alex looked like she might argue, but clenched her jaw and nodded her agreement.

“Yay! We’ll finally have time to catch up on the newest season of Veep like we’ve been meaning to,” Kara said, smiling.

Alex smiled in response and nodded, but the sentiment of the gesture didn’t reach her eyes. Since the mission went wrong a few days ago, Alex had felt…off. She couldn’t explain it, she wasn’t even sure she understood what it was, but something about the experience had affected her. It’d been a standard op: chase down a Thronnian Fort Rozz escapee, capture, and neutralize him so he wouldn’t be a threat to anyone else, then return with him in custody.

Everything had been going well until Alex had somehow been pushed off of the pier into the sea.

She remembered the burning sensation as frigid saltwater flooded her lungs, the fatigue as she tried and tried to kick to the surface beneath the dragging weight of her combat gear and gun, and the dark realization that she would probably never see Kara again and never led a full, happy life like she’d promised her sister she would do. She’d worried that the last time she closed her eyes against the pale blue light filtering through the surface would be the last time she’d ever see anything. Then she’d woken up to bright sunlight on the dock, gasping harshly for air with Kara kneeling...
over her just as soaked through with seawater as Alex herself was, the two of them hanging onto one another like their lives depended on that connection.

Alex had been at death’s door at least three different times in her life: the first time from a severe concussion, the second time from a gunshot to the chest that her vest had caught, and the third from almost drowning. After the first two escapes, she hadn’t felt different really. Her life had just gone on as it was with Kara and J’onn and their friends. She’d still called her mother at least once a week, still had sister night at Kara’s place with pizza and virtually recorded TV shows, and then there’d been the occasional game night with the Super-friends. Nothing had changed after the first two brushes with death, but Alex felt like something was missing from her life now for some reason. Who knew almost drowning in the harbor could lead to an existential crisis before she was even 30?

Whatever, Alex mentally berated herself, I’ll get past this.

“Alex?”

Alex blinked and suddenly both J’onn and Kara were staring at her: J’onn, with an expression like he was trying to work out a puzzle, and Kara, like she was legitimately worried about what was going on in her sister’s head.

“Are you alright?” Kara asked, reaching for Alex’s hand.

“Yeah,” Alex said, brushing off her sister’s concern with a carefree smile and a level of enthusiasm she didn’t really feel. “I was just thinking, you know, about…what we’re going to be doing for the next few days. You know, we can get Chinese and oh—we can watch reruns of Mystery Science Theater—that would be great! Or, or we can go to that Thai place you love on the corner of Brenton and 52th and go shopping after…”

Alex grabbed Kara’s arm and pulled her forward with her as she continued to chatter on and move towards the looping corridor that would lead to the front exit. J’onn watched the two of them until they were out of sight, reserving judgment on Alex’s state of mind until he knew more about what was causing it as he often did with the humans that he cared for.

The next morning Alex rolled out of bed with a sore throat and a general malaise that was physically and mentally draining. Alex had always prided herself on her ability to stave off physical illness mainly by refusing to acknowledge it until it went away, but today she had to say she was feeling pretty crappy and that crappiness could be attributed to anything from the sour mood in which she’d gone to bed to the equally bad one she found herself in after a fitful night’s
sleep. Regardless, Alex got up anyway, brushed her teeth, took a shower, got dressed into a pair of
dark skinny jeans and a long sleeve Henley, and walked over to Kara’s for their customary early
morning coffee run before Kara went into work.

“You busted a bank heist. That has to make you feel good,” Alex commented, staring at the front
page of the National City Journal where a picture of Supergirl shown apprehending a band of bank
robbers with local police covered the entire spread.

“Eh, I don’t know how to explain it, but it feels like I could be doing more, you know?” Kara said
from beside Alex as they walked down the sidewalk together in the middle of early morning foot-
traffic. “Ever since Myriad, I’ve felt like everything has been too easy. Sure, there’s the odd
supervillain to apprehend, but mostly it’s just bank robbers and purse thieves, not that I want bad
things to happen, but I want to be able to do what I was meant to do, you know? Save lives, save
the world.”

“Who says you can’t save the world a little bit every day”, Alex reassured, putting her arm around
Kara’s shoulders and squeezing her tightly to her in a half body hug for a minute. “You’re always
my hero even when you do things like get hopelessly tangled up in the cord from the vacuum
cleaner.”

Kara laughed at that and Alex felt her dark mood lift a tiny bit at the genuinely happy smile
beaming out from her little sister’s face. Maybe she’d been overthinking things, Alex thought,
maybe nothing was missing from her life. She had a great life, if she was being honest. Alex had a
job she truly loved, a sister who loved and supported her, a boss who was like a father to her, and
she got to fire newly developed weapons on a daily basis. What more did she need out of a life than
what she already had?

No sooner had she let go of Kara than she felt the full weight of another body slamming carelessly
into her shoulder. Alex stumbled and suddenly her dark mood had returned tenfold.

“Excuse you,” she shouted angrily at the back of the woman who had just run into her.

“I’m sorry,” the flustered brunette apologized, turning around. “I wasn’t paying attention and then I
—”

Alex’s anger diminished as she was met with warm and sincere brown eyes and possibly the face
of the most beautiful woman she’d ever seen before in her life. Something inside of her shifted—
something not obvious—something Alex wouldn’t realize for months to come, but nonetheless the
boulder holding back the part of herself that had always yearned to be free of its isolation had been
rolled away in an instant.

“Are you alright?” The other woman asked her, genuinely concerned as she walked up to Alex until they were only a few feet apart.

Alex felt herself falling into the attentive dark gaze almost like she belonged there. It was only when Kara said her name from beside them both, that Alex regained her senses.

“I—I’m fine, I just spaced out for a second.” Alex said.

“You name is Alex?” The other woman asked and Alex nodded her head mutely, “I’m Maggie. I really am so sorry for running into you like that. I was trying to pull my keys out of my pocket and they got stuck and—well—how about I make it up to you? There’s a restaurant just around the corner called Noonan’s that makes the best cup of coffee in the city. How about I buy you both a cup for the road?”

Kara opened her mouth to agree because that was where they’d been headed originally anyway, but Alex elbowed her in the side—which was like elbowsing a brick wall—but still Kara got the hint and remained silent.

“You know, that’s okay,” Alex rambled, feeling nervousness bubbling up into her chest as if she were a standing on a stage exposed for all the world to see. “There was no harm done and Kara really needs to get going or she’ll be late to work, right Kara?”

“It was nice to have met you,” Kara said as Alex grabbed her arm and pulled her hurriedly away in the opposite direction.

“You too,” Maggie replied quietly, watching the two women retreat from her as if they’d been burned.

Little did either one of them know that their lives would never be the same ever again after that day.
In April of 1915, Maggie Sawyer moved to Gotham City.

She’d traveled the globe with Aunt Tilda, attending schools in cities both domestic and foreign, she’d seen more of the world and more of life than she ever thought she would have, and the brave, confident woman she’d become thereafter was a reflection of that. Maggie now knew who she was and what she was worth and no one would be able to convince her otherwise.

She’d found work first in a settlement house on the lower East Side where her supervisor had offered her a promotion promptly followed by him placing his hand on her ass. Suffice it to say, Maggie had turned down the promotion and broken his hand in the process, choosing to take work driving a gravel truck as opposed to something more befitting her education because the hard scrabble life where she had more freedom to live and dress as she chose agreed with her more than the stuffily bourgeois lives of the wealthy and those aspiring to become the wealthy.

Living on her own financial means was difficult. Most women went from their father’s homes to their husband’s. Only the women who had to or who wanted more dared to live another life where they were solely responsible for themselves. A life that society didn’t want them to have, but Maggie had never been a woman of her time and luckily for her she never would be.

One day late in the month, Maggie was scheduled to make a delivery to the construction site of the new Gotham Central Train Depot—destined to be the second largest train station on the Eastern seaboard for the next eighty years. When her truck pulled up to the hastily laid dirt driveway leading to the pit where crews of men were digging the foundation of the building, the construction manager scratched his head.

“But…you’re a broad?” He said in disbelief, eyeing her up and down like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

Maggie rolled her eyes. The men working on the sites she delivered to balked when they saw her in her overalls and cowhide work gloves so often that it hardly phased her anymore. Still it was entertaining sometimes to watch their eyes bulge out of their skulls like the puppets at a Punch and Judy show.

“Yeah, I may be a woman, but I’m still the driver. You want the gravel you paid for or not?” Maggie quipped down at him.
The site manager grumbled something under his breath and jerked his thumb back towards the pit. Maggie drove the truck where she’d been directed and pulled to a stop just in front of the digs. She hopped down from her seat.

“Hey, anyone know where they want the gravel dumped?” She shouted at anyone who was close enough to hear.

Of the sixty or so men present, no one bothered to answer her.

Letting out a frustrated huff of air, Maggie marched herself up to a group of men all crowded around something in a corner near the back of the shallow pit. She bumped herself through the loose knit mass of dirty bodies and immediately stopped in her tracks when she caught sight of what everyone was staring at.

“We stopped digging as soon as we found it,” the construction worker nearest her said in a shaky voice.

Maggie peered over his shoulder. Sticking out from beneath the broken earth was a small child’s foot.

“Someone call the cops!” a burly man Maggie thought might be the foreman shouted. Another man nodded and ran to the diner across the street where there was a phone.

As discretely as she could, Maggie knelt down beside the body. The child’s exposed leg and foot were rigid and though Maggie could tell the body had probably been stashed there less than 24 hours ago, the child’s skin was permeated through with an unnaturally bright pink hue that Maggie recognized from her studies in Paris.

*It’s not your problem,* a voice in the back of Maggie’s mind spoke up, *just leave well enough alone and continue on with your life.*

Maggie stepped back and—as she often did—she kept what she knew to herself and minded her own business.

The police arrived within the hour, siren horns churning nosily. All of the workers as well as Maggie were asked to stay onsite until a GCPD officer could take their statements. Five uniformed
policemen meandered around to each worker in no particular hurry, asking questions, jotting down paraphrasings of various answers given. Half an hour flew by in no time and Maggie was all too aware that she was getting behind on her deliveries. Her boss was a decent man, but she didn’t doubt that if he had to compensate all of his customers for a day of work lost, she’d be fired in no time and finding another source of income was a financial headache Maggie did not need right now.

Stealthily, she started to slink back towards her truck. She was beginning to lift herself up into the driver’s seat when she felt a grip on the crook of her arm pull her back down. Maggie immediately wrenched her arm back when her feet were on solid ground again and whirled around, ready to deck her attacker.

“Whoa, whoa, hey! Well-meaning cop here,” a man in a Homburg hat and a serge coat shouted as he put his arms up to shield his face.

Maggie lowered her fist and crossed her arms over her chest, waiting. When the anticipated blow never came, the man lowered his arms to reveal an oval face with dark sideburns and somewhat sincere eyes. He reached hurriedly into a side pocket and held up a thin leather wallet with a brass badge inside.

“I’m Detective Joely Bartlett, GCPD. I’m afraid I can’t let you leave the site until you answer some questions for me.”

“One: the fact you think you are letting me do anything is amusing, Two: I have deliveries to make that are already behind schedule or I might lose my job and you wouldn’t want to be responsible for that would you, detective?” Maggie asked, turning around to hop back up into the front seat.

She felt another tug, this time on the back of her jacket and again her feet ended up back on the ground.

“Stop grabbing me. I don’t know anything!” Maggie shouted, annoyed.

She turned around again and Detective Bartlett backed away, hands raised up in surrender.

“I would still prefer if you didn’t leave, Miss Sawyer is it? Every witness needs to give a statement. It’s procedure.” Detective Bartlett said, almost regretfully. “If you like, we could call your boss from the station and explain the situation. Might get you out of dutch, but we’d have to take your
“If it’s all the same to you, detective, I think I’ll take my chances with my boss on my own.” Maggie said, backing up towards her truck.

In Maggie’s nineteen years of life, she’d tried her best to stay on the right side of the law in every country she’d lived in, but many of her Aunt’s friends in Europe had had less than glowing encounters with various law enforcement groups over their long queer lives. As an openly gay woman on her own in the world, Maggie was naturally cautious of any group of people charged by those in power with the task of upholding the often arbitrary laws in which only the very rich normal majority benefited.

For as brave as she was, Maggie had never been arrested for her “lifestyle” and didn’t ever want to take the risk of drawing attention to herself in that way. She’d vowed to herself long ago on a train steaming out of Nebraska that she’d find a way to live a full life and to—not just survive—but to thrive: to fall into love and out again, to travel and see everything the world had to offer, and to experience all there was to experience. Gotham was to be just one footnote in the story of her life and she didn’t want to end it there.

She could knockout a cop, of that Maggie was sure, but she didn’t want the legal repercussions that were sure to follow if she used that mean right hook she’d been famous for amongst her more raucous university friends in the Latin Quarter.

“The sooner you give your statement, the quicker I’ll stop bothering you and you can get back to your deliveries. I don’t know about you, but that sounds like a win-win kind of situation to me for both of us,” Joely said, settling his hands into his trouser pockets and rocking nervously from his heels to the balls of his feet and back again, “what do you say, miss?”

Maggie opened her mouth to answer, but a voice from somewhere behind her cut her off.

“Or we could arrest you for obstruction of justice,” said a second man in a dark greatcoat, leaning against the front of Maggie’s truck lighting a cigarette.

He was taller than Maggie by a head and his blonde hair had been combed back with so much brill cream that she doubted a windstorm would be able to knock it loose. He fumbled with the lighter, clicking it over and over again between his fat fingers until finally a flame caught and the end of his cigarette glowed orange, illuminating dark eyes that seemed to regard Maggie as a nuisance already.
Maggie clenched her jaw. This was just what she’d been trying to avoid. If she was arrested then more questions than she wanted answered would be asked about her. Maggie looked between the two men and finally, relented.

“Alright,” Maggie agreed, dropping her arms to her sides. “What do you want to know officers?”

The drive back to the GCPD station on 4th Street was maybe a twenty minute journey, but to Maggie it felt like an eternity, stuffed into the back of a Model T with two cops sitting in the front seat giving her varying looks through the rearview mirror. Detective Bartlett looked at her like he felt guilty for calling her in whereas his blonde partner looked at Maggie like she was a piece of dog shit on the sole of his shoe. Maggie didn’t shy away from either of them, instead she glared through the mirror right back at them both.

“So,” Detective Bartlett asked, clearing his throat. “What’s a woman like you doing driving a gravel truck?”

Maggie shrugged and looked out the side window, “the owner didn’t demand I wear a dress and I could do the work so…”

“What a waste,” the blonde cop commented from the driver’s seat. “Some honest man’s outta work because you haven’t settled down and had a family like you’re supposed to.”

“If this hypothetical man you’re championing really is honest then he can be honest someplace else,” Maggie stated with a smirk. “Women need to make a living too.”

The blonde cop’s eyes in the mirror were wide, angry, and bloodshot and if Maggie didn’t know any better, she would have expected them to shoot right out of his skull and into the windshield.

“You mouthy little —,” he started to growl, but Detective Bartlett interrupted him.
“Easy, Cornwell. You’re not from around here are you, miss?” Bartlett asked, turning around in his seat to face Maggie, grinning.

“What gave me away?” Maggie asked, amused.

This time it was Detective Bartlett’s turn to shrug, “just a lucky guess. So, where are you from originally?”

Maggie’s face fell a bit, “Nebraska.”

“The foreman at the site said that he saw you kneeling beside the body. Care to tell us about that?” Detective Bartlett asked, holding Maggie’s gaze in the mirror.

“Did you notice the kid’s skin was bright pink?” Maggie asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Yeah, what of it?” Cornwell grumbled from the driver’s seat.

“That brilliant pink hue only occurs in people who’ve died of carbon monoxide poisoning.” Maggie explained.

“How the hell would a gutter rat like you know something like that?” Cornwell asked with an air of suspicion.

“I studied medicine at the Universities of Lyon and Paris while my aunt and I were living in France.” Maggie said.

“You wanted to be a doctor? You?!” Cornwell balked, his face reddening as he bristled with male indignation Maggie saw directed at her nearly every day.

“I didn’t know what I wanted to be,” Maggie answered, trying to remain relaxed even though the frustration radiating from the front was starting to make her muscles tense up. “Just something extraordinary. My aunt supported my ambitions and her friends humored me after her death, but I left school not long after.”
“Why?” Bartlett asked earnestly, stuffing tobacco from his jacket pocket into a pipe. “It seems you excelled at it.”

“School was expensive and then the War happened.” Maggie sighed, looking back out the window at the horse carts they passed and the people walking to and fro parallel to the street wandering through their everyday lives without a purpose or a plan. “With the German army marching through Belgium into France, it was just easier to leave.”

“So you decided to settle in the murder capitol of the world?” Bartlett asked, lighting his pipe and taking a few experimental puffs off of it.

“I never intended to end up here.” Maggie explained absently. “I moved to New York first, then Newark, Star City, Metropolis, and finally Gotham. I don’t know why, there was just something about this place that seemed…new and worthwhile.”

Cornwell grunted in irritation from his driver’s seat, but said nothing. Bartlett drew on his pipe thoughtfully and Maggie sat silently contemplating the memories that swirled around in her skull, popping up in her consciousness as if they’d happened yesterday and not months or even years ago.

In her mind’s eye, she saw herself at a café laughing with school friends, or on a boat chuffing down the Seine where a blonde beauty named Marie had given her the first real lover’s kiss Maggie had ever experienced. There were other less enjoyable memories: flashes of that one time she’d gotten into a fist fight while drunk in the Latin Quarter and had been knocked out and left in a narrow alley until the cold spring air woke her up the next morning. Or the memory of that terrible beige room in the Hôtel-Dieu where her Aunt Tilda had spent her last few miserable days on Earth, Maggie sitting by her side with a handful of Tilda’s closest friends until she’d taken her final breath and her weakened heart had finally given out.

In the moments afterward, Maggie remembered the way the sunlight from the one open window had cascaded down upon the bright white sheets covering her aunt’s body and she’d felt this overwhelming feeling in her gut that the thing she had been dreading for the past two months had come to pass and yet the world remained the same around her, only she was different…lost somehow, adrift.

“We’re here.” Detective Bartlett announced as their car maneuvered in between two stone posts and stopped in the middle of a flagstone yard in front of a stocky brick building. “Welcome to the Gotham City Police Department, Miss Sawyer.”
Maggie stepped out of the back seat. She stared up at the daunting front façade of the police station and for some reason she couldn’t place, she felt at home. Like she belonged there.

“Sawyer, you coming or what? Today please.” Cornwell groused, over his shoulder.

Despite shaping up to be her nemesis, he held the door open for her as she sauntered in, well on the way to a future she would never have been able to foresee.

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National City – June 2016

Damn it, Alex groaned internally as yet another mechanical pencil tip busted against the clipboard she’d been writing her notes down on.

“Problem, Agent Danvers?” J’onn asked from the doorway to the DEO’s med bay where Alex had been assigned to run tests on the latest technology confiscated from their last Fort Rozz escapee.

Alex looked up from her work, frustrated. “No, I’m just—”

“Distracted,” J’onn finished for her, stepping fully into the room and crossing his arms across his chest as he watched her. “You know if there were any active Ops, I’d send you out into the field to work off some of that excess energy you’ve been storing up, but as it stands there is nothing for you to do except, well, lab work.”

Alex sighed and set the clipboard down on the desk she’d been using to observe the particle deconstruction process of a piece of the matter replicator (at least she was pretty sure that was what it was) that the DEO had taken off of that Korugarian smuggler they’d apprehended three days ago. She should have been thrilled to be back at work or at the very least intrigued by the process. Alex was a Bio-engineer after all, but for some reason she couldn’t quite name, her heart just wasn’t in it today.

“I think I need to take a break—get some fresh air, if that’s okay?” Alex asked, surprising herself as the words passed her lips.
“Of course,” J’onn nodded, “Go for a walk or get a coffee or something, but be ready to focus when you get back.”

Alex rolled her eyes and J’onn let a rare laugh escape his mouth as she shed her lab coat on her way leading out into the rest of the building.

Alex immediately felt better once her feet were firmly planted on the sidewalk. The sun had risen over most of the buildings, peaking between too tall skyscrapers like yellow slots of light through Venetian blinds. It was comforting—the way the rhythm of the city remained the same every day. Things changed, places were bulldozed or bought and renovated. Intersections were occasionally renamed, but beneath the surface of it all, beneath the objects, life ran through the cityscape morning to night at the same speed like it was turning on a wheel.

Just after she entered Noonan’s, Alex moved to the side out of the way of the door and leaned back against the wall, staring up at the sign showing all of the various coffee concoctions. She always went over the selections thinking that she might try something new that day, but in the end Alex always got the same thing: a Café Mocha with a croissant when she felt like it.

“What are you waiting for? An impatient little voice from deep inside Alex’s consciousness goaded her. _Order already._

In truth, Alex didn’t know what was keeping her from ordering. She just had this feeling in her bones that she should stay put right where she was, as if she were wearing metal boots and a magnet was beneath the floorboards holding her in place.

“A Sawyer!” The barista called out.

A brunette moved towards the counter, her back to Alex. The barista pushed a cup and a white bag towards her with an easy smile.

“One tall black medium roast coffee and a twice toasted sesame bagel. You have one of the easiest orders to remember in your whole department, Detective.” The barista said, making small talk. “The two dark roast coffee carriers will be ready in a minute. I’ll call your name again when they’re done being filled.”
“Thanks, Jon.” The woman said, reaching for her coffee and bagel.

Alex thought the voice sounded familiar, but she couldn’t place it. She leaned against the wall and pulled her phone out of her pocket, pretending to be interested in whatever articles popped up in the newsfeed. Then the woman turned around and Alex couldn’t have pretended to care about anything else if she had wanted to.

It was the woman Alex had run into two days ago. Maggie, was that her name?

Maggie met Alex’s gaze, surprised at first and then recognition dawned and a beautiful dimpled smile bloomed on her face. Alex felt her stomach summersault at the sight.

She’s so beautiful, Alex thought.

“Alex.” Maggie’s voice greeted warmly like they were old friends, “it’s good to see you again.”

Alex smiled and opened her mouth to say something, but no words came out. Instead, she was startled by a thud that might’ve been as loud as a gunshot as her phone fell from her grasp onto the hardwood floor. Maggie set her coffee and bagel down on a nearby table and knelt to retrieve the phone at the same time Alex did and their hands brushed as they both grasped the fallen piece of technology in tandem. Both looked up and Alex forgot to breathe for a moment as her eyes again melted into the woman’s warm brown gaze.

“I’m sorry, it’s stupid, I don’t know what happened…” Alex sputtered, standing up at the same moment as Maggie, feeling her cheeks color in embarrassment. “I guess I was distracted.”

Maggie chuckled, a carefree easy sound that Alex wanted to hear again and grinned, “It’s alright. It happens to everyone. Maybe now you’ll let me buy you that cup of coffee?”

Alex smiled despite herself, but she couldn’t look away or speak or even breathe properly. She felt like a teenager all over again. It was like she was being pulled into this woman as if they were one body, like…like gravity. What was wrong with her? To be fair, she’d never felt this way in her life before now.
“What’re you having?” Maggie asked, her voice sounded casual, deep and smooth like chocolate.

“I was going to get a tall Café Mocha, I guess,” Alex said, the shade of her cheeks darkening as the words came out of her in an undignified rush.

Maggie chuckled again and bit her bottom lip in the sexiest gesture Alex had ever seen, regarding Alex as if she was somehow enjoying her flustered babbling, but not in a mean way. If Alex didn’t know any better she would say…Maggie was a little bit in awe of her?

Me? That’s absurd, a tiny negative voice in the back of Alex’s mind scolded. Who could ever be in awe of you?

It probably was and yet…Alex couldn’t help but hope against hope somehow that Maggie felt the pull of the same force that rendered Alex’s attempts at coherent speech nearly impossible and at the same, drew her into the other woman’s orbit. Time seemed to slow for a moment as Alex fell into dark eyes again shining with a light Alex was sure radiated from Maggie out into the world and not the other way around. Her heart thumped loudly in her ears and she felt her entire body temperature rising.

“You alright?” Maggie asked in a concerned tone, stepping closer and reaching out both hands to touch Alex’s shoulders as if she were afraid the other woman might keel over at any moment.

“Ah…yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” Alex replied with a hasty smile, coming back to the present. “I just you know…was distracted…again.”

Alex shut her mouth, afraid that if she continued to talk everything that came out would be senseless babble.

“Oh huh,” Maggie said, unconvinced, but the tone of her voice was light, almost—dare Alex dream—playful.

Maggie’s eyes scanned Alex up and down before she smiled again---oh god that smile, that smile was going to be the death of Alex one day of that she was sure—and released Alex’s shoulders as she stepped out of her personal space.

“Let’s get some coffee into you. Maybe that’ll perk you up.”
Alex reached into her back pocket automatically to retrieve her wallet, but Maggie’s soft hand on her forearm stopped her.

“My treat remember?” Skillfully, Maggie guided Alex to the table where she’d set her coffee and bagel and encouraged her to sit down. “Relax here for a moment. I’ll be back in a flash.”

With that Alex watched as Maggie sauntered confidently up to the counter and flagged down the barista who’d called out her order earlier. She leaned on the counter pointing up towards menu saying something Alex was too far away to hear. She smiled so charmingly that Alex thought she might be in the process of having a heart attack as her chest tightened and the barista reflected Maggie’s enthusiasm, moving back into work mode. Maggie finished paying and started walking back towards her table and Alex.

“So tell me, what does a day in the life of Alex look like?” Maggie asked, taking a seat in the chair across from her.

“Danvers,” Alex supplied anxiously without being asked. “My full name is Alex Danvers.”

Maggie smiled that wide dimpled smile again, “Danvers. I like it. It suits you. So, what does a day in the life of Alex Danvers look like?”

“Uh, you know….pretty normal usually,” Alex uttered, immediately feeling guilt settle in her gut at lying to this woman. There was no reason she should feel bad. She was a top secret government agent after all. It’s not like she could go around every day telling everyone she met about her job, but for some reason lying to Maggie made Alex’s stomach churn uncomfortably. “How about for you? What does a day in the life of Maggie look like?”

“Sawyer,” Maggie echoed Alex’s earlier revelation, her eyes travelling up and down Alex’s face curiously before meeting her eyes again. “Maggie Sawyer. I’m a cop so every day is a new kind of crazy. It does have the virtue of never boring though.”

“I can imagine,” Alex commented, her expression mirroring Maggie’s own. “If you’re a cop what are you doing in a coffee shop at 10 in the morning? Is it your day off or something?”

Maggie opened her mouth to answer, but before she could the barista was shouting out her name from the bar. Maggie excused herself and walked up to the bar juggling what looked to be two
heavy coffee carriers in one white fisted grip and Alex’s café mocha in the other.

“Your drink, milady,” Maggie said as she handed the coffee cup to Alex.

“Thanks,” Alex replied, taking the drink gratefully, blowing on it before taking a sip.

Alex was so momentarily engrossed in her mocha that she didn’t realize the dilemma at first, but once she refocused on Maggie again, she realized there was a problem. Maggie had two hands and four things to carry and she was trying to pick up her coffee cup with one hand and then go back down and reach for the bag her bagel was in, but before the imminent spillage became inevitable, Alex scooped up the bagel bag along with her mocha and gripped Maggie’s coffee cup in her free hand so that her fingers was covering Maggie’s unsteady ones.

“Here, let me help.” Alex offered.

“Danvers, you don’t have to. I can manage—” Maggie protested, but Alex cut her off.

“You may be a badass cop, but trust me, even badasses need help from time to time.”

Maggie looked into Alex’s eyes—really looked—as if she were trying figure out what made her tick, who she really was, and what her intentions were. Alex felt exposed, but oddly, she wasn’t uncomfortable under the scrutiny.

“You win, Danvers,” Maggie relented, letting Alex take the coffee cup from her hand.

“I always do,” Alex smirked, feeling confident for the first time since she’d walked into Noonan’s that morning. “Where are you headed?”

“ar the police station on Morton Ave. It’s only a couple blocks down.”

Alex held the door open and Maggie led the way back out onto the sidewalk, slowing her gate so she could fall into step beside Alex.
As they walked, they talked, mostly about banal things: likes, dislikes, motorcycles, TV shows they never had the time to watch and working so late into the night that others accused them of being workaholics. They ruminated about the day, the weather, popular scientific breakthroughs (Alex’s contribution), and even about the topic of aliens from other planets living among human (Maggie’s doing).

“Your ex is a Roltikkon?!?” Alex exclaimed so enthusiastically that she garnered a couple of odd looks from passersby. “I’ve read Roltikkon can form telepathic connections by making physical contact with the dorsum of the tongue.”

“Yeah, incidentally that’s how she learned English,” Maggie said winking conspiratorially at Alex who immediately blushed, but didn’t shy away from the other woman’s gaze. “For the record I don’t strictly date aliens, but I do like them more than most humans.”

“Why?” popped out of Alex’s mouth before her brain had time to stop it. Alex was never one who was interested in the personal lives of other, except for Kara, but that’s because Kara told her and Kara was Kara.

Maggie sighed, but answered the question honestly even though Alex sensed her hesitation.

“Growing up a non-white, non-straight girl in Blue Springs, Nebraska... might as well have been from Mars. I was an outcast and felt like it. Our alien neighbors, they’re no different. Most of them are hardworking immigrants or refugees just trying to get by. They shouldn’t be punished for that, you know?”

“They have to hide who they are in order to survive. I can sympathize with that.”

A heavy silence between them followed. Alex felt Maggie’s demeanor change as the easy smile slipped off of her face and she shoved her hands into her pockets as if she was folding in on herself. Suddenly, Alex felt responsible for the heavy atmosphere lingering between them like a dense fog. Who am I to pry into her personal life? Everyone has things that’ve happened to them that they’d like to forget. Growing up like she did, so different and exposed in a small town in the middle of mostly farmland, Alex felt a swell of pride flare up in her chest for Maggie. Here was this brave, brave woman who had likely survived some pretty terrible things and all just because she was different.

*This amazing woman,* Alex thought, *so tough and so beautiful.*
“You’re amazing, Sawyer, you know that,” Alex said, smiling at Maggie beside her and nudging her playfully with her smile.

Maggie’s glum demeanor evaporated immediately and Alex’s favorite smile spread across Maggie’s face.

“Aw, Danvers, you’re making me blush. Thank you.” Maggie teased, looking at Alex as if she’d just discovered something new about her. Something important, but Alex couldn’t imagine what that something would have been.

Alex’s heart fluttered in her chest as her brain caught up with what she’d said. Where did that come from? Alex wondered I mean she is amazing and tough and, brave, but why am I thinking of her like…like I like her. No, nope, nope don’t like her!! At least not like that. I’ve dated guys, albeit not recently, but that doesn’t mean anything. What if I’m not? What would mom think if I…No, I’m straight and I always have been. Damn it, Alex, get ahold of yourself!

“Hey Danvers, we’re here. Danvers?”

Maggie’s voice pulled Alex out of her self-depreciative musings so quickly that she started, wide eyed and breathing harder than she had been before.

“Danvers? You okay? You look like you saw a ghost or something.” Maggie stepped up to the building, set the coffee carriers on the stoop of the police station, and for the second time that day she stepped into Alex’s personal space and gripped her shoulders loosely, staring up into her eyes.

Alex took a deep breath and tried to steady herself, but she felt shaky. Like she hadn’t eaten anything that day. Maggie must have sensed that she was unwell because she immediately took the coffees from Alex’s hands, set them on the concrete, and led Alex over to one of the steps to sit down. They sat side by side without saying anything at first. Alex just breathing and Maggie watching her for signs of distress.

Finally, Maggie took one of Alex’s hands and held it. Alex looked at her and that’s when Maggie saw it. Fear. This woman wasn’t just afraid she was terrified of something.

“Alex.” Maggie said in a soft, soothing tone while running one of her thumbs along the back of Alex’s hand. “I know we don’t know one another that well. You don’t have to tell me what you’re going through, but I’m right here just the same.”
Alex sucked in a breath so deep it felt like her lungs could burst from the pressure and then she let it out. The last of her anxiety went out with it and she became conscious of Maggie’s hand cradling hers. The warmth radiating from Maggie’s gentle grasp made Alex feel safe, understood, and somehow anchored.

“I’m right here,” Maggie repeated, giving Alex’s hand a little squeeze. “How’re you feeling? Better?”

Alex nodded and exhaled another breath. Beside them, two uniformed police officers climbed up the steps, nodding to Maggie. Immediately, Alex pulled her hand from Maggie’s and stuck it into her pocket. Maggie noticed the knee jerk reaction and she thought she might know why, but she’d lived long enough to know better than to go around assuming things about people. She reached into her pocket, pulled out a card, and handed it over to Alex.

“This is my card and there’s my personal number. If you ever want to talk or need something or just want someone to play pool with on the weekend, give me a ring, okay?”

Alex gave a humorless chuckle, “You think I’m a mess. Don’t you?”

“No, I think you’re human.” Maggie said, staring straight into her eyes. From any other stranger, Alex would have cried that statement off as bullshit, but not from Maggie. “And everyone needs to let off some steam or lose their cool every once in a while. Because life is hard and it’s unfair and no one deserves to go through it alone.”

Maggie was aware of the irony of that statement given her own unusual circumstances, but she brushed it off, instead deciding to focus on Alex. This is about Alex, not her.

“I…uh…I should get going,” Alex said, standing up quickly. “I need to get back to work.”

The words coming from Alex’s lips sounded and felt hollow, but she didn’t feel like she had the strength to stop them. She reached for her coffee and stood up, looking at Maggie.

“Thanks for the coffee,” Alex said, smiling dimly. “It more than makes up for the other day.”

“Anytime, Danvers,” Maggie said, standing up and taking a few steps towards Alex.
“I really have to go now, I’m sorry.” And with that Alex put her head down and walked straight back to the DEO. When she finally set foot in the lobby of the government building, she reached in her coat pocket where she’d hastily stuffed the card Maggie had given her.

“Detective Maggie Sawyer, NCPD Science Division,” Alex read out loud.

Quieting the negative thoughts resurfacing in her mind, Alex stuffed the card back into her pocket with her phone and marched back to the med lab, doggedly determined to put the beautiful and amazing Maggie Sawyer out of her thoughts so she could get at least some work done in the day that was remaining.

TBC
Another Fateful Meeting

Chapter Notes

Hi all! For starters, I want to apologize profusely for how long this chapter took to be written. It’s long, it took a lot of research, but most of the time in between was spent dealing with real life things and—though that is sometimes unavoidable—I want to keep up the momentum with consistent updates in the future. Wish me luck. I’ve done extensive research on this time period and some very interesting—lesser known—women of history. I name drop a lot of historic lesbians from the early 20th century in this story and add a lot of history from my personal research, but as fun as that all was, I really hope it adds to the story and doesn’t take away from it. Lastly—just a head’s up—this chapter explores part of Maggie’s first year spent in Gotham as a cop and also mentions a few of her past lovers at certain points. I’ve based Maggie’s observational methods and dogged characterization to see real justice done on a real life woman from the early 1900s whose extraordinary life has been mostly lost to history because she took on a lot of powerful people in government and made a lot of powerful enemies in the process. She was a lawyer who turned into a detective because she didn’t trust the police. She was the first woman Special Investigator to the NYPD that I know of. She brought about the biggest corruption investigation into the ranks of the NYPD and also became the first woman Special Assistant United States Attorney. That remarkable woman is Mary Grace Humiston and I encourage each and every one of you to read up on her if you can. She saved two alleged murderers from death row by solving those cases without the aid of the police. That’s it for my fangirl ramblings.

Thanks for listening to my PSA and enjoy the read!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gotham City—April 1915

Maggie had thought all she’d have to do when they got the GCPD headquarters was to give her witness statement. She’d thought she’d be allowed to return to the construction site for her truck and at least manage to make one of her deliveries on time afterwards.

She’d thought wrong. Very, very wrong.

After Maggie had filled out and signed the form Detective Bartlett had given her regarding the events of that morning, she’d been strong-armed on her way out of the station by Lt. Cornwell and pushed into a room with concrete walls and only two gas lamps on either side of the doormain frame. The rest of the room was cast in the lamps’ faint orange glow that was barely bright enough to read a piece of paper right in front of your face. She’d yanked her arm back from Cornwell at the first opportunity and been directed into a chair. She’d refused to sit at first, but Cornwell had threatened
to throw her in a holding cell for “obstructing justice” and refusing to cooperate with law enforcement.

At that, Maggie had sat down and crossed her arms defiantly over her chest. That was when the real farce had begun.

At first, Maggie had almost chuckled at how stupid Cornwell must’ve been to suspect her, then she’d grown bored and frustrated at the same questions being repeated and now—ten minutes later—she was beyond pissed off. Because not only was this nincompoop wasting her time and putting her job on the line, he was obviously trying to get her to confess to something incriminating so he could frame her and thereby get credit for solving the case.

What was worse was how Cornwell looked at her. Most men had two approaches to attractive women: the first one was to use persistent sweetness—as they saw it—to get an attractive woman to submit to them. The latter—far more dangerous approach in Maggie’s opinion—was to be straightforwardly aggressive, viewing beautiful women as something a man had the right to take and own simply by virtue of his manliness.

Cornwell was a master of the second approach and the way he leaned back in his chair and his eyes took in her features as if he wanted to hurt her and have her at the same time. He looked at her like he thought she was nothing by a thing, not a person and that set off warning bells in Maggie right away. Her arms tightened across her chest and her feet stayed directly beneath her under the chair just in case she needed to get up and go quickly. Maggie’s mind warned her to stay calm. No fighting and no fleeing, it repeated on a loop, because if she did either, Cornwell could use her actions as proof of complicit guilt in the “crime” she’d unwittingly stumbled into or something worse.

A crime it had been to bury a child’s body on public property, but a murder it wasn’t.

In 1915, two-hundred and seven Gothamites had been murdered by shooting or stabbing, three-hundred city residents had lost their lives to automobile accidents. Another two-hundred-fifty had committed suicide and—most alarming of all—over eight-hundred Gothamites had died of poisoning including not only murders with malicious intent, but also accidental poisoning by things such as overdoses of the arsenic used in cosmetic creams and fumigations of buildings that had not been properly evacuated beforehand—and those were just the ones the city knew about.

These statics became known to Maggie over time as she made more friends who worked for both the City records office and friends who wrote for newspapers and periodicals who liked to sensationalize the multiple deaths that took place daily in the city of four million people—hundreds of whom continued to arrive each day by boat from Europe and the Old World. But no matter how she’d tried to separate herself from it, the forensic studies Maggie had abandoned in
Paris hadn’t left her and her constant curiosity about who died, what killed them etc. put those friends to task.

She’d ask day in and day out, what her friends knew about each crime they filed reports for or wrote upon. Questions like what the police knew, what the evidence was, and so on and so on until one or another of her friends would refuse to tell her anymore about it. Her ceaseless pestering would often end in a heated exclamation to the effect of, “Why the hell do you care about any of this?! You drive a damn gravel truck!”

Why did Maggie care about the crimes that happened every day in the city? Or how many went unsolved?

Gotham was not the biggest city Maggie had ever lived in, but it was the most ramshackle. European cities like London and Paris had their own growing pains: entire districts filled to the brim with crowded tenements, babies born so often and in such poverty that it wasn’t uncommon to see them left to die in gutters, and more piss and shit in the streets than there was fresh water for the inhabitants to drink. As much as every single one of those things had sickened her, for Maggie it was somehow worse to come back to her home country and see the same indifference to human suffering. She hadn’t been born yesterday. Maggie knew better than to think that everyone was a decent human being. Being run out of Blue Springs had killed that hope in her. Still, Maggie had hoped things would get better, but—if anything—they were getting worse.

She hadn’t been in Gotham that long, but somehow Maggie felt like Gotham was her city. She belonged here and it was up to her to bring what she’d learned to the law enforcement community here who didn’t really believe in the power of forensics like their counterparts overseas and had only just formed their first Toxicology lab and Medical Examiner’s office 6 months before Maggie had arrived.

Part of her had come here to make a difference, but the other part of Maggie just wanted to get out of this fucking police station and pummel this jackass to death!!

Still, Maggie had come to the conclusion on her own on the ride over to Gotham Central that the little kid she’d found had died of Carbon Monoxide poisoning—which actually happened every day as Carbon Monoxide was a key ingredient in the gas that lit people’s homes, burned in their radiators, and provided their stoves with fire to cook their meals.

All it took was turning the gas on, opening the oven door to light the pilot light, and getting distracted thus allowing the gas to permeate the apartment. The most obvious thing about Carbon Monoxide deaths other than that they were common was that there was little glory in solving them, documenting them, or reporting on them. Maggie had heard that years before the appointment of the first Medical Examiner in the city, coroners—who never had any scientific clout and were hand
chosen by the mayor based on loyalty—would destroy vital evidence, write up a shoddy report and refuse to give the body over to the deceased’s relatives unless they chose a funeral home that paid the coroner under the table for every body he brought in. Sometimes coroners even sold ‘Cause of Death’—recording the way a person’s family wished them to be known to die and submitting it as official for a hefty bribe.

Although, the child’s death wasn’t murder or manslaughter as Maggie imagined the block headed Lieutenant was angling for, it was still accessory to an actual crime. The real crime according to city law was that someone had tried to conceal the child’s death by burying the body illegally on private property and trespassing to do it. But, if the way Cornwell was treating her was any indication, Maggie imagined no one would listen to her conclusions and some poor bastard out there was going to be proclaimed guilty and strapped down into the new electric chair at Blackgate Mayor Cobblepot was so proud of.

It wouldn’t be her. Maggie was determined. Life could be hellish, but it was still hers to do with as she pleased until her last breath, pompous lazy detective assholes be damned. Maggie sucked in a deep breath and tried to keep her skin from crawling as Cornwell’s gaze swept over her body again—most of her curves gratefully hidden by the work overalls she wore.

“Foreman on the site said you didn’t look that upset for a dame,” Cornwell stated, lighting the cigarette he was holding between his teeth with a match from his pocket. He took a few drags and the already dim light around them became hazy with smoke. “He and a number of construction workers around you said you knelt by the girl and just marched off, no tears, no pitiable wailing, or fainting. The only conclusions I can come to for that is that you are either not really a member of the weaker sex and you’re hiding a prick somewhere in those overalls of yours or you had something to do with the crime being committed and therefore you weren’t affected because you already knew what you’d find.”

“Those two things are mutually exclusive,” Maggie countered. Cornwell’s expression quickly turned blank and the cigarette drooped from his lips in confusion. He didn’t understand the phrase, Maggie realized. With more patience than she felt, Maggie continued. “Meaning that one thing doesn’t logically lead to the other. Lack of crying is circumstantial. It doesn’t support or belittle the committing of a crime. I didn’t cry because I’ve lived in a handful of cities in the United States and Europe. I’ve witnessed the cruelty people visit upon themselves no matter what language they speak or what part of the world they’re from. For that reason, I’ve hardened my heart. Crying doesn’t come easily to me.”

*After losing Eliza and Aunt Tilda,* Maggie thought to herself. In a strange act of courage, Maggie met the detective’s eyes and held them as if saying ‘two can play this game.’

“And you just happened to know where the body was buried and how the child died? That’s awfully coincidental, Miss Sawyer, and if life’s taught me anything it’s that there are no
coincidences where a crime is concerned, *Miss Sawyer*, if I’m even guessing your sex correctly.” Cornwell said again, the note of righteous superiority clear in his voice.

The detective hissed her name every time he spoke, his features screwing into an expression of disgust—as though merely saying Maggie’s name left a bad taste in his mouth. The feeling was most assuredly mutual and it was time Maggie fought back.

“I’ve told you, I was making deliveries of gravel because it’s *my job* and I’ll tell you again that I didn’t know where the body was buried, I simply called out to anyone who would listen for a place to put the fucking gravel and noticed all the workers huddled in a corner of the yard. And once again—just in case none of this soaked into primitive rodent brain the first twenty times I told it to you—I only estimated that the child’s death was due to Carbon Monoxide poisoning because I studied medicine abroad. I’m not even a cop and still I noticed more than you, *Lieutenant*, and I think you’re determined to frame me for this because you’re jealous you can’t even solve a real crime on your own. You’re the type who’s risen through the ranks kissing the asses of your betters or maybe doing a little more than kissing? I’d bet my life that the title of Lieutenant definitely wouldn’t have come without the price of a little pillow biting. Wonder what the move to Captain will cost you?”

Cornwell’s cheeks colored, his jaw tightened, and his teeth grit together as he lashed out across the table at her, but Maggie’s instincts saved her—alerting her that she’d gone too far almost as soon as the words had left her mouth—and she’d pushed back from the table, sliding the wooden chair across the concrete and out of the Lieutenant’s reach.

“You smug bitch!” Cornwell exclaimed, standing and holding the whole of his weight on his closed fists on the tabletop and looming far above Maggie. “I’m the detective here! I ask the questions and I determine if your answers make sense or if they’re a crock of shit or not and I say they are! You’re hiding something and I’m going to get it out of you so help me God! You’re lucky I don’t kick you in the box and bend you over this table like you deserve, you fucking Dyke!”

Dyke.

That word always seemed to come from an angry man’s mouth and Maggie loathed the sound of it. She wanted to shout back at him. To stand up, kick him in the family jewels, and punch him until her knuckles were a bloody mess, but instead, Maggie gritted her teeth together and remained on high alert. She shouldn’t have antagonized him. She knew better than that. She’d always knew better before she’d done in the past, but it’d never stopped her.

Maggie thought of Eva Le Gallienne—the first woman her age she’d had a meaningful relationship with. Eva had been gorgeous, full of life, and so, so brave. Those were the qualities that had caused
Maggie to fall in love with her and—according to Eva—vice versa. Eva was an actress. Maggie had first seen her in a production of *Monna Vanna* while Eva was in drama school and she’d snuck backstage afterwards to convince Eva into going to dinner with her.

The six months they’d spent together before Eva had broken off the relationship to begin her career in New York had been magical and—bluntly revealing. The older Sapphic’s in Aunt Tilda’s circle had always doted on Maggie. Renée Vivien had written a love poem for Maggie on her sixteenth birthday that had made her entire face turn the color of a cherry tomato. Isadora Duncan had Maggie’s first suit of man’s clothes tailored to her measurements—which Duncan boasted she knew intimately.

Even Eleonora Duse during a summer in Paris, had invited Maggie on an outing to the Lourvre Museum and proclaimed that none of the portraits were as elegant and alluring as Maggie was not even the Mona Lisa. All of these women commented on her charm and beauty with the ease of practiced lovers because they *wanted to be her* lover. Eva was different. She’d never pandered to Maggie or flattered her, she was honest, even to the point of pain and she’d told Maggie on a number of occasions that Maggie’s temper and penchant for getting herself into dangerous situations would be the end of her and for Maggie’s part, she really hoped that end wasn’t now.

After what felt like an eternity, Cornwell dropped back down in his chair, fixing Maggie with a malicious glare. Cornwell’s beady black eyes disturbed Maggie as much as his vehemence towards her did. Were they in a different setting—on the street or in a pool hall—Maggie was certain he would have tried to lay a beating down on her. Even here—in this interrogation room where there was no one by the two of them—Maggie should have been terrified, but her nerves took a backseat to the anger swelling in her chest at how she was being treated.

The interrogation went on in the same vein for another few minutes until Maggie was sure she wouldn’t be able to resist the urge to throttle Cornwell anymore and be sent to rot on Blackgate Island or to that new sanatorium the newspapers claimed Amadeus Arkham intended to build on his family estate. What made the instinct harder to push down was the superior smirk on the Detective’s face as if he’d already won their little word battle. He was trying to deliberately bait her, either into saying what he wanted to hear or into running from the room so he could claim her guilt, neither of which Maggie felt particularly inclined to let him do.

“I’ve told you *repeatedly,*” Maggie answered, emphasizing the word in a practiced false polite tone, before continuing on not as brazenly as before. “I came to make a delivery of gravel, I stepped out of the truck to ask where it was supposed to go, and I saw workers milling around the body in the dirt. I don’t know anything else!”

“That’s exactly what someone who knew something and wanted to hide it because it meant they would be complicit in a crime would say,” Cornwell said as he scribbled on the front page of his police notebook.
His current actions resembled those of a bored schoolboy drawing in his composition book, but that was exactly what he wanted her to think Maggie suspected. Her intuition proved right when Cornwell’s hand stopped moving and his hollow eyes lifted to meet hers. This man was a bully who was used to getting what he wanted from everyone especially from women.

This man was also no Artie Wainwright. Artie’s jibs and exaggerated mocking of the other students in their one room schoolhouse had seemed terrible back then, but he was a boy who only bothered to insult you until it didn’t please him any longer and then he would let you go. Detective Cornwell, however, looked at her like he was a man who could choke the living breath out of a grudge, and right now Maggie’s very existence was offensive to him and he looked determined to make her pay for that.

*Personal grudges*, Maggie thought leaning back in her chair in a mock casual manner so as to put more distance between herself and the man who would have no qualms about hurting her at any further provocation. *Was it little wonder that so many crimes went unsolved in the city when morons like this guy demanded answers to the wrong questions from the wrong people just so he could get recognition for solving a child “murder” case?*

Just when Maggie thought she would have to risk bolting from the room so she would have a fighting chance at being able to live out the rest of her life, the door to the interrogation room burst open. In walked a sheepish looking Detective Bartlett and two other men Maggie didn’t recognize with sour expressions darkening their faces.

“Lieutenant! What is the meaning of this?!?” The youngest stranger bellowed.

Both of the men Maggie didn’t recognize were very different from one another. The one who’d shouted was moderately tall, had a slim perhaps athletic build, topped with a blocky face, and a pair of pince-nez spectacles balancing above a bushy brown mustache. He also had a head of oiled dark hair that parted in the middle. He couldn’t have been that much older than Maggie herself and yet she got the impression from how he carried himself that he was someone in a position of power over all those gathered around them.

“Commissioner Gordon, I can explain. You see, I was just interrogating—,” Cornwell started, standing from his chair and smoothing his hands nervously over his suit jacket.

The younger man didn’t allow the detective finish.
“A witness, Detective Bartlett tells me. I was in your captain’s office when he came running in like a chicken with his head cut off and informed us that you’d fallen off of your rocker,” The Commissioner stated, his arms clasped behind his back in the stance of an at ease solder despite his obvious ire. "Read my lips, Cornwell: We. Do. Not. Interrogate. Or. Detain. Witnesses against their will!"

Cornwell looked at Maggie out of the corner of his eyes and she was sure he was trying to figure out a lie that would get him out of this maybe even blame the incident on Maggie saying she attacked him and he figured that to be evidence of guilt or that he hadn’t interviewed her against her will, but whatever his improbable excuse would be, David Cornwell didn’t get to use it.

“Damn it all to hell!” the Commissioner continued fuming, his arms now at his side as he began to pace back and forth in front of the doorway. “I don’t need this type of horseshit from a senior officer in my own precinct. I’ve got enough trouble with Governor Murray breathing down my neck about keeping up with progress in the criminal justice systems in New York and Metropolis and now this!”

Suddenly, the Commissioner turned midstride and pointed one authoritative finger at Detective Cornwell’s chest.

“This illegal interrogation ends now, understood, Lieutenant?” he said, the tone of his voice letting all present know that this was the end of the matter.

“Yes, sir,” Detective Cornwell’s posture immediately straightened like someone had shoved a broomstick up his ass and into his spinal cord. For a moment, she thought he was going to salute and kick his heels together like a little boy playing at soldiery, but he didn’t. Instead, he appeared defiantly humbled, struggling against the shame the Commissioner insisted he feel.

Maybe it’ll bring a positive change to his character, Maggie mused.

“You’re suspended for the time being,” Commissioner Gordon said, as easily and calmly as if he were teaching someone how to properly fold socks or remake a bed after it has been untidied by sleep. “You’re dismissed for now, Lieutenant.”

All deference seemed to bleed out of Cornwell’s body with those words. His shoulders hunched in over his chest defensively and the hands at his sides clenched into reflexive fists.
“Sir, I may have been out of line, but that woman—if you can call a filthy degenerate parading around in men’s clothes a woman—is a dangerous creature.” Cornwell argued heatedly. “I brought her into interrogation because I had a hunch that she knew more than she was saying. I was only doing what I thought to be right—”

“Your job is what the law says it is! Obedience of the law is demanded not asked as a favor. It is especially required of those who serve it like you and like me. We must uphold the rules that govern our own conduct or we cannot demand the same from our citizens. Now, go, Lieutenant, before I demote you.”

For a minute, Cornwell just stood there, slack jawed. Then his jaw clenched shut and he stomped passed Commissioner Gordon out of the room.

Once it was just the four of them left, Commissioner Gordon’s stern gaze fell on Maggie and lost its severity. All of the sudden, he released a deep breath and it was like his entire body was so exhausted that standing upright was difficult. In the dim glow of the room, the Commissioner looked fifty years older than he actually was.

“My name is Jeremiah Gordon, Commissioner of the Police of the City and County of Gotham.” Gordon said, his voice even and calm as he held out a hand to Maggie to shake. “I apologize for the conduct of my officer, Miss Sawyer. And for wasting so much of your time. Rest assured, your boss has been contacted and you have been given the rest of the work day off. Another driver has been sent to continue your deliveries. Now that we’ve finished with the formalities, however, I am afraid I must ask for your indulgence and another moment of your time. This talk will only take a moment and I promise that it won’t consist of meaningless questions or bullying. Would you kindly converse with me and Detective Bartlett in private?”

Maggie wanted to shout ‘No!’ but the anger simmering in her chest refused to morph itself into words, insisting on burning itself out in her belly like an oven pilot light. She rolled her eyes, but nodded her assent and Gordon turned to the only other man in the room Maggie didn’t know. Though an older man, probably in his middle fifties, he was taller than the Commissioner and bulkier. His face was weathered—showing the ravages of age and stress from a lifetime of chasing criminals on the streets. His gray hair was combed back against his head with pomade and he had a matching moustache with burnsides on his cheeks.

“I will need the use of your office, Captain,” Gordon said.

The older man nodded his ham hock head, “Of course, sir.”
“Shall we?” Gordon asked gesturing to the still open door. When Maggie didn’t move he continued, “Ladies first.”

Maggie sighed, stood, and led the way out of the interrogation room.

OOOOOOOO

The only sounds in the Captain’s office were those of the ticking of the oak wall clock and the pendulum below as it swung back and forth inside of its glass belly to an intimidating rhythm. Then Commissioner Gordon finally began, clearing his throat.

“Detective Bartlett tells me that you have a…unique set of skills not common to most women and—indeed—to most men. Is this true?” The Commissioner asked curiously from behind the captain’s desk.

His hands were entwined professionally on top of the polished dark walnut and behind the seated Commissioner stood Detective Bartlett, eyes anxiously flitting all over the room and avoiding Maggie as if she were not present. Despite his apparent lack of focus, when Maggie shot Bartlett a pissed off glare for making her personal business public without her permission, he met her eyes and looked somewhat ashamed of himself. No matter what she did to him, however, the cat was out of the bag and Maggie would be damned if she backed down now, even though she was so tired and irritated from the events of the day that all she wanted to do at that moment was just go home to her shitty apartment, guzzle down the fifth of Pendleton Rye tucked under her mattress, and collapse onto her lumpy cot by the gas cooking stove in her kitchen and never wake up again.

“That’s true,” Maggie admitted, quiet and subdued.

Gordon nodded and continued, “He also tells me you mentioned that these skills of yours were taught to you at University abroad?”

“Yes. I studied legal medicine and criminology first at the University of Lyon under Dr. Alexandre Lacassagne,” Maggie explained slowly, trying to say only what was necessary, nothing more. The exhaustion in her voice was palpable, yet if Gordon noticed it, he showed no sign. “Then I attended lectures for a summer at the London School of Medicine for Women, thinking that I may want to finish out my education there, but my aunt and her friends lived on the Left Bank in Paris so I relocated to the University of Paris to study pathology until my aunt died a few years later. I stayed in the city until the German army advanced through Belgium. Then, while Antwerp was being bombarded into nothing, I figured I would cut my losses and sail back to the States.”
Gordon nodded, thinking as he took in every word Maggie said. There was a tense pause that followed immediately in the wake of Maggie’s words that she didn’t know how to interpret. Then Gordon started speaking again, this time his voice was professional and clear.

“You know, after I graduated from university, I decided to go on a Grand Tour of the old empires. I loved every city I went to, but I didn’t just go there to take in the sites. I spent a year in London observing how Scotland Yard was run and organized and I vowed right then and there that I would rise to a high enough rank in the Police Services to implement those improvements in my home city. And I did.”

Maggie’s eyebrows lifted in surprise, but aside from that her expression remained indifferent.

“Good for you?” Maggie ventured, not sure what to say to that or if she even should say anything.

Gordon gave her a grim smile beneath his bushy moustache and continued.

“One of my ancestors was Captain Jon Logerquist, the Norwegian soldier who settled the original city site in the 1600s and since then the members of my family have always…assumed a certain amount of responsibility for the welfare of Gotham and all of its citizens. My father taught me and my siblings that it is the duty of every man, woman, and child to improve the community in which they live. I’m not telling you this because I want you to see me in a good light, but because I believe we are kindred spirits in this respect, you and I, and I would like to give you the opportunity to aide your community in a unique way.”

Maggie’s eyes narrowed, but on the inside she was equal parts apprehensive and befuddled. What does he mean by opportunity? She wondered, I might have a degree, but I’m not licensed to practice medicine in the States and he already has enough blockheads patrolling the streets so I can’t imagine where I’d otherwise fit into the plan of a Police Commissioner.

“In what way?” Maggie inquired, folding her hands in her lap.

“The Police departments of London, New York City, and Metropolis have begun hiring women into their ranks. Now, from what I’ve heard and seen, this practice hasn’t impeded the course of justice, but improved it greatly. More criminals are being brought to justice because new and varied ways of thinking have been brought to the table by adding educated women and new technologies to law enforcement positions. I would like to hire you for such a purpose though I believe it would be prudent for both of us to name you as a special investigator to the Gotham
Police Department first. Then once you prove your mettle so to speak, I will officially announce you as a properly hired officer of the GCPD.

The commissioner paused again to pull two tumbler glasses from one of the desk’s drawers just as Bartlett—whom Maggie hadn’t seen move in the first place—set a full pitcher of water down beside them. Gordon poured himself a glass and then poured one for Maggie, setting it near the far edge of the desk. Once he’d had a drink, he continued his pitch.

“I’m not going to sugarcoat things for you, Miss. Sawyer. This job is dangerous. Rookies die every day in slums and alleyways run over by cars or gutted by riffraff. Patrol officers work long hours and officers in the brass hardly ever see their families in daylight. Also—as I’m sure you are aware—some of the more conservative officers in my department are hostile to the thought and, I fear, the reality of a woman not fulfilling her ‘natural duties,’ and working what would usually be considered a man’s job instead. No matter how hard you work or how many cases you solve, I cannot guarantee you that this attitude will change if you do choose to join us, but I can guarantee that I will defend you so long as you uphold the law. I can also guarantee that you will be in a position to protect and serve the people of this city no matter what their stripe or how much money is in their bank accounts. You can advocate for the little guy or girl that this city shits on every damn day. Will you join me in changing Gotham for the better?”

Maggie broke eye contact with Gordon. She couldn’t think with his insisting gaze in her head.

Was this something she could do? Was this something she even wanted? Maggie had never known what she was going to do with her life, she’d just known that she wasn’t going to marry a man, settle down, and have children like society expected her to do. Knowing what she didn’t want, Maggie had been influenced by the women around her, financially independent friends of her Aunt Tilda’s, romantic lovers, and hopeful school acquaintances.

One day not long after arriving in Europe, Maggie and a few school friends had been out riding their bicycles down a dirt lane. The pathway stretched from a country road down towards a stream and continued on. However, there’d been no bridge to connect the ways, so Maggie and her friends had dared one another to jump the stream. Prin had made it without a hitch, so had Alice and Maggie, but when Nellie’s turn came, she hadn’t built up enough momentum to quite make it.

Nellie’s front wheel had crashed into the upraised bank on the opposite side and she’d fallen into the ditch that held the narrow stream, hitting her head on a log of rotting oak. Prin had screamed, Alice had gone pale and shaky, and Maggie had immediately leapt down into the stream beside a prone Nellie. When Maggie rolled her over, Nellie’s face from temple to jawline was running with bright red blood. Maggie hadn’t hesitated. She’d pulled a scarf from her side satchel and wrapped the soft wool around Nellie’s head slowly and carefully. The sight of the blood hadn’t slowed her when she’d lifted Nellie out of the ankle deep water and she’d been able to take the lead back to the home Nellie shared with her parents in the city.
Because Maggie wasn’t bothered by the sight of blood or gore and because she generally liked science, her Aunt had suggested she look into the field of medicine to continue her studies. *You could be a younger, more attractive version of Florence Nightingale*, Tilda had told her once with a wink. So Maggie had taken up the study of medicine. However, after learning about the capture and trial of the notorious Dr. Crippen—an American doctor who’d murdered his wife—and of how pathologist Bernard Spilsbury had used forensic evidence to identify the remains found in Crippen’s basement as belonging to his wife a few years earlier, Maggie had decided that was the route she wanted to take.

Whether it was because of her experiences in Blue Springs or just an innate part of her being, Maggie wanted to rid society of people who preyed upon others like predators because it gave them pleasure to hurt and degrade others. She’d thought during her secondary and university school days that she’d become a pathologist like Bernard Spilsbury. She’d daydreamed day in and day out about helping the police put away more Dr. Crippens and Frederick Seddons before she’d finally let that dream die.

However, Maggie had never considered that she could become a policewoman and solve the crimes and arrest the criminals herself. Thinking of it now, it seemed like such an abstract concept as opposed to a possible reality because she’d never actually seen a policewoman in all of her travels. Maggie didn’t have a point of reference for what that would look like or how much she’d be able to truly help and advocate for people—especially for the people like her.

To be honest though, Maggie found that she was ready to find out. What could be the worst that could happen?

“When can I start?”

OOOOOO

*National City—August 2016*

Maggie sipped at her mug of coffee, re-reading the same couple of sentences in the police report.

*... Young female of indeterminate age. Victim thought asphyxiated by soft surface like the pillow found underneath the head of the body. Blue viscous fluid dried over wounds on backside. Fluid type unknown...*
Feeling wrung out, she closed the top of the manila folder over the papers and set her coffee cup down so she could rub at her eyes with the heels of her hands. She’d have to talk to some of her rookies about making sure they follow proper protocol while filing reports. This one hadn’t bothered to include his badge number and the language he’d used describing the scene he’d found—though detailed—was too subjective.

Suppositions of the cause of death and—in this case—even the species of the victim couldn’t be fully collaborated until the M.E. did a postmortem examination. Maggie wouldn’t be too hard on her rookies though. She knew through years upon years of law enforcement work in nearly every city she’d run to and ever identity she’d lived under, that police education—though it had come very far—wasn’t standardized as well as it should be. Rookies observed their superiors like their T.O.’s or detectives in their units and picked up on their bad habits.

Speaking of.

Maggie dropped her hands to the desktop and looked over at the clock on the wall across from her in the bullpen. She’d been on the job since 9:00 a.m. the previous morning until—well—7:30 a.m. this morning rounding out a 21 hour shift. So much for living her life instead of surviving. She should go home and try to get some rest. Just as the thought left her mind, the telephone on her desk rang. Or not, Maggie thought, reaching for the headset and bringing it up to her ear.

“Sawyer,” she answered stifling a yawn.

“Hi, Mags. It’s Joan from reception. There’s someone here to see you.”

“Did they state who they were and why they’re asking for me?” Maggie asked, trying to shake away the veil of fatigue covering her senses.

“Uh, yes, her name is Ms. Bette Kane and she says she’s a lawyer from the firm of Kane, Power, & Spencer. She said she’s here to make sure you eat at least one full meal before you keel over.”

Maggie chuckled and rubbed her eyes with her hand again.

“Tell her I’ll be right down,” Maggie sighed. Then added with humor before she hung up, “And Joan? Be careful. She does bite.”
When she arrived in the lobby, clad in her usual black leather jacket and the same Henley and dark jeans she’d picked out of her closet yesterday, the apparently older blonde woman’s green eyes narrowed at her.

“Still running the ticker tape at both ends I see,” Bette commented, disapproving.

Bette was in her late 30s and a couple of inches taller than Maggie as well as being several steps above her on the snarky scale. She was the grand-niece of the late Kate Kane and the executor of the estate and profits thereof she had left Maggie which the detective had been living off in part for the last fifty-six years or so. Being biologically immortal—as it turns out—was a legal pain in the ass. New identities had to be assumed every so many decades when Maggie failed to appear to age and those lives had to be abandoned. She had to start over from the beginning with a new name, new SSN, and new fictitious life story that would be collaborated by digitally fabricated and backdated documents provided by Bette. Then the same estate would have to be transferred from Maggie’s old identity—usually being willed or bequeathed in absentia to the new identity. It was a mess—one which Maggie was glad she didn’t have to manage alone.

But as amazing of an executor as Bette was, she was a better friend.

Maggie had outlived all of her family both blood relatives and otherwise. She’d had numerous surnames and had only been able to return to her original name once it was confirmed by Bette that her little brother’s great-great-grandson had passed away and the Sawyer family had died out in Blue Springs, Nebraska. Since then, she’d reinvented herself—this time reconciling herself to almost complete isolation. To be fair, Maggie had lived for so long that she’d thought she’d outlived the need for friends and close relationships, but Bette was constantly reminding her that she had people who cared what became of her and she enforced that truth by occasionally stopping by Maggie’s current place of work and encouraging her—sometimes with legal threats as incentives—to take care of herself like a normal person.

“Have you eaten anything in the last 21 hours?” Bette asked in that professional prosecutor’s tone that she used whenever she had to go into a courtroom. When Maggie didn’t respond after a minute, just glowered at her defiantly, Bette shook her head at the other woman, “Your silence speaks for you. Honestly, you’d think you’d eat at least some sort of edible nutrition that didn’t begin its life as coffee beans and you’re really old enough to know better.”

Maggie was about to counter Bette’s criticism when she heard an excited bark from the vicinity of Bette’s knees. Buster, the border collie–blue heeler mix she’d found emaciated and tied to a dumpster in an alleyway a year ago then adopted, started wagging his black bushy tail so hard when she came into view that it vibrated his entire body like the strings of a piano. He whined excitedly and strained against the leash in Bette’s hand to get closer to her.
“Well, at least someone’s happy to see me,” Maggie said, raising and eyebrow at Bette and turning all of her attention to the dog.

She knelt down and Buster nearly knocked her over in his enthusiasm, jumping up on her lap and licking her face and whining as she spoke to him in the high, baby-like tones that proved his human was truly happy to see him.

“How was he today?” Maggie asked Bette, as Buster continued to try to paw his way up onto her knees, finally just settling for standing on his back legs and licking Maggie’s chin.

“Oh, you know, spent the day pouting like one of your infrequent one night stands because he missed you, but he was well behaved otherwise,” Bette shrugged noncommittally.

Maggie ignored the barb, gently pushing Buster back so she could get a better look at him. “Did he eat anything?”

“A few pieces of hard food, but not much more.”

Maggie sighed, taking Buster’s head in her hands and scratching behind his ears. After she adopted him, Buster has bonded to Maggie pretty quickly and because of that, when she wasn’t with him he had a tendency not to eat or sleep or play. She’d come home at night and see him sitting a few feet from the door, watching and waiting until she came in. It wasn’t until Bette had started watching him during Maggie’s longer work days and had informed her that Buster didn’t just wait for Maggie when she would normally come home, but he really did wait all day by the door without doing anything else until Maggie came back. Bette would try to take him on walks or throw those tennis balls he liked to eviscerate, but Buster was never dissuaded from his primary mission.

Now though—with Maggie in front of him—Buster seemed to be the poster boy for the happiest dog alive.

“What am I going to do with you Buster-boy? Hm?” Maggie cooed, scratching the dog’s jowls and looked at her as if she had all of the answers.

“ ‘You can take me for a walk to someplace where we can both eat some breakfast. And give the nice lady who watches me a raise’, ” Bette said in a low tone, throwing her voice like the ventriloquist she’d always wanted to be when she was a little girl and looking entirely innocent as Maggie smirked up at her.
The detective chuckled and looked between her austere self-appointed guardian and the dog who looked at her with large dark eyes like she was everything good in the world. For the first time in a month or more, real warmth bloomed in Maggie’s chest. She had people—yes, pets counted as people—who cared for her and they’d never let her forget it so she might as well give in and enjoy her time with them. If there was anything Maggie had learned since the freak accident that mad little Dr. Vitae had led her into ninety-five years ago, it was that good moments in life were short and far between. They needed to be enjoyed while they lasted.

When Maggie remained lost in her thoughts, Bette again took it as a que to prompt her.

“Seriously, you need to get out of this place, Mags, and if you don’t get some food in you right now, I’m going to call that gorgeous, infuriating Captain of yours and have her order you to go.”

To drive home her point, Bette fished her Nokia out of her pocket with her free hand, her index finger hovering near the keyboard with insidious intent. Maggie looked at her and stood.

“‘Gorgeous,’ huh? I’m sure Captain Lin would appreciate hearing that in person,” Maggie grinned, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

“Or I can will all of your assets to Buster. It’s your choice,” Bette countered playfully, never losing a beat.

“Some friend you are. Captain’s not even in today,” Maggie pouted, taking Buster’s leash as the two made for the front doors.

“A lawyer can never be too careful.”

They both chuckled, Buster barked, and all three of them emerged out onto the sun warmed sidewalk.

OOOOOOOO

*Gotham City—April 1915*

Actually solving the case of the body buried on the building site of Gotham’s Central Train Depot turned out to be a stranger tale than anything Edgar Allan Poe or even those lesser writers who slumped it making one act story adaptations for Zukor’s silent pictures could have imagined.
Maggie had been nervous after she’d accepted her new job offer. She’d made it a point to make choices in her adult life based upon the predicted future consequences and gains of any action taken, but she’d taken Gordon’s offer without knowing what she’d lose if she was kicked out onto the street by the GCPD and that scared the shit out of her. The only thing that gave Maggie some peace of mind about the situation was that Gordon had paired her with Detective Bartlett as her Training Officer and—surprisingly—they actually made a really good team together.

Joely Bartlett wasn’t like most men Maggie had worked with or even met before. He didn’t immediately assume that she would play a subservient role in their dynamic just because she was a woman and he also didn’t discount the advice she gave regarding any trace evidence they found just because she was a rookie. He saw her first as a human being rather than just a woman and respected Maggie for her skills and Maggie found that she appreciated him for that in turn. The only friendships she’d had with men in her early life had been with either her little brother, Dominic, or the men who’d frequented Natalie Barney’s home on 20 Rue Jacob where she and her Aunt Tilda had been invited to stay for a few months upon their first arrival in Paris.

Natalie Clifford Barney—the undisputed and well worshipped European queen of open lesbianism and free Saphic love—had been a friend of Aunt Tilda’s when she was a young actress travelling around the world and even—Natalie and her long-term partner at the time, the Duchess of Clermont-Tonnerre—had occasionally insinuated that they’d even been lovers for a brief period in the 1890s. Maggie had never been able to find out whether that rumor was true because whenever she inquired about it, Aunt Tilda would change the subject so swiftly that it was as if the question had never been asked in the first place. However, the fact that Barney had paid for the entirety of Aunt Tilda’s funeral and entombment at Père Lachaise Cemetery had been a not so subtle hint at the validity of a possible romantic entanglement between the two of them.

Most of the men who frequented Natalie’s salons every Saturday had been artists, authors, communists, or self-promoted free thinkers who thought of themselves as too liberal to talk down to women who they saw as their intellectual equals. In a way, Maggie hoped Bartlett thought of her like that.

As an equal. It would make everything easier in the long run.

For weeks after the body of the girl had been found, Maggie and Bartlett had haunted the construction site for potential clues while also driving the site foreman to obstinate frustration grumbling that the police might as well, “Take a giant shit on Alan Wayne and Mayor Cobblepot in person for all the good your delays are doing their pocketbooks.”

At the end of the last day of the second week, Maggie and Bartlett had returned to Gotham Central and found Lieutenant Cornwell—only suspended for two days—yanking a half-starved teenage
boy around the bullpen by steel chains restraining the boy’s hands and feet and grinning from ear to ear the whole time.

As it turned out, Cornwell had been given direct permission from the State’s attorney to arrest an eighteen year old Ashkenazic Jew—Lucien Rothstein—for the disposal of the little girl’s body and—Cornwell insisted even after the M.E.’s report had proven him wrong—on suspicion of her murder. On what evidence, Maggie wasn’t entirely sure. As far as she knew, they just had the girl, no solid leads otherwise.

She concluded—as Cornwell continued to boast to his fellow officers—that the boy had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. The first thing that had damned Lucien Rothstein of the crime was that he’d lived in the same tenement house where the dead child—identified in the morgue as 10 year old Marjorie Grey—had lived with her parents and two siblings. The second, was that Lucien had known Marjorie as a friend of his younger sister and when Cornwell had questioned him about the day little Marjorie was last seen, Lucien had run without provocation. According to Cornwell, he’d arrested him because Marjorie had last been seen entering that apartment the last day she’d been seen alive and because why would an innocent man run?

Watching Cornwell march the shackled youth around—because handcuffs apparently weren’t showy enough, he had to pull out the irons reserved for the most dangerous prisoners—through the station like a triumphant war hero made Maggie’s stomach turn and lit a fire deep in her belly. A fire to see real justice done.

As if in slow motion, Maggie had taken in everything happening around her as Cornwell shouted something, the men gathered cheered, and Lucien was pushed into the center of the bullpen. She watched Lucien being pulled into the orbit of two uniformed cops and jeered at. Another patrol officer yanked him around by his chains, calling him, “a Dirty Kike bastard” echoed by a chorus of voices shouting “damned child killing Jew.”

Maggie scanned the boy’s body, taking mental notes as she did. He was around 5 foot 1 inches and skinny. His hair was dark and shone under the gas lamps hanging from the ceiling like it was wet. There were places where Lucien’s lower ribs peaked through the thin cloth patches that had been used to mend the holes in what was probably his only shirt. His hair was unkempt because why comb it down when it was just going to have to be washed after a day of long labor anyway?

There was coal soot under his fingernails. His trousers had seen better days, but they weren’t surprisingly made of the heavier material often favored by laborers, but homespun wool almost worn through in places. His shoes had high buttons and were several decades older than the times and the soles of those shoes showed signs of being glued back together. They were also stained ochre with dust—the color of the dirt from the construction site. There was a primal fear in his young voice as he cried out in Yiddish and what sounded like Russian to the officers who were abusing him, but each word protesting his innocence only brought more pain down upon his head.
One cop spit a plug of chewed tobacco into the boy’s face. Another smacked Lucien so hard across the cheek that a string of blood spurted out from the side of his mouth as he fell to his knees. The gathered uniforms cheered to see him drop. The only one who didn’t was Cornwell who griped as he dragged Lucien back to his feet by the shackles around his wrists and pushed the teenager back into the hostile arms of the people who were employed by the law to protect him.

No one else seemed to care that the poor boy didn’t speak enough English yet to defend himself. Then Lucien had turned in Maggie’s direction. His dark eyes flashed with feelings of betrayal and fear and Maggie was reminded of another moment in her life when time had seemed to stand still around her as a hailstorm of text books were thrown at her by a schoolhouse full of hateful peers. She still heard the chorus of their insults in her dreams some nights:

*Dyke, dyke, take a hike! Dyke, dyke, take a hike!*

The youthful voices rang in her ears for a moment as wall clocks slowed and Maggie watched Lucien be mocked by the gathered host of uniformed officers. It was as if she could feel like what is was to be in the middle of that hateful circle. She felt the pushes and blows of phantom hands and the voices in her eyes grew louder and louder until her ears rang with them. Maggie closed her eyes and when she opened them again, she was in control once more.

Suddenly, time had returned to its natural speed and Lucien was pulled into the grasp of a giant of a man in blue serge before being hoisted smoothly into the air faster than any flag.

“Stop! Stop!” Maggie shouted.

The rabble quieted, Lucien was lowered carefully to his feet, and Cornwell looked at her with eyes like red hot coals ready to burn a whole right through her. Bartlett—who’d been leaning against a desk in the bullpen behind Maggie—scrambled to his feet, folded his arms across his chest, and stood directly behind his rookie partner so there was no question who’s corner he was in.

“Is that boy in the process of harming anyone?” Maggie asked the occupants of the room.

At first they appeared surprised that this question was even being asked of them so Maggie repeated it patiently. They looked at each other, shrugged, then looked to Cornwell, “Lieutenant?”

“Not right now, no, but he—”
“Has the boy threatened harm to anyone? Has he tried to escape since you took him into custody?”

Cornwell’s face reddened in rage as everyone once again looked towards him for guidance.

“What are all of you looking at me for?!” Cornwell fumed.

“If he hasn’t done any of those things, then you must treat him with the respect the law demands every suspect be treated with until he’s indicted.”

“He’s a damn kike, *Special Investigator,*” Cornwell said, spitting out her title as if it were a chewed tobacco plug being spewed into a spittoon. “Practically fresh off of the boat, he ain’t got no rights to speak of. Besides, when I arrived on his doorstep he ran like the guilty little Jew boy he is so I arrested him. He hurt that little girl and we’re just seeing he’s punished for it before he’s sent to the chair.”

There were murmurs of assent throughout the room. *Where was the Captain at a time like this?* Maggie wondered. *Why was he never around when they needed him?* She stood on her tiptoes, but their fearless leader was nowhere to be found.

“I know you have no physical evidence that he committed that crime, Cornwell, and under section 221 of the Crimes Act of 1900, ‘A person shall not, in the course of arresting another person for an offence, use more force, or subject the other person to greater indignity, than is necessary and reasonable to make the arrest or prevent the escape of the other person after the arrest.’ Unless you want this boy’s family or the Ashkenazi Jewish community of Kosher Street at large to sue you and this police department for unjust treatment, he must be remanded and respectfully treated,” Maggie rattled off.

She’d made it a habit to study the laws of all of the places she’d ever lived in to know what her rights were if she was ever arrested in any one of city. It was a genius move for a rootless wanderer, really. Maggie looked back at Bartlett and saw he was looking at her with eyebrows shot up into his hairline and his black Oscuro cigar dangling from one corner of his open mouth. Cornell, however, was less impressed with Maggie’s accumulated knowledge. When he spoke again, his voice was so full of fury that Maggie was sure he was finally going to make her pay for all of the corrections of his behavior and unhelpful jibs she’d given him in the past weeks.

“He’s my prisoner!” Cornwell seethed through clenched teeth, jerking a thumb at his chest. “And I know the damn rules.”
With that, the Lieutenant grabbed Lucien Rothstein by the collar of his shirt and forced him down the stairwell towards the holding cells. A heavy atmosphere hung over the room in Cornwell’s absence and then—as if nothing had happened—things went back to normal. Patrol officers pulled on gloves and departed for their beats while those sitting at their desks answered ringing phones or reviewed reports.

Maggie took a deep breath let it out, her entire body deflating as the adrenaline that had been fueling her forward drained out of her. A hand squeezed her shoulder in what was meant as a comforting gesture.

“You’ve done good, Rookie.” Bartlett said, impressed. “Hey, how do you know all the sections of what was it again?”


“Huh, I don’t remember that being part of our retraining at any point and I think it would’ve been…I’ve been on the force long enough.” Bartlett said, thinking

Maggie smirked, leaning back against a desk as Bartlett came to his own conclusions.

“Wait. The Crimes Act of 1900 isn’t a local thing is it?” Bartlett asked.

Maggie’s smirk grew, but her voice was calm and completely deadpan, “Oh it is very much a thing…in Australia.”

OOOOOO

After Cornwell threw Lucien Rothstein into a holding cell, he left the station for lunch at the sandwich shop across the street. That left Maggie and Bartlett with a shallow window of opportunity and they took it. They were let into Lucien’s cell with him. He looked smaller somehow up close than he had in the bullpen. The chains and shackles had been taken off of his feet, leaving behind wide red bands of irritated skin. He’d been laying down, but when the door opened, he shot up and regarded Bartlett and Maggie wearily. The cramped space wasn’t meant to accommodate three people. There was mattress on a wrought iron bedframe against the side wall and an ominous smelling metal bucket in the far corner. Above the bucket a faded paper poster had been nailed into the concrete. It showed a noose, beside which had been printed the offenses
someone could hang for—back when hanging was a method of execution. Etched in the center of the noose were the words, “Swing high, aim low.”

“How ya doing, kid?” Bartlett asked, sitting down on the end of the prison bed where Lucien’s feet had been moments before.

Lucien looked at him as if he expected to be struck and he probably did. Bartlett caught the look of fear in his eyes and raised his hands in the air.

“Hey, easy kid. I’m not gonna hurt you. Me and my partner, we’re just here to talk to you like people. Is that alright?”

Lucien’s narrow shoulders relaxed slightly as he let out a deep breath, but the rest of his body was still tense. He looked at where Maggie was pacing on the other side of the cell—occasionally peering out of the bars for Cornwell. As she turned around, Maggie met his eyes and gave him a warm smile.

“We need to ask you about Marjorie,” Maggie said, trying to make her tone as kind as possible to offset the anxiety her words might trigger.

“Nothing. Nothing. I know nothing,” Lucien replied shaking his head back and forth rapidly.

“We know you didn’t hurt her, Lucien.” Maggie explained quietly, “but we need to know as much as you can tell us to prove it.”

Bartlett fished a little black notebook from his pocket, flipped back the cover, and fished in his pocket another moment before coming back up with a Swan Safety fountain pen.

“Alright, we know Thursday, April 15th, 1915 was the last day Marjorie Grey was seen alive. What were you doing on that day, Lucien?” Bartlett asked, pen poised expectantly over the notebook.

Lucien shrugged and looked down at the cracked cement floor. Maggie had suspected that—like most second language English speakers—the boy understood more words than he spoke, but how many could he articulate and would they be enough to absolve him of blame? Only time would tell, but time—Maggie mused turning her head back to the bars and the gray expanse of corridor beyond—was not on their side.
“Come on, son,” Bartlett sighed. “We can’t help you if you don’t talk to us.”

“I was at home with children—the children,” Lucien finally whispered.

Bartlett licked his thumb and flipped a few pages back in his book to the few notes he took when the commotion started in the bullpen.

“Cornwell said you were home alone when he knocked on your door? But you have kids of your own or younger siblings, I take it?”

“Sisters, brothers…they play stick ball...” Lucien trailed off, his hands running over a flat horizontal surface in the air then pointing down at where the invisible object should be. There was frustration on his face and pleading in his eyes as he struggled to show what he meant.

“In the street?” Bartlett offered.

Lucien nodded quickly and Bartlett wrote it down. Maggie remained quiet, observing every detail across from her, taking in little things, signs of previous life in the cell she wished she didn’t notice like what looked like scratch marks on the wall over Lucien’s shoulder, dots of dried brown blood on the edge of the stripped mattress by Bartlett’s hip, and the way Lucien’s leg jittered up and down nervously. It was her gift and her curse—Maggie’s ability to observe, categorize, and process things others might’ve dismissed as unimportant.

“Why’d you run, Lucien?” Bartlett asked evenly.

“He scared me,” Lucien said, his body beginning to shake.

“Did he threaten you before you ran?” Maggie inquired. She’d stopped pacing and was standing next to the bars, hands resting in her trouser pockets.

Lucien looked at her with wide eyes—clearly afraid—but his hands clenched down on the mattress on either sides of his now completely still legs. Beneath the single gas lamp hanging from the asymmetrical ceiling, Lucien’s dark hair looked like it was drying. Was his hair wet because of sweat maybe? Maggie stepped closer to him and took in a deep breath—and coughed.
“What?” Bartlett asked, his eyebrows drawn up in bemusement.

“The smell,” Maggie got out before coughing into the cook of her arm.

“Hey, I’ll have you know, I took a bath this morning. I even shaved and rubbed Bay Rum in so there is no way I smell bad,” Bartlett protested, defensively.

Maggie recovered and elaborated, “No, him. He smells like kerosene. How didn’t I notice it before? How didn’t you notice it?”

Bartlett sniffed the air for good measure, “I can’t smell anything right now.”

Lucien looked at him and raised his eyebrows. Then he said, “Then how you know you no—“and finished by pinching his fingers over his nose.

Bartlett shrugged, “My wife told me I smelled good this morning, so I know. Wives are good like that. Mothers too.”

Lucien nodded, albeit a little sadly.

The moment between the two would’ve drawn Maggie’s attention in any other circumstance, but they were under the wire and still they knew almost nothing. Maggie stepped closer until she was standing above Lucien. She bent her head and took a better look at him in the dim light. His dark hair looked oily from the kerosene, but there were a few pieces of hair that reflected the light brighter than the rest like the tiny clear beads of a window curtain. She moved a few strands aside with her fingers, parting his hair and finding the reason why.

Glass. There were shards of glass in his hair.

“Where did these shards of glass come from? Lucien?” Maggie asked, stepping back so she could see his expression.
Lucien reached over the side of the bed to an invisible surface and clasped his fingers in a half circle as if he was picking up something. Then he slammed the top of his hand into the concrete above his head, letting out a loud breath between his teeth as sound effects as both of his hands rose above his head and expanded outwards.

“You broke a lamp over your head?” Bartlett asked.

Lucien shook his head no.

Bartlett tried again, “Someone else broke a lamp above your head?”

“You broke a lamp above your head?” Maggie asked.

“Dave?!” Bartlett exclaimed, standing up in surprise. “Nah, he wouldn’t.”

“The man’s a maniac, Joe. He needs his badge taken away,” Maggie stated, bluntly.

“Nah, is Dave a hot head sure? Does he make the best decisions when he’s angry? No, but would he throw a lamp at an immigrant kid for refusing to confess to what he didn’t know? No way in hell. That's highly illegal and Cornwell's this city's most decorated example of law and order. None of it makes any sense, Maggie.”

Lucien clapped his hands together to get their attention, then held up one hand like he was holding a pencil and began scribbling in the air.

“Writing,” Bartlett tried as they both turned to watch him. “Writing a letter.”

Lucien stopped for a minute and glared at him, then started up again, this time his hand moving more furiously. Maggie’s gaze bounced around the room as she thought. Writing? What did writing have to do with Cornwell? If Lucien couldn’t speak English, that didn’t mean he wasn’t literate, but what would Cornwell have cared about that and where would any of that have come
into play with Cornwell just standing in the hallway outside of—Maggie stopped, the wheels in her head rewinding.

In the bullpen, Cornwell had said he’d only knocked on the door and he’d never been in the Rothstein’s apartment but what if he’d been lying?

Some officers had little to no compunction infringing on a person’s first amendment rights. Maggie’d seen it happen at least ten different times since she’d come to Gotham alone and that had been before she’d joined the police department. She’d seen suffragettes who were peacefully protesting outside of Town Hall be beaten away with billy clubs and the camera of one of the newspaper photographers set up nearby forcibly picked up and smashed so none of it would reach print.

But was doing something like that to a young immigrant too extreme even for a loose cannon like Lieutenant Cornwell? Maggie knew how he felt about her and she had no doubt he would do those things to her and "deviants" like her without hesitation, but to other people would he have big enough balls to take those kinds of risks when his job was on the line? Maggie signed, rubbing her forehead as a headache began to build behind her eyes.

*Probably,* Maggie concluded in her head.

“Did he—” Maggie started, faltering as she tried to figure out how to word the question she wanted to ask. “Was he in your apartment Lucien?”

“Yes,” Lucien answered immediately. “Yes. He wanting me say I hurt her. Marjorie.”

“So he what? Forced you to write a confession and then threw a lamp at you?”

Maggie and Bartlett looked at each other. Things were falling together, but there was one final building block missing in their understanding. Something crucial.

Lucien shook his head adamantly, “No, I no can write.”

Maggie let out a deep breath, her chest constricting as that crucial thing became visible to her—as clear as the picture of Cornwell sitting across a table from her—staring her down for a confession she didn’t have for something she didn’t do.
“He let himself into your apartment to question you, threatened you, wrote down a confession, and then got angry when you wouldn’t sign it,” Maggie concluded, her stomach beginning to roll uncomfortably.

“Yes!” Lucien shouted in triumph, clapping his hands together once and looking between both of them as if excited that they both understood what he’d been trying to tell them over and over again.

“That’s highly illegal,” Maggie said, rubbing her hand over her face.

“But if you didn’t sign the confession then it can’t be used in court,” Bartlett said, hopefully. “And if you didn’t actually run from him then he doesn’t have even a circumstantial net to haul you in on. Were there any witnesses to this, Lucien?”

Lucien shook his head quickly.

“No, Sisters, brothers…” Lucien pointed down again.

“…were playing stick ball. We got it. Damn,” Bartlett finished, cursing as he realized they were in the same situation they were in when they’d walked into the cell. “It’s just your word against his then.”

“What about you?” Maggie asked. “You could said Lucien told you what really happened and you believe him? Gordon would probably believe it if it came from you. You said it yourself, Cornwell’s a hothead and the Commissioner isn’t blind.”

Bartlett shook his head, “Wouldn’t work, Mags. Cornell’s been decorated for bravery. Just a few years ago, he saved the life of Mayor Cobblepot from an assassin. He’s the golden boy. The mayor has a couple reporters whose only job is to write about him. He’s like the Gibson Girl of law enforcement. You’ve seen the papers, haven’t you?”

Indeed, Maggie had.

Nestled between article headers like “Typhoid Epidemic On West Side Over,” and advertisements for Radium Hand Cleaner – “It Takes Off Everything But The Skin”—ran articles on the front page of the *Gotham Gazette* at least once a week, “Detective Saves Woman from Mad Leap From Kane Memorial Bridge,” or “Detective Speaks to Neighborhood Children About Crime.”
Maggie latched onto the one hope she could think of.

“You didn’t sign the confession did you, Lucien?”

“No, I tell you, I no write, I—,” At this Lucien raised his hand in the air like he was going to write, but instead he made invisible diagonal lines that crossed one another.

“He had you make an ‘X’. That’s just as bad. We’re screwed.”

Maggie was about to say something when she heard the sound of footsteps on the concrete stairs.

“We have to go,” Maggie said, pulling the keys from her pocket and blindly feeling around for the keyhole on the opposite side of the door.

Usually, there would’ve been a guard here to watch the inmates in holding, but there was only Lucien this afternoon and Maggie had guessed when she’d arrived that the guard had slipped out for lunch. So she’d taken the keys and their responsibilities upon herself, but she hadn’t thought about the logistics of unlocking the cell door from the inside and now she wished she had. The footsteps continued and Maggie fumbled, almost dropping the keys as one after the other failed to fit and turn in the lock.

“Oh, hang in there kid,” Bartlett said to Lucien, then bounced on the balls of his feet towards Maggie. “What’s the hold up?”

If Maggie’s hands weren’t shaking and they hadn’t been on a time crunch, she would’ve whacked her partner in the back of the head.

“What do you think?!” Maggie hissed, feeling a little more steady as the right key popped into the lock. “I’m unlocking a door backwards!!”
“Houdini did that in a French nickel flick years ago,” Bartlett shrugged, stepping away when Maggie growled at him for the comment. “He made it look easy enough.”

“Houdini fucking lied!”

“But it was right there on film. I mean how can they show it if it—”

“Joe!” Maggie scolded.

“What? I didn’t do anything!”

“Why do you think I’m yelling?!”

Maggie was beginning to sweat as the footsteps grew louder and picked up pace. The key turned finally with a click, but the door remained closed.

“You have to be kidding me! Fuck!” Maggie cursed and threw her body weight against the bars once.

Then a second time with Bartlett throwing his weight in beside her. Then the door finally gave on the third push and they both tumbled to the concrete floor in a heap. Maggie got up quickly, closed the door, locked it, and grabbed Bartlett by his ear in one hand and his shirt collar in the other, pulling both of them back behind the guard’s half circle desk like something out of a vaudeville act.

The footsteps finally stopped at the bottom of the stairs as Detective Cornwell arrived. He looked around him absently twirling a toothpick between his teeth. Maggie held her breath and Bartlett swallowed dryly laying on his side where she’d dropped him. They waited for felt like an eternity before Cornwell started moving again and humming *The Yankee Doodle Boy* as he sauntered up to lean against the bars of Lucien’s cell.

“How you doing, Jew boy?” Cornwell asked, smiling.

Lucien glared at him from the cot, but Cornwell hadn’t been waiting for an answer. The tooth pick
dropped languidly onto the floor at his feet. Then he reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a packet of Lucy Strikes, biting down on a cigarette between his teeth, and then stuffing the crumpled paper pack away. He turned towards Lucien again, looming over the cell in his three piece black suit and bowler like a morbid specter. A hand disappeared into his jacket pocket and returned with a matchbook. The red phosphorus ignited against the book. Cornwell drew from the cigarette until the end glowed orange and was about to drop the match to the ground and extinguish it until he saw Lucien flinch.

He drew on his cigarette in silence then leaned forward.

“You’re not scared of a little fire now are you, kike?” Cornwell asked.

When Lucien didn’t answer, he lunged forward tossing the lit match across the room. Lucien vaulted off of the mattress and retreated into a dark corner, cowering. Cornwell snickered and leaned there watching him.

“What? You don’t wanna be a kosher candle? Killjoy.”

There was silence for a while as Cornwell just smoked and watched Lucien in silence.

“Nah, I wouldn’t do that to you, kid. I’ve never burned anybody alive before and I won’t have to if you’re good. Can’t account for my actions though if you misbehave. I’ve got a meeting with my Captain and then you’re going to be charged for murder. You’ll have your name on the front of all the papers—well—you’ll have your moniker in the papers. I can picture it now, ‘Hero Detective Catches Kike Girl Slayer.’ Sounds pretty catchy, don’t you think?”

Cornell pulled the cigarette stub from his lips, looked like he was going to toss it to the floor then looked at Lucien, smirking. He feigned throwing it and Lucien flinched back against the wall with a yelp. Cornwell chuckled, dropped the cigarette but to the ground and stepped on it.

“I’m just joshing with ya, kid. Gotta give you some sort of entertainment while you rot away down here. Like I said though, won’t be long and you’ll have a cell to yourself in an actual prison. I’ll be back and when I am I’ll see you fry.”

With that, Cornell was humming again and transcending the stairs. When he was gone, Maggie stood and slammed her fist down into the desktop while Bartlett rolled over with a groan and righted himself.
“Son of a bitch!” Maggie growled. “We gotta go. We don’t have that much time. He—”

“Easy, Rookie,” Bartlett said, grasping her shoulders and squeezing. “Don’t tap out on me. We still got one more round to go. You’re acting like James J. Jeffries, but I need you to be Jack Johnson. Hell, that kid needs both of us to be Jack Johnson.”

Lucien had come up to the bars and was watching them. His face was paler than it had been and dark circles were visible beneath his eyes. He already looked defeated.

“It ain’t over until it’s over, Rookie. Come on.”

Bartlett took off towards the stairs with more energy than Maggie knew he had. He’d done it for both Lucien’s benefit and hers, but Maggie didn’t feel any better. She looked at Lucien.

“We’re going to get you out of here. I promise.”

Then Maggie, followed Bartlett, taking the stairs two at a time. Absently—like someone who wasn’t on the verge of losing their first ever case—Maggie found herself wondering who in the hell Jack Johnson was.

OOOOOOOO

Without speaking, they’d gone back to Marjorie Grey’s tenement house and spent the next few hours canvassing the building, speaking with the landlord, maintenance workers, and every family that lived there. Sometimes a door would open and they’d find nine people comprising two or three separate families cramped into a tiny two room abode. Always the children of the immigrant families would translate for their parents. Not surprisingly, Maggie and Bartlett had found that none of Lucien’s neighbors thought he’d done it. “He was an upstanding boy,” they’d said, “A credit to his father. Oh, his poor father.”

According to a Mrs. Valenti who lived in between the Rothsteins and the Greys, old Mr. Rothstein’s wife had died in childbirth and he’d been working on the docks nearly day and night for the last few years to provide for his children. She also said that Lucien—being the oldest boy—had spent most of his time caring for his younger siblings instead of attending school, all of whom had been constant playmates of Marjorie Grey so it hadn’t been strange at all that she’d been in the Rothstein’s apartment that day.
Even the Greys didn’t believe Lucien could have harmed their daughter. Bizarrely, they were convinced it was some sort of boogeyman figure that had been luring children who’d been reported missing from different tenements around Gotham away with a pocket full of sweets or a handful of pennies. Those children were never seen alive again, but the police investigation of those disappearances had come to a halt almost immediately because kids ran away from home right? It was a near daily occurrence so no one had bothered to link the missing cases and make inquiries. After talking to the distraught couple, Maggie made a note in her interview book to look into the situation once this was resolved.

Believing a specter had taken the girl had seemed to become more and more probable as Maggie and Bartlett made the rounds over each floor. Marjorie’s body in the morgue had showed no signs of struggle or abuse before it’d been released to the funeral home and Lucien—by all accounts—had always been kind to the Greys, helping their younger sons with the early morning coal deliveries they made to other tenements so as to help their parents pay the rent.

Last, Maggie and Bartlett had met with Mr. Rothstein himself and his other children—all six of whom ranged in age from four to eleven. Mr. Rothstein—as the neighbors’ had recounted—was a worn old man perhaps in his early fifties who looked like the gaunt specter of a man in his late seventies. He worked at all hours and—as a result—he suffered from severe rheumatism that made it hard for him to do little more than shuffle from the door to his bed once he’d made the agonizing return from work each day.

“Lucien, had done the rest,” Mr. Rothstein, had admitted by way of the translation of one of his younger sons. That was as forthcoming as he’d been able to be before he broke down into tears. The old man had curled in on himself and sobbed and sobbed, repeating, “My boy, my boy, my precious boy,” over and over again even when all of his had children enveloped him in a massive hug.

While the family grieved, Maggie and Bartlett had taken their time inspecting the Rothstein’s living spaces.

The family’s lodgings consisted of only two meager rooms similar to the layout of Maggie’s own apartment. There was a living room where a rough table stood surrounded by an assortment of mended furniture pieces—from broken foot stools someone had probably tossed out and Maggie imagined Lucien had repaired—to a few metal buckets turned upside down to serve as chairs for the youngest children. The walls were plaster—tinged yellow with age and the soot that came in through the stovetube and radiators—with no ornamentation whatsoever. On the wall beside the door, wooden cots were lined up, four squashed together along the plaster. The adjoining room was a kitchen where two more cots had been shoved beneath the stovepipe that ran from the brick dividing wall across the ceiling and down into the gas range where the family’s meals were prepared.
Lucien had been in charge of the cooking, Mr. Rothstein had said and he’d also made the coffee or tea the family drank in the morning and every evening before bed. Maggie and Bartlett had paid special attention here to the small somewhat rusted iron teapot that sat on the last burner. The kettle itself was rounded with a copper base that tapered down into a copper pedestal and it was this pedestal which rested on the grate over gas jet that would have to be lit manually before the water could be heated.

There was a problem with the kettle though.

It wasn’t as sturdy as it seemed upon first glance. The copper bottom was a decoration added to the heirloom that appeared to be much too small to safely hold up the pot and its contents without careful placement. Maggie reached out and gently pushed the empty container with one finger. She added a second when the heavy wrought iron refused to budge. Eventually either her fingers or the kettle would give way and she was relieved when it was the teapot that toppled over onto its side on the enamel stovetop.

Then Bartlett had gone back into the other room to question Mr. Rothstein in more detail. While voices mumbled in the other room, Maggie continued to stare at the overturned iron kettle, willing her tired eyes to see more than the obvious.

She and Bartlett had spent all day working the case. Now they only had a limited amount of time before Cornwell led Lucien in chains from the precinct to the courtroom and then—if the worse happened—from the courtroom to prison and from there directly to the electric chair at Black Gate. Faint sunlight cut through the only window in the room, illuminating dust particles swirling in the air above the stove. Maggie’s eyes drifted loosely back and forth between the range and a rubber tube that ran from the back of the stove down into a gas tap in the wall by the floor.

Finding nothing out of the ordinary, Maggie ran a hand over her eyes in exhaustion. She’d been ready to throw in the towel then, to give up in defeat, but before she could convince herself that going back to a life of making gravel deliveries would be a good idea, she heard the voice of one of her criminology professors in her ears as she stared into the space straight ahead of her:

*Remember, students, every contact leaves a trace and it is this trace evidence that will show you the way forward. Do not waste your time and focus on only what is obvious to you. It should always be the chief occupation of the forensic scientist to look upon the scene of even crime—old or fresh—with ‘new eyes.’*

Maggie took a step back from the stove, scanning up and down the sides and over every surface. It only took a second before her eyes locked onto something she hadn’t seen before, a small smudge
of brown on the white enamel corner just below the foremost burner. It could’ve been rust, but the rest of the stove was rust free save the feet that curved into the floor. She knelt down, pulled a white handkerchief from her trouser pocket, and rubbed at the smudge. The smear that stretched faintly across the smooth white silk appeared to be a dark red whereas rust residue when smeared or crushed between the fingers was always ochre in color.

Maggie bent to smell the stain on the fabric, but there was no odor. Steeling herself, she lifted the fabric to her mouth hesitantly and touched the smear to the tip of her tongue. Immediately, she tasted metal…but not enamel or steel.

Copper. She tasted copper.

It was the same sharp taste that flooded her mouth whenever Maggie accidentally bit her tongue or was punched in the jaw during a back alley brawl: Blood.

It couldn’t be Marjorie’s. She’d had no cuts, scrapes, on her body to speak of that were recent. Swiftly, Maggie stood, stuffed the cloth back into her pocket, and walked quietly into the other room. The boys were huddled around Mr. Rothstein on his cot as Bartlett asked the old man if his children were left home alone by themselves during the day, and if so, did he know if they were alone at any time on the last day Marjorie was alive? Had they been alone when she’d come over? Did Lucien mention anything odd to him that happened during the day? Etcetera.

During the discussion, Maggie noticed that Rothstein’s only daughter—eleven year old Magda—was the only one who wasn’t sitting with her father. Instead, she stood close to the table, staring down at her torn shoes and the floorboards beneath. The girl’s dress was a tan rag, the shoulder sleeves of both arms were so tattered they were almost non-existent. Maggie took in her small frame, her wiry arms, and bowed legs—potentially a consequence of rickets she thought—before settling on the left shoulder where the edge of a rectangle of cotton gauze peaked out beneath leftover tan threads.

Maggie had a theory, but she couldn’t prove it if she didn’t test it so she followed her instincts.

She knelt down so she was eye level with the little girl, but still a respectful distance away. Surprised, Magda took a few steps back anyway, her large oval eyes regarding Maggie wearily. When their gazes locked, it was like a wireless signal had been sent and the Morse code had arrived and been transcribed by separate operators at the same time. It was in a language every human being spoke: fear. Cold, dread.

“It’s going to be alright,” Maggie said softly to comfort her.
But Magda didn’t believe Maggie. She shook her head violently and her dark eyes filled to the brim with tears. She continued to shake her head determinedly even as the tears began to stream down her cheeks. Maggie did the only thing she felt like she could in that moment—she opened her arms wide. Magda stayed cautiously where she was at first, then vaulted into Maggie’s embrace like she’d known the woman all of her life and cried into her waistcoat.

The murmuring of voices from Bartlett and Mr. Rothstein quieted as Magda sobbed. She cried and cried until her sobs had turned into hiccups and her tears had given way to puffy eyes and sniffles.

“It’s going to be alright,” Maggie repeated, gently, rubbing the girl’s back with a free hand, “But we need your help, Magda.”

When the girl stayed quiet, Maggie pushed back from her a step so they were eye to eye again.

“The more we know, the more we can help your brother. I know he didn’t hurt Marjorie. I know what happened to her was likely an accident, but I can’t do anything with that knowledge. We can’t do anything for Lucien until we know the truth, all of it and can prove his innocence. I know you know what happened, Magda, and if you tell us, I promise my partner and I will do everything in our power to help your brother.”

Magda brought a hand up to her face, rubbing at her irritated eyes and then looked down at her feet again, her emotional vulnerability from earlier hidden beneath a veil of trepidation and mistrust.

“Luci, told me not to tell anyone. He said we’d be safe that way.”

“What happened that afternoon, Magda?”

Maggie waited patiently in the suspended silence of the room and was rewarded when Magda started to speak. The words rushed out like a raging flood, painting a picture of the missing pieces of that afternoon. Marjorie had come over to play with Magda and her littler brothers as she often did while her parents were working and school was off. The two older boys aside from Lucien had taken extra shifts at the factory where they worked so it’d only been Lucien, Magda, Marjorie, four year old Albert and six year old Yusef. Lucien had been sitting at their worn dining table practicing writing down English words from one of those cheap translations of the Bible missionaries forced into immigrant hands at the docks and sounding them out once they were inked onto the blank paper.
Bored, the smaller children had begun to chase each other around the table, over the cots, and then into the kitchen, and back again giggling. Lucien—used to their antics—hadn’t attempted to stop their spirited game. Marjorie tapped Yusef on the shoulder and shouted, “You’re it!” Then she and Magda had raced into the kitchen, hand and hand. At some point, Yusef and little Albert had managed to corner Magda and Marjorie between the wall and the gas stove where the kettle was boiling water for tea.

Excited and yet terrified of being it—in that serious way children fear silly things—Magda had ducked away from one of Yusef’s long arms, Marjorie shielded behind her and when she’d jerked her shoulder backward, it had collided with the metal grate and the kettle it held. The kettle had fallen over, spilling water over the stove, extinguishing the flame and leaving the unlit valve to spew deadly cooking gas into the room. At first, nothing had happened, then Magda had felt dizzy and heard a thud and then another and then Lucien shouting.

Whether through increased exposure or just pure luck—Magda, Yusef, and Albert had all come to once Lucien had turned off the jet and opened a window, but Marjorie—the closest of them to the stove—hadn’t. Lucien had tried to revive her by pumping her arms back and forth and shaking her, but the girl was gone. They’d spent the blurred together minutes after that panicking and shouting at one another and crying before Lucien told Magda to stay with the boys, wrapped Marjorie in a sheet, and carried her in the fog to the construction site where he had buried her.

“Luci said—he said—” Magda faltered, stumbling over her words. “Luci said that he would protect me. He said we couldn’t bring her back and that all we could do was make sure no one knew it was our fault because if anyone knew me and Luci and Papa and the boys would all be separated. He—he—he didn’t say anything because he wanted to protect me and the family. It was an accident. Marjorie was my best friend, I never—but Luci—Luci tried to protect us and now he’s in trouble and—“

Magda broke down crying and clung to Maggie again. Maggie perched her chin on the girl’s hair and held her as she sobbed. Over Madga’s head, she could see Bartlett remove his hat in deference and Mr. Rothstein stare ahead into the room unseeing as his sons whispered on the cot around him.

“It’s going to be okay,” Maggie reassured over and over because that was all she could think to do. “It’s all going to be okay.”

They’d reported straight to Commissioner Gordon when they returned to the Station as they’d been ordered to do. Gordon listened to them, had them fill out the necessarily paperwork and met with
the Captain and the DA to decide how to proceed. There would have to be an inquest into Marjorie’s death—that would be unavoidable—but whether criminal charges would follow for Lucien and what they would be still needed to be arranged.

“You think the DA will buy it?” Bartlett asked, as both of them leaned against opposite sides of the corridor leading to the Captain’s office where three voices argued at different volume levels.

“I hope so,” Maggie answered shifting her weight from one foot to another before leaning back into a more comfortable position against the wall.

“District Attorney Neil isn’t fond of immigrants like most of the people with authority and money in this town. He’d sink the Rothstein kid if it was just him deciding, but Gordon’s on the level though. Commish isn’t the type to cut corners, that much I’m sure of.”

Police officers went back and forth on the floor just below the stairs at the end of the corridor. Maggie could see them if she stood on her tippy toes, but it wouldn’t be worth the muscle strain. The cacophony of phones ringing and shoes stepping from place to place was comforting in its predictability. Even the smell of smoke coming from the cigarette of almost every officer—including Bartlett puffing away on his Lucky Strike across from her—seemed to take the edges off of the day.

But tranquility doesn’t have a long shelf life.

There was the sound of a door slamming loudly from somewhere below them, then a shouting voice, and leather soles stomping up the stairwell until Lt. Cornwell stood at the end of the corridor. Maggie cursed under her breath and snatched Bartlett’s cigarette from between his lips, taking a long drag before handing it back to her partner and staring up at the stained plaster of the ceiling.

This was all she needed. Immediately, his beady rodent eyes focused on them and narrowed. Then he started marching towards them.

“You two!” he raged, pointing between the both of them

“Hey Dave,” Bartlett greeted. “You want a smoke?”
Cornwell didn’t allow himself to be distracted instead he stepped closer to Maggie.

“How dare you interfere in my investigation!” He bellowed at her, his cigarette and coffee breathe blowing into Maggie’s face and making her eyes water Cornwell’s voice was so loud that there was no way the three men behind the frosted glass hadn’t heard it. Their argument tapered off as if even they had stopped to listen. “You think you’re a big deal now because you a so called ‘Special Investigator’? Well, I got news for you, you filthy degenerate whore, you’re still just a woman in men’s trousers and vest playing at being police. You are nothing, just a waste of space. Do you hear me, Sawyer?!”

“David, David! Hey!”

“That’s what this is really about isn’t it?” Maggie said, locking eyes with Cornwell even as he moved his hands to either side of her head on the wall so she was trapped beneath him. “You’re not upset that I interfered in your case. You’re upset that I’m just a woman and I’m doing your job better than you’ll ever be able to. I may be a woman, Lieutenant, but I’m a better man than you’ll ever be and more woman than you’ll ever deserve.”

It all happened in a moment. Cornwell’s eyes flashed, one of his hands wrapped around Maggie’s neck and squeezed, Bartlett scurried forward, and somehow in all of the commotion, Maggie ended up being the one who remained standing thanks to a well-placed knee, a good right hook, and follow up kick to the groin once Cornwell was on the floor.

“You’re not a man,” Maggie muttered between breaths as she rolled Cornwell over onto his stomach and kept him down with a knee in his spine. When she had his arms firmly restrained behind his back, she leaned down until she was close enough to hiss in his ear. “You’re nothing.”

“I’m gonna kill you! Get offa me, you stupid fucking whore!” Cornwell snarled at her over his shoulder, wriggling beneath Maggie’s knee like a stuck eel.

Bartlett started to rise from where he fallen, Maggie pulled Cornwell’s arms tighter behind his back, and the DA, the Commissioner, and the Captain left their office for the hallway.

“What in blazes?!” the Distract Attorney exclaimed befuddled.

“Lieutenant Cornwell?” the Captain said, equally confused.
Only Gordon who stepped out from between them, took in the scene and guessed what had really happened given the personality of the officers involved.

The Commissioner positioned his hands on his hips and nodded to Maggie, “Let him up, Sawyer. Now!”

Maggie rose to her feet and stepped back. Cornwell—red faced and sweating—scurried up to his feet as well then turned, and landed a vicious left hook to Maggie’s jaw and two furious uppercuts to her unprotected abdomen. The blows slammed Maggie back into the wall, where she slid down to the floor and groaned in pain.

“That’s right, how do you like that you stupid bitch?!”

Cornwell pulled his foot back to kick Maggie, but Bartlett had grabbed one of his arms and Captain Sørensen took hold of the other, pulling him back and restraining him against the opposite wall. Maggie stood up. Her nose had started to drip blood, but as she felt along the sensitive cartilage, Maggie could feel no breaks and she knew at worst in the morning her noise might be a bit swollen and her abdomen was sure to bruise, but all and all she wasn’t badly hurt.

Commissioner Gordon took in Maggie’s bloodied nose and Cornwell’s futile struggles to escape his restraints and launch himself at her. He looked between them, his oval face resembling a cherry tomato as he stood still, his body seeming to shake with anger.

“Cornwell! In this office, now!” He rumbled, leaving no room for debate

Cornwell stopped struggling and stomped into the office beyond them, glowering at Maggie the whole way.

“Have we settled on an agreement, Neil?” Gordon asked, exhaling deep breath and turning to face the boyish district attorney who still stood frozen just outside of the open office.

The DA nodded, putting his off white Panama hat on his head and straightening it, “The Rothstein boy won’t be brought up on charges of murder, however, he will still have to be tried for trespassing on private property and burying a body on private land.”

Gordon nodded and put out his hand, the DA shook it quickly, then tipped his hat to Maggie after doing a double take to make sure she really was a woman, and descended calmly down the stairs like the fight in the corridor had never happened. Captain Sørensen retreated to his office, where he
was speaking with Cornwell in quiet tones. Gordon took a step closer to Maggie and examined her injuries.

“Are you alright, Investigator?” He asked lightly. His face was stern as always, but his eyes and tone were not unsympathetic.

Maggie looked down at the drying blood on her fingertips, “I’m fine.”

Gordon divided his attention between Maggie and Bartlett who had come stand beside her, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly.

“Tell me what happened.” Gordon commanded.

They told Gordon the story. His face shifted back and forth between dour, angry, and enraged then back again. Once he had all of the facts, he dismissed the two and marched back into the office, slamming the door behind him.

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She’d cleaned as much blood off of her face and clothes as she could and shrugged on her coat, but before Maggie could leave the station for the evening, Bartlett caught her on the stairs.

“Heya, rookie. You did good today!” He exclaimed proudly, slapping Maggie on the back so hard that she stumbled onto the main landing.

“Thanks.” She wheezed, slightly. “You didn’t do so badly yourself.”

“So, uh, I’ve been meaning to say something and we were running around so fast earlier that I couldn’t find a good time and—”

Maggie cut him off before he could go any further.

“I’ll save you some time, Bartlett. You’re a good training officer and a nice man, but if you’re
asking me to walk out with you, I’m not interested. I don’t have romantic relations with men. I have them with other women and if that’s going to be a problem, it might be best if we part ways now.”

Bartlett looked shocked for a second and then he recovered, waving off her presumptions with an unsure smile

“Oh, you thought I was—? Oh no, Sawyer, I mean you’re attractive in your own way and all, but I wasn’t going to ask you out.” The Detective explained, “I just wanted to say that—um—well I sort of figured that was the case with you—liking girls I mean. I—I just wanted to let you know that’s not gonna be an issue with me. My kid brother Lenny has this—this other guy who lives with him—he calls him his “husband” or whatnot—and I mean he treats Lenny real good and all and he seems like a decent man and I mean I ain’t no fairy…I’ve got a wife and two kids you know? But if I was a fairy like Lenny, I’d want people to respect my right to have someone and live happy you know? Someone like my Ruth is to me, she’s my rock. And I guess what I’m trying to say is that if you ever bring over a—you know—a “wife” or a companion to Sunday dinner sometime in the future, me, Ruth, and the kids, we’d be good with that.”

There was a pause of uncomfortable silence as Bartlett waited for a response from Maggie and Maggie struggled to find an appropriate response. So few people in her life who weren’t attracted to their own sex had ever expressed acceptance towards Maggie that she didn’t really know what to say back. Finally, she held out her hand to Bartlett to shake.

“Thanks, that means a lot to me,” Maggie admitted, giving Bartlett a firm handshake of understanding.

Then she put her hands in her pockets and continued down the stairs with Bartlett in tow.

“So, uh, we solved a case today,” Bartlett continued on in that frank way he said everything. “We need to go out and celebrate, Sawyer!”

“No, no, no,” Maggie answered immediately, shaking her head in Bartlett’s grinning face. “it’s been a long day. I just want to fall into bed and sleep for a year.”

“Aw, come on you old woman!” Bartlett teased with a familiarity Maggie was sure she felt yet. “What else have you got to do tonight? It’s perfect! My Ruth won’t be making dinner because she’s visiting her sister downtown with the kids and Chaplin’s By the Sea just opened over at the Odeon. His Tramp’s hysterical! We should go and see it and then stop at the closest greasy spoon for a meal. We’ve earned it, partner. Eh, eh? It’ll be my treat?”
“Fine, but only so you stop bothering me and you understand that I’m paying my own ticket. I do have at least seven cents to my name,” Maggie relented with an eye roll, but the annoyance she was feigning wasn’t what she felt, so much as a conflation of mixed emotions from nervousness to the gratitude of being accepted for who and what she was.

Bartlett rolled his eyes at her stubbornness, but he still led the way down the front stoop onto the sidewalk. The Odeon was only three or so blocks away from Gotham Central, but the easy distance turned into an insurmountable slog as it began to downpour halfway there. Then they’d started to run, heedless of the traffic officers.

The Odeon cinema was in run down music hall. There was only one viewing room crammed with as many rickety wooden chairs as they could fit inside and a white sheet covering one wall. The opaque projector was mounted on a table in the back and there was a basket beside the operator where you deposited your seven cents before you sat down. There was also a chair in the far corner by the screen where an accordion or harpsicord player would sit and play sometimes, but he wasn’t there that night.

When Maggie and Bartlett hurdled inside the Odeon out of the rain, the projector operator had already started up the crank and the title and beginning images were already moving on the sheet. Maggie and Bartlett deposited their admission fees in the basket then snuck down into two empty chairs at the end of the front row, trying to disturb as few people as possible along the way, but there were the inevitable grumbles and Bartlett flipping one or two people off and then they were seated.

High up on the sheet, the Tramp himself was strolling down the boardwalk in that bowlegged way of his, twirling his cane in one hand as he brought a banana up to his lips with the other and took a bite. He throws the peel away and slips on it then makes his way over to a drunkard whose wife had melodramatically gestured to a place in the sand where he was to remain before leaving him there. The drunkard lost his hat then the tramp did and both of their hats flew off of their heads, entwining in midair—strings tying them to their owners occasionally noticeable—causing both men to be pulled together against their wills and absolute hilarity ensued from there.

Maggie was surprised to find herself caught up in the laughter with Bartlett. She’d seen slapstick films before, but she hadn’t bothered to see Chaplin’s *The Tramp* released earlier in the year and yet the easy naiviness of how he bumbled into the other man, trying to be helpful, but causing a fight between them instead, warmed Maggie’s lonely heart. The film was like a breath of fresh air after the trying day she’d had. It didn’t take long before she felt her shoulders ease and all the stresses of her life lift off of them like they’d never been there in the first place.

For a moment, Maggie felt free. Truly, utterly, unmoored. She couldn’t’ remember feeling that
way since…since running down the dirt road to her family’s homestead with Eliza giggling beside her…

The memory brought with it a subdued sense of reality creeping back into her bones as the wife reappeared up on the sheet, looking all around for her wayward drunk. Maggie immediately pushed the feeling down. She wasn’t that girl anymore. She’d grown up and she’d learned that exposing your heart to the world could be one of the most painful things and—though she hadn’t set her mind and heart against love—she hadn’t pursued any long term romantic relationships after returning to the States either.

Just as Maggie had resolved herself to the idea of not getting too attached to anyone, the sound of some man spitting into a spittoon in the aisle cut into her viewing pleasure. Just as Maggie turned to ask him if he could be any louder and ask him to shut up, she caught sight of a woman a few chairs down.

A beautiful woman.

Her blonde hair was cut into a short bob that curled around the smooth angles of her jawline. Instead of the short dresses become more popular among the younger generation, she was wearing a collarless satin blouse tucked neatly into the waistband of her knickerbockers and brown leather boots that stretched up almost to her knee. There was something about her that drew Maggie’s gaze to her.

Then the Tramp on the screen stuck his ice cream cone in the drunk’s moustached face and the blonde laughed with the crowd around her—her eyes lighting up as her face erupted into joy at Chaplin’s antics and Maggie’s heart leapt in her chest.

What was that about not cultivating romantic relationships right now? Maggie scolded herself.

Maggie watched the woman until Chaplin and the varied gang around him tipped over their bench in the sand and the film ended before she decided fuck it and raced to the front of the aisle the moment the audience began to file out. Maggie waited by the wall as people passed by her and as the blonde approached her—she caught Maggie’s gaze and smirked. Bartlett who was giving Maggie a look that said, ‘Really? You left me back here!’ was just visible over the attractive blonde’s shoulder, but Maggie completely forgot about him as the blonde moved off to the side and settled next to her against the wall.

“And who might you be, Beautiful?” The blonde woman asked, crossing her arms over her chest as the last of the crowd filed past them.
Maggie felt her cheeks redden at the other woman’s forwardness and was glad of the still dark theater all around them, but she smiled back just the same. “Maggie Sawyer. And you?”

“Toby Raines. Pleasure to meet you.”

Maggie’s expression blossomed into a full blown grin. Maybe her life was finally beginning to shape up after all.

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National City—August 2016

“Eliza’s worried about you.”

Alex looked up from her coffee cup, took a sip, and put it back down.

“She doesn’t need to be. I’m fine.”

“You don’t act fine.”

Across from her at their usual table at Noonan’s, Kara sat, leaning forward on her elbows, hands relishing in the heat from her coffee mug and looking imploringly at Alex for answers Alex wasn’t prepared to give just yet.

“Alex, what is going on? Please, let me help you.”

Alex looked down into the darkness of her coffee cup and wished she had some whiskey to add to it to make this situation more palatable. She’d been a little preoccupied of late sure, but it was nothing her family needed to worry about. She’d found herself skipping out on the Super Friends’ weekly gatherings with flimsy excuses. She’d put off the weekly check in calls from her mother and had been throwing herself onto the front line of as many field missions as possible.
Twice she’d even forgotten to wear a vest—TWICE—only to notice the same time Kara had. And at least three times last week, Kara had been called to bring her home from The Black Dragon because she’d been so drunk she’d gotten into bar fights, though in Alex’s defense, the first time a guy was bothering a waitress who clearly wasn’t interested and the second time she’d been approached by a friend of that guy trying to get back at her for his buddy. The third had just been a bonus.

“What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to be honest and tell me what’s going on with you?”

“Honestly, Kara. I’ve just been distracted is all.”

“By what?”

Alex ran a hand over her face and sat back in her chair. My own mortality and the lack of a life I’ve lived, she thought to herself, but she couldn’t say that to Kara. Though they’d always bared their hearts to one another in the past, this amount of sadness of existential crisis wasn’t something Alex wanted to put on Kara’s shoulders. She already had enough on her plate being Supergirl, not to mention pretending to be human, and being one of two survivors of a now extinct race. Next to what Kara had gone through, Alex’s problems were as insignificant as a rain drop falling into a lake.

Alex took a deep breath and let it go, quelling the instinct to just tell Kara what was really bothering her. She decided to stick with an oversimplified version of the truth.

“The whole almost drowning thing a month ago. I’m not fully over it.” Alex admitted, fingers of one hand fidgeting with the spoon beside her coffee on the table.

Kara reached her hand across the space separating and squeezed Alex's fingers in hers reassuringly.

“Oh, Alex, no one is asking you to be. What happened to you was—traumatic—and it’s okay to not be okay. Just be you.”

“That’s just it Kara, I—I don’t know who that woman is anymore. I—” Alex faltered as she tried to collect her thoughts into the right words. “It’s like—I don’t know—I know who I’m supposed to
be on some non-conscious level and yet in living my life, I’m not even able to figure how to even start becoming that person.”

Kara just nodded, regarding Alex with her eyebrows raised in worry and her entire face a mask of concern as if at any moment Kara might fly her back to Midvale like she was a sick child who needed to be nursed back to health by her mother.

“Don’t look at me like that, Kara, I’ll be—,” Alex’s words tapered off as she looked down to where Kara’s attention had drifted, “—fine.”

A grey peppered muzzle was perched on the edge of the table across from Alex, belonging to a dog with matching dark swaths of fur extending from its semi-erect ears, across the eyes, and down around the rest of the head. The dog looked at Alex with soft brown eyes and when it noticed Alex looking back at it, the dog’s tail started thumping into the floor as it wagged happily.

“Hi there,” Alex greeted. “Where did you come from, huh buddy?”

The dog whined and nosed slightly closer in Alex’s direction as if it were desperately in need of attention. Alex reached out her hand experimentally and when the mutt just titled its head to be petted, Alex started scratching its ears.

“Who do you belong to huh?” Alex asked, quietly.

“Maybe he’s lost?” Kara supplied.

“Well, he’s definitely not a stray.” Alex leaned farther over the table, examining the dog. Its body was colored similarly to the fur on its head, but it looked well cared for and healthy. “He has a collar on and a leash—”

“Buster!”

The shout cut through Alex’s thoughts like a knife. The dog whimpered and lowered its head and ears. Not a second later, Detective Maggie Sawyer came sprinting around the half-moon serving counter and reached forward to grab onto the dog’s collar with a hand.
“I’m so sorry about this! My friend and I stopped in for breakfast and Buster slunk away while we were making our orders. I hope—” the detective stopped talking as she looked up from the dog she was holding to meet Alex’s eyes.

And Alex felt like she was falling, but in a good way. Like she was in a different dimension. One in which there was only ever her and Maggie. Kara cleared her throat and Alex blinked herself back to reality. They were back in Noonan’s. Kara was still sitting across from her, Maggie was standing beside the table holding Buster’s collar, the only sign that she’d been as effected as Alex was a slight pink sheen to her cheeks.

Alex cleared her throat too and sat up. When she spoke her voice was unsteady, “So, he’s yours? He? She?”

“He. Yeah,” Maggie replied.

The detective smiled that easy smile of hers and Alex felt her heart beat doubly fast for a couple seconds as the beautiful view captivated her. Maggie broke the spell when Buster butted his head against her leg and she looked down to scratch behind his ear. Maggie’s attention shifted from Buster up to Kara.

“Kara, right? You’re the sister,” Maggie tried.

“Yup, that’s me,” Kara said, her friendly Catco intern smile already on her face. “And this is Alex.”

“Oh, I remember,” Maggie said, returning her attention to Alex.

Bette chose just then to saunter over to them, two mugs of coffee in her hands.

“I wish this coffee was Irish.” She grumped.

Maggie looked at her, “You say that a lot.”

“I mean it a lot,” Bette quipped back.
Alex felt her face heat up as that glorious smile of Maggie’s was directed towards the new blonde woman and an indeterminable flare of jealousy sparked to life inside of her. When Maggie turned, she must’ve caught Alex’s bleak expression because she quickly started introducing the blonde.

“Alex Danvers, Kara Danvers, this is my friend Bette Kane.”

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Bette said politely.

Alex found herself speaking before she’d even thought about what she was saying, “How do you two know each other?”

Everyone turned to Alex, seemingly different levels of confused and amused by the question. Maggie pushed a lock of hair behind her ear and looked at Bette.

“Oh, we go way back,” Maggie said.

“Yes,” Bette said, playing along. “We’ve been friends for at least thirty years.”

Alex looked between the two of them, then looked at Kara, then back at the two women who looked like they were trying in vain not to laugh. Bette didn’t look much older than thirty something so Alex assumed they must be family of some kind or old family friends. When she caught, Maggie’s eyes, the woman chuckled, but didn’t look away.

“I’m a friend of her family,” Maggie admitted, before switching the focus from her to them. “So, are the two of your having a sister day or something?”

“No, in fact, I was just leaving for work. It was good to see you again, Maggie. Bette. See you, later Alex.”

Kara rose, balling up her napkin on the plate, and giving Alex a not so subtle meaningful look that said, ‘we’ll talk about this later.’
“You know, I should get back to our table or they won’t know where to bring the food. Come on, Buster,” Bette gave Maggie an even less subtle raise of her eyebrows before collecting Buster’s leash from Maggie and walking away, leaving Alex and Maggie to their own devices.

Alex swallowed hard, “I didn’t call you. After you gave me your card, I mean. I look at it every day and think of calling you, but I haven’t been able to summon up the courage to do it.”

Maggie took Alex’s words as an invitation and sat down in Kara’s vacated chair. She studied Alex with sympathetic eyes.

“What’s been stopping you?” the detective asked softly.

“I didn’t want you to think I was weird and—I don’t know—we’ve only met once. Once and a half if you count that day we literally collided on the sidewalk,” Alex said.

“It’s not weird, Danvers. I gave you my card remember?”

The comment brought an instant grin to Alex’s face. Maggie had given Alex her card. Maggie had thought of her. Alex swept a lock of her chin length hair behind her ear and met Maggie’s eyes again shyly.

“To be honest, I thought you’d probably have forgotten me by now.”

“Are you kidding me?” Maggie asked her, that wide Alex-only grin spreading over her face and giving Alex heart palpitations. “Danvers, no one could ever forget you. You’re like a super sexy giant.”

“Giant, really?” Alex asked.

Maggie folded her arms across the tabletop and winked. “You’re taller than me.”

Alex rolled her eyes, “Yeah, well that’s not hard to do.”
Maggie let out an indignant huff of air and the next thing Alex knew, a balled up napkin was being hurled at her face. Alex smacked it on the floor a couple of inches from her face and laughed, feeling more lighthearted than she had in weeks.

“Take that back, Danvers!”

“Oh yeah, what are you going to do to me if I don’t—oh Jeez!”

Alex saw Maggie shaking the ketchup bottle and glowering at her and flinched, throwing her hands up in front of her to protect herself against a deluge of tomato slime that never came. Alex heard Maggie chuckle and dropped her hands.

“Gotcha,” Maggie said.

They both broke out into laughter. When it quieted down and they could breathe again, Alex stretched comfortably in her chair and focused on Maggie across from her.

“This is the most fun I’ve had in—,” Alex stopped to think, then continued. “I don’t know how long.”

“All work and no play isn’t healthy, Danvers. You have to laugh at least once a day, it keeps the Grim Reaper away.”

That was one of the more absurd things Alex had ever heard. She shook her head, “Where did you hear that?”

“In my head,” Maggie admitted.

Their gazes locked once again and Alex couldn’t find the strength to break eye contact. Being near Maggie was addicting. It felt somewhere in between the adrenaline rush Alex felt riding her Ducati at full speed and the comfortable feeling of sinking into her memory foam mattress after nearly twenty-four hours of non-stop work. It was exhilarating and familiar at the same time. Alex didn’t know how that was possible and she didn’t care, but she did know that she didn’t want it to end.
“Would you like to hang out with me sometime?”

Maggie’s voice was just as breathless as Alex’s, “Yes. When?”

“Uh,” Alex rubbed the back of her head sheepishly and laughed at herself. “I actually haven’t thought that far ahead yet.”

There was an awkward silence as Alex tried to control her overwhelming sense of embarrassment because apparently she sucked in social situations that had nothing to do with work and Maggie just watched her, thoughtfully.

“How about tomorrow night?” Maggie asked, finally.

“Perfect. Where?”

Maggie smirked, “It’s a surprise. Text me so I can put your number in my phone and we’ll hash out the details later.”

“That would be awesome,” Alex said. Her cheeks hurt because of how wide she was grinning, but she was happy and that feeling alone was worth the discomfort.

“Coolsies,” Maggie replied.

The detective stood and Alex felt herself automatically following suit without thinking.

“I better get back to my table. I ordered French Toast and I have a feeling that Bette might switch the plates and eat it if I don’t get back to her. She denies it, but she has a weakness for sugary breakfast foods.”

Maggie turned, looking over her shoulder at Alex, a move Alex was sure would put her in cardiac arrest without any effort.

“See you around, Danvers.”
Alex nodded, dumbly. Unable to form words as those gorgeous dimples turned away from her and disappeared into the other side of the restaurant. The atmosphere suddenly felt cold around Alex, like the air conditioning had been jacked up too high all at once, but Alex was so warm that she could’ve travelled on foot to the North Pole and not felt the temperature drop. She bit her lip, trying and failing to keep her excitement at bay.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Too much? Not enough? What did you like and not like and what would you like to maybe see more of? Also, if anyone is interested in the history of ladies loving ladies in the early 1900s, hit me up for some book suggestions. There are so many incredible women who lived and loved and were mostly forgotten by wider history, but whose lives helped make mine as an out lesbian possible in a way. One of my favorites is Natalie Clifford Barney, which is why I shamelessly plug her anywhere in the story that she could’ve had a role. Debating in a later chapter on having Maggie go back to Paris, is that something anyone would be interested in seeing as a part of Maggie’s backstory? What do you guys think? Also, I know I haven’t shown the flashback where Maggie is turned immortal, but it is coming and hopefully in the next chapter.

Worked super hard on this chapter guys. Hope it was enjoyed by all. Whether or not you did, kindly leave a comment on the way out.

One more P.S.- You can actually watch Chaplin's 'By the Sea' on youtube. The movies back then weren't very long, usually 5-15 minutes, and though a lot of them were lost, this wasn't one of those and it's actually quite entertaining if you're interested in slapstick and such.

Thanks for reading!
I Don't Wanna Live Forever

Chapter Notes

So this chapter explores more of Maggie’s life in the present and of course her long awaited date with Alex. I chose to do this because I could literally write a full novel length fic just on Maggie’s immortal life experiences alone and I fear including them too much might slow the story down so I’ve only included two flashbacks in this one, both serve a purpose that might not be immediately apparent, but I hope you enjoy them all the same. Second, this chapter deals a lot with grief, pain of loss, and talk of possible death and aging. I did this because I don’t think someone like Maggie could live forever without being marked by an overwhelming sense of the loss of people, places, and times that only now exist within her head. Also, my family has suffered a decade of loss that took everyone from parents, uncles, grandparents, great-aunts, and great-uncles to the point where I would say we were averaging at least one funeral every year and I am still struggling with coming out of that so I put a bit of that into Maggie and I hope, hope, hope that won’t make you guys lose faith in her journey or in this story as a whole. I promise you, the title of this story isn’t predictive. There are so many good things to come for these characters and I look forward to sharing them with each and every one of you.

Please enjoy this chapter and leave a comment on the way out if you have the time.
Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gotham City—August 1915

Maggie sipped on the coffee in her French porcelain cup, reading and re-reading the headline of the article shoved onto the bottom right corner of the *Gotham Gazette*’s front page.

‘BRIDES IN THE BATH KILLER’ GEORGE JOSEPH SMITH FINALLY MEETS HIS END

A line or so beneath that was a smaller heading centered above the main article:

*Famous Pathologist Praises Justice Done. See pg. 18 for details.*

*There’s another win for Doctor Spilsbury,* Maggie thought to herself, nurturing a proud smile. She’d only been with the Gotham Police Department for four months, but Maggie still liked to entertain the notion sometimes that she could throw on a white jacket, lean over a microscope next to her famous onetime idol and not look out of place. Most of the time though, Maggie was satisfied with her life as it was. For the first time that she could remember, she felt…settled and
Maggie looked up and took in her surroundings. She was seated at an outside table of the Café De La Vie—one of the few cafes in Gotham city to have been actually founded by a French person before all things French became a popular trend. On the street, automobiles swerved dangerously around the few horse carts that remained and honked at trolleys in annoyance when they were forced to slow down or pull over because of them. The city air smelled like a mixture of petrol, horseshit, and decay and while unpleasant—that was Gotham—though it was no more aromatic than any other city.

She was so immersed in the article that the rookie detective jumped when another newspaper suddenly covered her own, the new headline stretching boldly over the front of *The Gotham Post* taking precedence.

**LADY DETECTIVE HERO NABS GOTHAM BOOGEYMAN**

“Congratulations, hero cop,” Toby Raines said, pulling the strap of her messenger over her head and plopping down in the chair opposite Maggie.

Maggie groaned and covered her face with her hands. Fucking press.

“I don’t understand what their obsession is with me. I’m just doing my job.”

“Yeah, but you’re a lady copy—the first ever lady cop in this city—doing your job, that makes you a novelty. Besides, this headline and mine on the *Gazette* are two of the more subdued ones on the newsstand. *The Tribune’s* was ‘LADY JUSTICE RIDES AGAIN’ and *The Herald’s* was, ‘MS. SHERLOCK HOLMES BRINGS DOWN CHILD KILLING FIEND.’”

Maggie dropped her hands and looked at Toby as the older blonde woman started to laugh. A waitress came over to the table and poured Toby a coffee. Then she topped Maggie’s off and glanced down at the front page of the newspaper where a woodblock print depicted Maggie arresting a dour looking old man glared back up at them. The facsimile’s features had been expertly rendered to match Maggie’s. The illustrator must’ve been at the station when she’d brought Martin "Mad Dog" Hawkins in for the murders.

The waitress’s eyes popped from the image back up to Maggie and widened—snapping back and forth from the picture to the detective and back again several times.
She must’ve realized she’d been staring for a few seconds after Toby cleared her throat loudly, because the girl looked away and her cheeks reddened in mortification at being caught staring. Then she did a clumsy approximation of a curtesy and said, “It’s an honor to meet you, Ma’am.”

Maggie’s eyes went as large as saucers as the waitress retreated back inside the café and her face colored self-consciously as Toby guffawed so hard she was gasping for breath by the time she’d calmed down.

“I’m so glad you’re finding this funny,” Maggie glowered, taking a sip of too hot coffee and flipping over *The Gotham Post* so the offensive article and illustration were out of sight.

Toby took and released a deep breath and wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes, “Christ, that was worth getting up at the ass crack of dawn for on a day I don’t even have an article due. Whoo!”

Maggie ignored her, still sipping gingerly at her too hot coffee and going back to the story in the *Gazette* she’d been reading before Toby even arrived.

“I have to say, you’re developing quite a reputation for yourself. Monikers for you created by my colleagues now include: The Girl Scout, The Lady Detective, Lady Protector of the City, and Ms. Sherlock Holmes.”

Maggie sighed. Unable to focus, she pushed the *Gazette* away from her and looked resignedly back up at Toby.

“Yeah, well tell your colleagues I’m just a cop, not some freak in a Barnum & Bailey’s show. I’ve never even read Sherlock Holmes and that would make their nickname for me—Ms. Sherlock Holmes—oxymoronic because I don’t believe in deduction, just observation and common sense.”

Toby blew a raspberry at Maggie and waved her reasonings away like some fearful miasma, “Technicalities, Sawyer. The public doesn’t care about that and no reporter worth their salt would let the truth get in the way of framing a good story.”

“Oh ho, so what you’re saying is not even the investigative journalist cares about the actual truth, huh? Woe, unto your career then.” Maggie quipped.
Toby narrowed her eyes and flipped Maggie off, raising her middle finger daintily instead of her pinky as she lifted her coffee cup to her lips and smiling politely all the way. Maggie chuckled, amused despite the low simmering embarrassment still rolling around in her belly. Toby was a good egg. Their relationship together had run the gambit from acquaintances to hot and heavy lovers with no strings attached to exes who couldn’t seem to avoid one another before circling back around to acquaintances and finally vaulting ass forward into a deep friendship that so far seemed to be equally important to both of them.

Maggie’s dynamic with Toby was one of the most confusing ones she’d ever been a part of in her life to date—not because of the way they squabbled like old biddies or were bluntly honest with one another to the point of pain—but because of their past history. Maggie had never kept in contact with an ex-lover and every one of their encounters seemed to stir up an unruly cocktail of emotions within her.

“So will your Boogeyman be tried for multiple kidnappings and murder or just for the Ricco girl?” Toby asked, her tone indifferent and seemingly uninterested in the answer, but the way her honey colored eyes scrutinized Maggie over the lip of her coffee cup gave away her inquisitiveness.

“That depends,” Maggie countered, both of her hands on either side of her coffee cup, enjoying the heat permeating through her fingertips in the early morning chill. “Are you asking as my friend or as the investigative crime reporter for the *Gotham Gazette*?”

“I’m whatever you need me to be, sweetums,” Toby cooed, copying Maggie’s protective posture around her now tableside coffee cup and leaning forward so she could gaze more directly into Maggie’s dark eyes.

*Except one very important thing*, Maggie thought, breaking eye contact and focusing on the white table cloth and the vivid contrast of the grey newspapers laying over it.

*It isn’t you, sugar*, Toby had told her, laying beside Maggie in her bed, taking lazy puffs off of a cigarette in the dark. *I’m just not the romantic partner type of person. We can spend nights like this together though until we’re blue in the face. I don’t have a problem with that, but long term isn’t something I’m built for.*

Maggie had declined the offer and left. Though in her mind she’d known theirs had been a casual sex-only relationship, that didn’t stop Maggie’s heart from getting attached and wanting more than the beautiful blonde reporter was willing to give. At, first Maggie had been bitter about it, but when they kept meeting at crime scenes and serialized rehearsed apologies continued to come out of the guilty blonde’s mouth at every subsequent meeting, Maggie had finally let the hurt go and
they’d evolved from there.

Maggie smirked and met Toby’s gaze again, this time with a more confident edge.

“I am not at liberty to discuss the details of cases currently pending investigation or in the process of criminal litigation,” Maggie repeated the byline that had almost become an automatic answer to any questions asked about any of her cases in the past few months. It was her job to catch the criminals, not dish about them to the public. “Call the Commissioner if you have an issue with that.”

Toby’s eyes darkened and she pushed back from the table in annoyance, “I did. The stick-up-hiss-ass ‘no commented’ me. Ugh, it’s stupid. You know, my first ever criminal case as a reporter was for my home town newspaper. Did I tell you? I was sent down from Cleveland to La Porte, Indiana to cover the Belle Gunness murders in ’08. Cops weren’t nearly as stingy with the information they were willing to give out then.”

“Forgive me for holding myself to a higher standard,” Maggie quipped, leaning back until she was more comfortable. “Is this why you wanted to meet me here this morning? To ask questions you know I won’t give you the answers to?”

“Actually,” Toby said, her eyes lighting up as she scooted conspiratorially back to the table as if the last five minutes of their conversation had never happened. “I asked you here because I’m going into court this morning and I wanted you to come with me.”

“What for?”

“Because: one, it isn’t a case you’ve worked on to my knowledge so there isn’t a conflict of interest having you there as an objective observer and two, because there is someone I want you to meet,” Toby explained, careful not to give too much away.

Maggie studied the woman across from her. Her blonde hair had been done up in a rounded pompadour, though—with no hat pinned over it—the detective in her could tell the style had been done in haste. Tiny wisps of blonde hair had fallen from the bun at the top holding everything up—having been tucked behind Toby’s Gibson Girl ears. Her eyes were the same honey color as ever, but as Maggie took in her face, she noticed light blotches under the sheen of foundation cream and light peach powder of her cheeks. Was she flushed? Nervous maybe? Embarrassed? Aroused even? Maggie shook the last one from her mind. She and Toby hadn’t been lovers for a couple of months. Maggie had focused on her work and Toby had been—well—Toby, living adventurously and sleeping with a different beautiful woman she seduced every couple of nights.
Nerves, Maggie’s gut told her. She’s nervous about something.

“Why is it so important to you that I come with you?” Maggie asked, not unkindly.

Toby finished her coffee and pushed her empty cup and saucer towards the side of the table, then folded her hands together in the space where they’d previously been.

“Because—I have to interview the prosecuting attorney in the case and—I’ve never interviewed a lawyer of her caliber before. I’ve known of her for a while, it’s hard not to. I mean the woman runs a law practice offering legal advice and services for the poor and the immigrants who are taken advantage of in the boroughs. Surely, you must’ve seen one of her cards meandering about? They’re printed in Italian, Spanish, Yiddish, German, etc.”

Maggie thought about it. She’d met a lot of people, both suspects and otherwise who’d spoken of a lady lawyer who used her family fortune to take on the impossible cases of the poorest of the poor and often won in one way or another. Maggie had just assumed she was being told these things because she was the ‘lady cop’ and the people she interviewed had concluded that the ‘lady cop’ and the ‘lady lawyer’ should at least know of one another if for no other reason than they shared a sex. After hearing a few stories about the woman, Maggie had eventually given into her curiosity and looked this “angel of the law” up.

“Do you mean Kate Spencer?” Maggie inquired, biting her lip.

“Yeah, that’s the one! She runs the Hoi-polloi Law Firm—and that is its real name—on the corner of West 52nd and Leonard Ave. I tried to call her office, but the operator couldn’t connect me because the line was swamped. So I decided to go there to interview her yesterday, but there was a queue of people literally around the block waiting to see her already, so I figured, one of her more prominent cases goes to trial today, why not show up and—”

“Doorstop her?” Maggie offered with a rueful grin.

Toby shrugged without shame, “Basically, yes.”

“And you need me for this why?”
“Because she’s a lawyer and lawyers aren’t usually fond of meddling reporters, but you are a cop and I figured having you there with me would lend more gravitas to my mission.”

“So, you’re asking me to do you a favor is what I’m hearing?”

Color ran higher in Toby’s cheeks as Maggie grinned for all she was worth and crossed her arms over her chest expectantly. It wasn’t often the adventure seeking, daredevil, oversexed female Casanova Ms. Raines asked anyone for help and Maggie was going to take full advantage of this opportunity. The reporter dropped her gaze, but nodded and affirmation.

“Oh, that’s not going to work. I need to hear you say it out loud.”

“I need you to help me,” Toby muttered under her breath.

“What was that?” Maggie said, turning her ear towards the increasingly surly looking blonde on the other side of the table. “I couldn’t hear you.”

“I need your goddamn arrogant ass to help me damn it!” Toby said, a little louder than was necessary for polite conversation, drawing the stares of several breakfast goers around them. “Are you happy now?”

Maggie finished her coffee in a swift gulp, and stretched languidly before standing up. “Very.”

“Oh, don’t look so damn pleased with yourself,” Toby griped.

“Like you wouldn’t be if our situations were reversed?” Maggie pulled out a few dollar bills from her pocket and dropped them on the table. “What time is the trial?”

“Nine sharp so we have plenty of time to get across the city, you know, if we run,” Toby said, just now realizing it was 8:30 and they wouldn’t get there in time to see the trial start.

“We could make it in time if we catch the next GRT train Downtown,” Maggie commented, opening the waist high iron gate to the barrier that separated Café goers from the street.
“Ugh, why oh why, didn’t I wake up earlier this morning?” Toby bemoaned, walking beside her as they made their way down the sidewalk towards the entrance to the Burnley Street Station. “I hate underground trains. If God had meant for people to ride mechanical beasts beneath a city, I feel like that crap would be written down somewhere.”

“How do you know it isn’t?”

“Because the way these zealots prattle on and on about their holy book,” Toby muttered, pointing to the Church of St. Cecily as they walked speedily by. “We definitely would’ve heard of it by now.”

“You have a problem with the GRT, complain to the Kanes. Rumor has it they paid for most of it because the Waynes wouldn’t.”

“Can’t be rumor if it’s true.” Toby stated, with a look of disgust. “I would complain too if I didn’t find their representative—if she can even be called that—so abhorrent.”

Maggie’s eyebrows came together as she thought, “Representative? You mean Kate Kane, the heiress? What do you have against her?”

“Oh, where to begin. For starters, she’s beautiful and she knows it. She’s also arrogant, self-centered, adventurous, vain, and worst of all—a playgirl who’s careless with other women’s hearts.”

The words left Maggie’s mouth before she could stop them, “So she’s basically you, but with more money?”

“MARGARET ELLEN SAWYER! Shame on you!” Toby shrieked, earning the attention of an elderly couple passing them by. “It may be true that I share most of if not all of those qualities, but at least I have them in moderation. With Kate Kane, what you see is basically what you get. She’s the complete opposite of Kate Spencer even though they run in the same circles or at least, that’s what I hear.”

Maggie cut a side glance at Toby who was looking at anything but her.
“You have an awfully high opinion of this lawyer you haven’t even met yet,” Maggie observed. “That’s not like you.”

Toby bit her lip and sighed, throwing her hands up into the air, “What do you want from me, Mags? Just tell me what you want to hear.”

“Whoa, whoa! Easy, Toby,” Maggie smoothed, grasping the other woman’s arm and steering them towards the nearest building so they weren’t standing in the middle of the pavement. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I was just—”

“—you were just detecting, I know.” Toby finished for her, tugging Maggie back towards the sidewalk. “We need to keep going or we really are going to be late.”

They descended the stairs to the underground station. The platform was lit by oblong electric lightbulbs, but it was still dark and dank and crowded compared to the freedom of an open sky. The air everyone had to breathe in was hazy with soot. The platform butted up against the actual tunnel originally hewn out of the bedrock beneath Gotham, which was barely large enough for a single train to squeeze through. The Burnley to William Street Line had been one of the earliest of the underground train lines to open and it definitely still looked like it.

There was a disquieting murmur thrumming though the air around them as the people waited, jostling amongst themselves for elbow and shoulder room. A child wailed from somewhere, a man in a trilby cursed, checking his pocket watch, and Toby—Maggie noticed—was trying her best not to hyperventilate as her claustrophobia took full hold over her. Maggie squeezed her hand in support, but no words passed between them.

It had become overly warm, sweat starting to bead beneath men’s paper collars and the old fashioned chin high bodice’s most women wore. Even Maggie was starting to feel a little moist and uncomfortable in her tweed three piece suit before there was a whistle and their train came rolling down dark the tracks. The great machine stopped with a heave and everyone attempted to squeeze into the Pullman cars at once. Toby—whether having pushed others aside or relinquishing her dignity and crawling between people’s feet until she was safely seated—had beaten nearly everyone into the car, taking up residence in a cowhide upholstered seat and continuing to take in deep measured breaths with her eyes closed.

The interior of their passenger car was hotter than it had been on the platform. It smelled like sweat and unwashed human bodies. The walls though were painted a pleasant olive green and there were electric lights at intervals in the center of the ceiling. There were cowhide seats, though they were few and far between and had to be supplemented by rough wooden chairs attached to the wall, the
bottoms of which had to be pulled down to be sat upon—and once you were seated—the likelihood of getting a splinter was almost assured.

There were a few aluminum poles by the doors and peppered in between seats as they were in trolley cars. Maggie grabbed onto the one in front of Toby and gave her a wink before Maggie was pushed against the wall by the entering crowd. The train then took off on its rough, jerky way to Old Gotham and Civic Square. By the time their train stopped at the Williams Street Station, it had become increasingly hard to breathe and the sweltering of crushed together bodies had become so oppressive that once the Pullman doors shuddered open, Maggie found herself running the stairs up onto the street then stopping to wait for Toby before proceeding to catch her breath.

Toby gasped for air, stopping to lean on the iron railing surrounding the stairway as she finally emerged into freedom. “What happened to no man left behind?”

“That’s the military’s motto,” Maggie defended herself. “Not the GCPD.”

“I hate you sometimes, you know,” Toby admitted, wheezing.

“The feeling is entirely mutual,” Maggie conceded, stretching then pulling at the stud that attached the collar to her shirt.

Once they’d sufficiently recovered themselves, they continued on foot at a more sedate pace to the Gotham County Courthouse. Maggie had been in the tall Greco-Roman building many times, usually to testify to evidence presented in a criminal case, but she’d never shown up in her spare time as a spectator and it surprised her how full the benches were when they entered the main courtroom.

It hadn’t surprised her though to find that the trial was already in session and that it was a lady lawyer—dressed smartly in a black wool suit jacket and matching skirt punctuated with blue pinstripes and a men’s straw dress hat with a purple and gold hat band—who was questioning a middle aged man sitting in the dock much to the bemusement of the audience.

“Mr. Watkins, please state to the court, your relationship to the plaintiff,” the lawyer said, annunciating her words so that all gathered could hear.

The middle aged man in a tan three piece suit cleared his throat and sat up straighter, “I’m the co-owner and managing Executive Officer of the Mount Vernon Guernsey & Shirtwaist Company.”
Maggie felt hot air puff against her neck and ear as Toby leaned into her and whispered, “There’s our huckleberry. Isn’t she just magnificent?”

Maggie found that her throat was too dry to respond given the overbearing warmth of the room, but she nodded after Toby moved back into her seat fully, watching as the lady lawyer paced languidly in front of Mr. Watkins.

“And your headquarters—are—or were located in the Ash Building at 1911 Addams Square in Gotham city is that correct?”

“Yes, but everyone knows that.” Mr. Watkins blundered indignantly.

“Everyone does now, Mr. Watkins.” Kate said, with a cocky grin. Then she began pacing calmly between the witness stand and the jury box with her hands clasped behind her back like an at ease soldier. “Everyone in this courtroom also knows that prior to the massive fire in your main factory on March 25, 1915 at that address—where 150 workers in your care were subsequently burned alive—that those same employees had been on strike not two weeks earlier for a period of three months protesting ‘intolerable and unsafe’ working conditions.

“Those same workers made an accord with you and your business partner, Mr. Kurt Robbins, to return to work in return for higher wages, lower hours, and more safety precautions. Now, ladies and gentlemen of the court—it must be said that this accord was struck out of desperation because those worker’s families were starving and on the cusp of being thrown out of their own homes—and all of it done by verbal agreement and without the protection of a union because that was the only condition upon which Mr. Watkins and Mr. Robbins would concede to the other requests.”

Kate Spencer turned back to Mr. Watkins, looking into his eyes and asking, “Mr. Watkins, did any of those things you promised your workers come to pass in the two weeks between the employee strike and the devastating fire of March 25?”

“Objection!” the business owner’s attorney—a short doughy man with a long handlebar mustache and a wild head of hair—stood up and banged his fist down upon the defense’s table. “I fail to see what this line of questioning has to do precisely with this fire on March 25.”

Kate Spencer spun around on the heels of her feet, meeting the defense attorney’s eyes in direct challenge, but her voice was as calm as if she were pouring herself a cup of tea. “Did you attend law school, Mr. Burgess?”
A guffaw came from somewhere in the audience followed by a rising tide of low murmuring voices.

The other lawyer’s face turned beet red and he actually stomped his foot onto the hardwood floor, before proceeding to throw an adult version of a small child’s tantrum, “Your honor, I demand that Mrs. Spencer retract that statement and apologize for her rude unladylike behavior!! She challenges and demeans the respect of myself, the court, and the nation whose laws it defends!”

The judge didn’t even have time to lift his gavel to call for order before Kate Spencer launched into one of her legendary diatribes.

“No, Mr. Burgess! It is you and your client who challenge and demean the respect of this court and the nation it protects! We are a nation of workers that venture capitalists take advantage of. Without us, businessmen like your clients wouldn’t have fortunes. These poor factory girls were not to blame for what happened to them. Your client is! The fire escapes in their building were made of untreated wood and only reached to the windows of the 7th out of 11 floors. The service lift to Addams Square was so small and under maintained that no matter how heroic the lift operator had been—he’d only been able to go back up twice before the lift broke down and women started jumping in desperation down the elevator shaft as the flames threatened to devour them. The only other exit from the building was a pair of doors kept locked by the foreman until the end of the day when the workers leaving were searched to make sure they hadn’t pilfered a measly roll of thread or a swath of cloth. The end of day bell hadn’t sounded yet on that day, however, so the door was locked and the man with the keys had fled without any concern for the many others who depended upon him for their survival!” Kate Spencer said loudly, gesturing wildly with her hands as she spoke almost as if she were directing some invisible orchestra.

“And what’s worse—what truly makes your clients, Mr. Robbins and Mr. Watkins, legally guilty if not morally bankrupt—is the fact that when the secretary on the 1st floor telephoned them in their offices to sound the alarm that one of the sewing machines had overheated and gone up in flames, they didn’t warn their workers on the top floors—the youngest of whom was a girl of 10 and the oldest a 72 year old master seamstress from Italy—that a fire had even started. Instead, your decent, law abiding clients escaped via the roof and climbed over onto the next building to make their cowardly descent to safety. The workers they left behind didn’t know there even was a fire until it was too late and by then—the flames had them trapped. The firemen—when they eventually came—raised their ladders, but their ladders only reached up to the building’s sixth floor windows. Too low, to save the women who’d been abandoned to their fates.”

Mr. Burgess had gone pale and the entire courtroom was listening to and watching Kate Spencer with rapt attention as she stepped up on the table for the defense—the table where Kurt Robbins was sitting flabbergasted—and continued passionately relating the facts of the largest industrial tragedy ever seen in the city up to that point right in front of one of the men who’d caused it.
“The firemen couldn’t reach the 200 women who worked on the highest floors. Women who were killed when the wooden fire escape burned away beneath their feet. Women whose anguished screams could be heard by dock workers as far away as the Otisburg District on the mainland. And the rest of the women your clients left behind? The ones who hadn’t been burned alive, or leapt down an elevator shaft, or fallen off the only fire escape—they eventually became so desperate that they jumped out of the windows rather let the flames take them. Their broken bodies littered the pavement from the edge of Addams Square to the corner of Green Street.”

Kate Spencer hopped down from the defense desk and rounded on all gathered in the court room, pointing back at a few black clad families seated on the plaintiff’s bench.

“Now, you look into the faces of my clients, look them straight in the eyes and tell them that Mr. Robbins and Mr. Watkins didn’t fail their loved ones on March 25th when they escaped that building without warning anyone of the danger to their lives. Tell them that their wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, sweethearts, nieces, grandmothers, sons, nephews, husbands, and fathers weren’t worth the two minutes it would’ve taken to warn the foremen on the upper floors so the Addams Square entrance could’ve been unlocked in time for them to get out. Tell them that the lives of their loved ones, killed because of the malicious neglect of these two great captains of industry, weren’t worth the slight loss in profits it would’ve cost them to make the safety upgrades previously suggested by the city fire commissioner. Tell them you’re sorry for their losses even, but don’t insult them by daring to claim without a shadow of a doubt that the blood of their lost loved ones isn’t on the hands of Mr. Robbins and Mr. Watkins. They failed these women and men once. If they’re acquitted here today of wrong doing, then we will all be failing those poor lost souls a second time. The prosecution has no more questions for the defendant at this time, your honor.”

OOOOOOOO

National City—August 2016

Every new day begins with waking up. Waking up begins with recognizing yourself as “I”. Then as the mind makes the body suck in oxygen and takes in more of its surroundings, it adds, “am.” By the time Maggie rolls her head to the side to see the sunlight streaming in through the glass of the bow window that covers the wall opposite her queen bed from floor to ceiling, her brain adds, “here” and “now.” Then the pieces are strung together as she stares up at the plaster above her.

I am here now, she acknowledges, remembering where and when she was.

The phrase runs through her mind a couple of times, then she yawns, rolls out of a tangle of bedsheets and a sleeping dog, and pads down the stairs into the open kitchen where she starts the coffee grinder. The apartment Maggie occupied stretched the entire top floor of Kane Tower. It’d
been built by Eustace Kane back in 1900 as a monument to all of the money the Kane’s had made on the west coast through expanding their various business ventures through railroads that connected one backwater town to another until a modern city cropped up.

Kane Tower was an office building back then, with the top floor reserved for executive officers and their clerks, but Maggie had gutted it when she’d arrived in California and remodeled it into an open warehouse loft apartment. There was a top level where the master bedroom, a guestroom, and a bathroom were and then below there was the kitchen which bled into the open dining and a living rooms leading on towards the front door.

Maggie had lived all over the world in her lifetime, but she’d had very few places in her life that had felt like home. This apartment was undeniably hers. She’d put her blood, sweat, and tears into molding dilapidated yellow and orange brick into a space she could relax in. Other tenants lived in converted apartments below Maggie, but they didn’t know her personally and why should they? The building and a share of the Kane properties had been willed to her a long time ago, but she had an executor who handled the details of all of that.

She was just a cop. A long lived cop. With almost no surviving family and very few friends. Biological immortality wasn’t conducive to making and keeping long term relationships that could take root and grow in one place because eventually everyone Maggie cared about would grow old and die and then she’d have to start all over: change her surname, get a new SSN, have official documents forged and implanted into Federal databases, make up new cities of origin, and fake the life and experiences of a whole new person when all Maggie ever really wanted was to just be herself and be loved for herself.

But Maggie knew she couldn’t have that. A mad little chemist and a freak accident had made sure of that in 1921.

While her smart coffeemaker started to brew, she walked over to the corner junction where kitchen cabinets butted up against the brick wall and an antique sideboard had been squeezed between granite countertop and French balcony doors. Maggie knelt, opened one of the drawers carefully, and pulled out a dusty leather bound book. She set it down on the kitchen island, pulled up a barstool to sit on, and opened it. The cover was loose and needed to be flipped gently, but most of the art nouveau matted pages were intact, still holding their celluloid portraits: fragmented memories of people and places in a world that didn’t exist anymore.

Maggie flipped a page. Inside was a matted black and white portrait. Like all of their gloriously rebellious photos back then, it was dramatic. Maggie was leaning against a wall, one hand hidden behind her, the other holding a dark mask that covered half of her face leaving the other half of her free to stare flirtatiously back at the observer. She was wearing a tailored three piece suit that made her sleek frame look sharp and dangerous. Maggie had posed for that one in 1922 or ‘23? She couldn’t quite remember.
What a fool she’d been back then.

She flipped another page. This one wasn’t made of patterned cardboard, but simple black paper upon which two black and white photos had been pasted. The one of the left showed Maggie, her friends Kate Spencer, Toby Raines, and her very own Kate Kane leaning against a bar, cradling drinks in their hands like they hadn’t a care in the world. The one next to that showed Maggie standing next to Joe Bartlett in front of a new Ford Model T, neither one of them smiling, just looking at the camera as if it were a spectator to this one moment shared in both of their lives. Maggie flipped the black paper, which gave way to another matted page with room for only one photo in the rounded square center of the cardboard.

It was a professional portrait slightly browned by time. In it, a tall slender woman stood at attention in profile wearing a dark blue overcoat with polished gold buttons running from her waist up into her lapels. There was a stiff, high collared tunic that peaked out from beneath the heavy coat and a cloth sash that wrapped around the woman’s thin hips. Matching dark trousers and knee high boots rounded out the rest of the body. The entire ensemble was topped off with the kelpi hat of the French Foreign Legion. She ran a fingertip absently over the subject’s jawline. She could see the uniform in color in her mind—vivid red and blue—and the mischievous green eyes that would turn towards her and wink.

A caption scrawled in ink upon a white ribbon just below the portrait read:

*Mags, told you I was the pretty one. Kisses Forever, Your Kate.*

*Amiens, France. 20 February 1917*

Maggie’s thoughts were bordering on melancholy when a knock sounded from the vicinity of the front door and Buster started to bark excitedly, pulling her back into the present. The knock came again until finally Maggie shuffled over in her boxers and fuzzy socks with the dog scurrying good naturedly ahead of her and threw the door open. Bette Kane in a black blazer and pinstripe skirt stood on the other side, leaning against the door jam and looking exasperated.

“You know these little visits of ours would be a lot easier if you’d actually let me bring up business during our hangout sessions or—at the very least—show up to the initial meetings we set every quarter instead of putting me off until literally the end of the fiscal year when I don’t have any other choice but to hunt you down.”

Maggie shrugged and stepped aside so the other woman could come in, “Where would the fun be in that?”
The blonde glared at her and Maggie just winked before she turned and moved into the kitchen, retrieving two ceramic coffee mugs, and filling them with steaming dark liquid. There was an indignant huff, then the sounds of Bette greeting Buster in a high pitched voice like parents used with infants and the slam of the door being kicked shut permeated the air. When Maggie turned back around, Bette was setting her briefcase down at the kitchen island. Immediately she noticed the photo album and recognized the youthful portrait of her legendary great aunt, a larger reproduction of which still hung in a gilded frame in the entrance hall of Kane Manor in Gotham she knew.

“Today’s one of those days is it?” Bette asked, her eyes flitting between the portrait and Maggie’s unreadable expression as she blew across the surface of her coffee. “You know, grandmother used to talk about Aunt Kate like she was some great romantic hero. I always wanted to be like her when I was a kid—an untamable badass who everyone either loves or hates—but alas the military isn’t for everyone for a reason. Are you still planning on flying into Gotham on your anniversary?”

“Same as I do every year,” Maggie said with a shrug, pushing the second coffee cup across the kitchen island where the blonde scooped it up gratefully, cradling the mug like it was filled with liquid gold.

“Under your real name this time?” Bette asked, staring down into her coffee, which appeared to have been made just the way she’d been taking it since she’d passed the bar years ago—two sugars, teaspoon of cream, and hopefully a shot of whiskey somewhere in there, but impromptu visitors couldn’t be choosers, could they?

Maggie nodded, eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Why do you ask?”

It was Bette’s turn to shrug back, “Just thought it was good to know in case I needed to get into contact with you or something.”

Maggie nodded again silently and looked down at her feet. Buster sat at her side on his haunches, looking up at her with big brown eyes, his fluffy black tail thumping against the hardwood floor.

“Is it time for your breakfast?” Maggie asked him, already knowing the answer, but enjoying the exchange anyway.

Buster answered her with a high pitched whine and the increased speed of his wagging tail until, were he a helicopter, he might’ve been able to take off. Maggie chuckled at him, and rubbed his
head affectionately before padding over to a side cupboard next to the refrigerator and pulling out a sizable metal bowl and Tupperware container filled with dog food. She measured out a cup and put it in the bowl, then set it down out of the way where the Buster—following at her heels—could blissfully devour it in peace.

“How have you been, Bette? Haven’t had you breathing down my neck about stocks and funds in a while? There must be a reason for that.” Maggie asked good-naturedly, walking back to her side of the island and her coffee.

“Hm, well, one: we saw one another for breakfast yesterday morning and two: I’ve got other things to occupy my time.” Bette agreed after a much needed sip of caffeine minus alcohol. “Believe it or not I do have a life outside of managing your portfolio.”

“Oh, really? When was the last time you spent a night In with your wife instead of a bottle of Vodka and a sleeve of Chips Ahoy at work?”

“Hey, like you can talk! When was the last time you went out on a date?”

“A one night stand date or a date-date like with someone special?”

“Date-date.”

“1946?”

“See! See the hypocrisy I’m up against?!”

Maggie shook her head, struggling to keep a straight face. “Not even a little bit.”

Bette lowered her arms and sputtered in frustration as Maggie chuckled from behind her coffee cup, raising it to her lips again for another swallow of the life giving roasted liquid that was heaven on a caffeine cloud.

“Oh, I almost forgot. I don’t know that you deserve it, but I ran into your mail man on the way up this morning, asked if he had anything for the apartment number, and without even asking my
name he handed me this."

Bette fished a medium sized package wrapped in brown paper from her gigantic purse. It was addressed to Detective Sawyer in styled calligraphy and held together with what looked to be butcher’s twine. Maggie took it in her hand, weighing it. Whatever it was, it looked vaguely rectangular, but rounded at the edges and it had a heft to it that wasn’t entirely heavy per se, but was still solid like lifting a small cat or a small breed puppy one handed.

“Your’re like a ghost in this place. You honestly need to get to know your mailman better. I think he just assumed I was you because he’s probably never seen you in actual life.”

“I prefer to do everything through intermediaries who don’t need to see me often. It’s easier that way,” Maggie waved her away distractedly, settling the package on the kitchen island between them and their cups of coffee.

“Don’t I know it,” Bette muttered under her breath as she lifted her mug to her lips again.

Maggie looked down at the package, studying the elaborate cursive handwriting on the paper and knowing that no one was taught how to make fancy loop-de-loops like these anymore. Not like the serpentine letters Maggie spent many of her earliest school days practicing over and over again until they met the school teacher’s approval. Most everything was typed out now and signatures weren’t even required to be in a matchable hand if permission was given for an electronic signature. Whoever sent this to her, had to be aged. Older than Bette at least, but definitely younger than Maggie and that didn’t narrow down the scope too much. The twine was white cotton, not the straw like brown hemp or coir that was often used in arts and crafts. This twine was thick, but thinner still than the wool yarn used in knitting or crocheting which told her…nothing.

“You think you know who sent it?” Bette asked.

The sound of her friend’s voice, ricocheted Maggie back into her kitchen with a loudly crunching dog out of her line of sight and Bette looking at her in quiet contemplation.

Maggie shook her head, “No. There’s not enough to go on, but if I need to, I’m sure the captain would allow me to bring it down to the forensics lab for some more helpful tests.”

Bette raised her eyebrows, “You think it’s really going to come to all that?”
“One never knows.” Maggie replied, grimly, “And someone like me can never be too careful.”

“Has Dr. Veritas found out anything new in her research?” Maggie asked.

Bette grimaced and stared up forlornly from her coffee cup. “If you mean has my wife found the secret to making you mortal like the rest of us poor bastards then the answer is still no. I don’t get it actually. I mean you’re what? 120 years old or something now?”

“Watch it,” Maggie warned.

Bette as always, ignored her and continued, “Is it so hard to accept what and who you are?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact it is,” Maggie admitted more sharply than she’d meant to. “Do you know how it feels to watch the people you know and love grow old and die right in front of your eyes and you can’t follow them? Do you know how hard it is to see the places you’ve known disappear so that the only place they can possibly exist anymore is in your memory? Do you know how hard it is to be constantly changing identities every fifty years or so and starting all over again in another place, with new people? Do you have any idea what it feels like to have literally no one in your corner? The answer for you is no because—trying as your life may be at times—you have the solace of knowing that you will never outlive your time. I don’t have that peace. It was stolen from me and mine is a fate I wouldn’t wish upon the most despicable human being on this Earth.”

“You have me!” Bette spoke up, but then her voice faded into a murmur as she realized it wasn’t the consolation she’d thought it to be at first. “Well…for the next twenty to forty years or so maybe…”

“Sooner or later I lose everyone and everything. The only thing that remains is me.”

Bette wasn’t giving up so easily, “But the life you’ve lived surely—”

“I haven’t lived, not really, in decades.” Maggie admitted, looked back over to the photo album on the island counter. At some point she couldn’t remember, Bette must’ve flipped the page because now it wasn’t Kate’s gallant war photo staring up at her, but a photo she’d honestly forgotten even existed. It was of her, Toby Raines, Kate Spencer, and two acquaintances Maggie couldn’t name all sitting at a table at Mollie’s with Mollie herself standing behind them glowering at the operator of the camera. All of the rest of them were smiling at the camera lens like they had the whole future ahead of them and in a lot of ways they had back then. “What I do is survive and that’s not
The room was quiet except for the chewing of kibble. Maggie stared at Bette and Bette met her gaze with a worried one of her own, all the while a presence of absence hanging in the air all around them.

Such presences permeated Maggie’s life and her days. She’d seen and known so many places and things that now only existed in her mental cedar chest of extensive memories of people, buildings, businesses, places, and varied ways of life that had passed her by.

In 120 years of being, Maggie had seen…well…everything. For her—but only her—all history of the past century was in living memory and it was so fucking painful! Albert Einstein had said, “time was an illusion,” but even he had been able to shuffle off the mortal coil back into the primordial ether. Maggie couldn’t. Death, dying, decay, and the recycling of it all into something new, something greater, was a part of daily life and yet over a century’s long drudgery, all of it had left Maggie weary and feeling so, so much older than the youthful looks she’d maintained. She’d lived longer than any one human being should’ve and she didn’t want to do that for the rest of eternity. What use was an eternal life if you had no one to grow old with? No one, to share your experiences and your heart with?

Maggie could keep up a steady façade for the people who knew her, but not her secret. The people who saw her day in and day out. To them she was adventurous, optimistic, and full of life and perhaps that was who she’d been before decades of loss and forced isolation on the run had shaped her into something else—something that was perhaps not quite human or more than human—a being that had evolved to survive and persist, but not to live or be love. She’d past that a century ago and yet the way Bette looked at her—as if she were the center of the world—this wouldn’t be an easy conversation to have face to face.

“You do know that I don’t want to live forever,” Maggie said, finally dragging the elephant into the suddenly serious atmosphere of the room by its tail.

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned that,” Bette looked down at the muted granite of the kitchen island beneath her arms and hands. Then she met Maggie’s defeated eyes again with a spark of defiant fire powering her green gaze. “But it isn’t about what you want completely is it? It’s about more than you and you know it.”

Maggie chewed her lip and looked down at her feet, her mug and the package both sitting long forgotten on the countertop separating them. The telltale well of emotion bubbled up into her chest, but as Maggie had done every day since Kate’s death in 1962, she shoved it back down and replaced it with a calm numbness that was slowly growing to become the only thing she truly felt at all anymore.
“It is,” Maggie admitted finally, “I made a promise to your aunt that I’d live my life and look after our son as he lived his. Until our Tim is dead and buried, I’m stuck here, but when he is, I fully intend to claim the peace I’ve been denied for so long.”

“Are you kidding me?!” Bette shouted suddenly, pushing away from the island and toppling her barstool accidentally with the sudden motion. “So, that’s it?! You’re just going to what?! Off yourself?!”

Maggie’s dark eyes didn’t flash with anger nor did she leap up to defend herself and deny it. She just looked at Bette with sympathy and perhaps that’s what had set Bette off the most. When Maggie finally did open her mouth to speak, Bette immediately cut her off.

“No, no, don’t even try to justify this to me right now!” Bette yelled, her eyes misting over with emotion that she was bound and determined to put into her rage. “You have what every human could only dream of—an infinite amount of second chances. The lifetime you’ve lived, the sheer extent of the world you’ve seen, how dare you throw that gift away as if it were nothing special. By doing that, you’re taking a giant shit on all of the people who love you including me! Hell, what about Buster?”

The dog padded over at the sound of his name and perked up his head, looking between the two of them and wagging his tail mutedly because—though he didn’t understand the topic being argued over—he knew these humans loved them and usually when they called him it was to love, treats, food, and kisses. Now though, one of them was yelling and the other just looked sad. Buster lowered his head, still wagging his tail, but from between his legs now. He approached Maggie as if unsure and nosed her knee and was rewarded with a reassuring scratch behind the ears.

“Are you going to abandon him to a life on the streets like whoever tied him to that dumpster?!”

“No, and you of all people, know me better than that.”

Maggie met Bette’s gaze again, still sympathetic, but edged now with an impatient defensiveness. It was her life, her decision, but Maggie would never leave Buster to starve and be neglected. She’d made arrangements for him to be cared for and spoiled until the end of his doggy days.

“I thought I did. I took it in stride when you asked me to compose a will leaving all of your assets to charity in the likely event Timothy predeceases you. I even humored you when you asked my Shay to do tests and research on you to see if she could reverse your condition, but it seems so
much more real now. I don’t—you’ve been there for me since I was a child—even when my mom
died and my dad abandoned his kids like we were so much nothing. You raised us. You were like
more than a mother to me. You were like my version of Aunt Tilda. A friend and a savior. You
might not have given me life, but you’re the one who made it great! What in the hell am I going to
do in a world without you in it?!

The last words trembled out in a desperate whisper as Bette finally lost the fight against her
emotions. Maggie rounded the island and embraced the blonde as she started to sob. It was true.
When Bette’s mother had taken terminally ill with breast cancer and had told Maggie that her
husband had abandoned her and the children to their fate, Maggie had taken it upon herself to raise
Beth Kane’s two youngest great-grandchildren. Many times she’d thought both Bette and her twin
brother, Lucien, would’ve been better off being raised in a more stable family setting. You know,
one in which they wouldn’t have had to switch identities, schools, and cities they’d grown used to
for new countries, names, languages, and backstories every time the heat on Maggie had grown too
intense to remain in one place.

Surprisingly though, Bette and Lucien had always elected to stay with Maggie even when she’d
offered to make more steady arrangements for them and—throughout adulthood—they’d
maintained contact with Maggie no matter where she went or who’s name she’d lived under.

When they’d grown old enough, the “trouble twins” as Maggie had nicknamed them, had moved
out and gone to University, and restored family ties with their older brother—who hadn’t wanted
the responsibility of raising two children when he was barely nineteen himself—and even with
their father. They’d grown into amazing human beings in their own right and Maggie was so proud
she’d been there to witness that, but they had to learn the one lesson every human being must
inevitably tackle one day.

And that lesson was that nothing lasts forever, no matter how much you may want it to.

When Bette’s sobs quieted and there were just tears left, Maggie pulled back to look at her. The
blonde’s face had a little less makeup on it, her eyes were red-rimmed and ever few seconds she
sniffled pitifully in a way that reminded Maggie of a younger Bette recovering her equilibrium
after having her knee bandaged when she’d been trying to learn how to ride a bicycle for the first
time and had unavoidably wiped out.

“I haven’t seen an outburst on this level since I took the training wheels off your bicycle for the
first time and insisted you ride full tilt down the field. Guess, you running me over in the process
was poetic justice, eh?” Maggie teased.

“Yeah,” Bette admitted with a snort and though she was still emotional—the tension in the room
had eased slightly with Maggie’s words.
“Listen to me, Little B,” Maggie said warmly, gripping Bette’s shoulders gently and holding her at arms’ length. “You already know what it means to lose the person who encapsulates your world and though—it never gets less painful or easier—you’ve learned how to live a good full life despite having to get used to missing someone so dear to you. That’s one of the first and hardest lessons in Humanity 101, but now you must learn another. Nothing is immortal, not even me, not really. I just can’t age because my cells can’t stop reproducing at an optimal rate, but if I were in a bus crash tomorrow, I could die as easily as anyone else on that bus. I’ve just been really lucky up until now. That’s all. And you’re right, I’ve lived an amazing life. I’ve seen more of the world than I even knew existed. I’ve met so many amazing people who continue to teach me something new no matter how old I grow and I’ve had the privilege of knowing you and watching you grow into this badass woman who lives life on her own terms come hell or high water. And I am so, so proud of you, Bette, but you’re going to have to let me go someday. That’s just how life is.”

Bette screwed her eyes shut, the last of her tears running down her overheated cheeks. Maggie reached forward and brushed them away with her thumbs before taking Bette’s face between her hands, encouraging the woman to come back to the present. When Bette did, Maggie smiled.

“You’ll be fine on your own. You know you will,” Maggie assured her, “Live every day like it’s your last. Look at everything with wonder as if you were seeing it for the first time. Love Shay and let yourself be loved by her in turn and don’t let your imperfections devalue your own self-worth. You are so much more than what you think and your life is going to be every bit as amazing as mine. One day, you’ll look back on it and you’ll understand, but I need to beg you for your indulgence now. I need…to go away…completely, Bette. Life for me now—it’s undercut with constant pain and loneliness—that I can’t get away from and—though I’ve grown used to missing everything that I’ve lost—I can’t escape the feeling that I’ve outlived my natural time and we both know that I have. And one day soon, it will be time for me to go and I will need you to get all of my affairs in order before that day comes.”

“I will, I promise.” Bette nodded, seriously.

Maggie’s let go of Bette’s face and the blonde raised a hand to rub at her eyes as her breathing steadied. Then there was a low whine as Buster sat down between them and rubbed his muzzle against Bette’s hip in commiseration. Bette let out a choked laugh and lowered her hand to Buster’s head.

“I’m alright, Buddy. But thanks”
“Have you been to visit Tim lately?”

Maggie took that as her cue to circle back around the island and put their empty coffee mugs in the ‘smart’ dishwasher the contractor had insisted she needed during her upgrades.

“Not since last week, but I was planning on checking in on him this afternoon. Why?”

“Are you going to tell him about your hot date tonight?”

Maggie tried to play innocent, “What date? I don’t have a date.”

“Yes, you do.” Bette snickered at the half-assed attempt to lie to her. “With that Alex girl from Noonan’s. You know, the brunette who wanted to bite my head off for standing too close to you.”

Maggie faltered, feeling her cheeks heat up. “How—she wasn’t—Bette, that wasn’t why—”

“I don’t know,” Bette interrupted her with a smirk as she raised her legs, using the barstool next to her as a footrest. “I know enough about dating other women to know that she’d have to like you an awful lot to get that defensive when she asked how we knew one another and then the way you tried to put her at ease with that 100 watt smile and by telling her the truth of all things? That says a lot about both of you and how you feel about each other.”

Maggie leaned on the counter, regarding Bette suspiciously. “How did you even know that we were planning on meeting up tonight in the first place?”

“I have my ways,” Bette quipped, but sobered when Maggie gave her the look that meant she wasn’t going to play around. “I ran into the sister on the way out. She said she was glad to meet me and that Alex actually talks about you all the time. I just assumed the rest and now you’ve confirmed it for me.”

Maggie continued to stare at her with the same intensity and when she finally raised both eyebrows in a, ‘seriously? You’re going to play this card’ expression. Sighing, Bette gave in and admitted there was more to it.
“Okay, okay, I also may’ve come back to the counter a couple of times under the rouse of needing more napkins in order to allegedly eavesdrop on you both.”

“Allegedly?” Maggie questioned.

“Yup,” Bette nodded, not willing to budge any further.

Bette was a lawyer and like every Kane Maggie had ever met—she had more sand in her than to just roll over and surrender—even when she was in the wrong and too stubborn to admit it.

“Anyway, I took the afternoon off,” Maggie said. “I’m going to use the time to run a few errands and visit Timothy.”

“Again I ask, are you going to tell him about your hot date tonight?”

Maggie looked at Bette, annoyed, but the vexation was for show and what she saw in Bette’s eyes wasn’t emotional upheaval as there has been during their argument. It also wasn’t the usual mischievous glint she had when she was teasing, instead it was a tiny glimmer of hope. The hope that Maggie might finally start living her life again and find love and be happy. It almost made Maggie feel ashamed to be planning her own eventual death and in that moment she didn’t have it in her to do anything, but smile back warmly.

“Maybe,” She conceded with a small shrug, though she knew that likely she wouldn’t.

OOOOOOOO


Adult cells belonging to unidentified Alien Species KCS2152 continues to show varied epigenetic changes, which cycle more rapidly than in the average adult homo sapien. 99% of cells appear to reproduce themselves with no noticeable senescence and little to no change in reproductive life between sample cell lines 1A and 1B over 152 growth cultures. With no Hayflick limit in sight, tests suggest...
Alex paused in the notes she was scribbling. Suggest what?

She’d only been working with a small team on culturing the adult extraterrestrial cells of the unknown species for a few months, but based on their tests and observations so far, it appeared as if…this species of alien was biologically immortal. That in and of itself wasn’t extraordinary. Many alien species whose technological advances far surpassed those of humans had figured out ways around aging and disease. For example, Green and White Martians both were biologically immortal to an extent, their bodies reproducing cells at the same rate, mostly without any noticeable change until they’d already lived a number of centuries. Kryptonian technology had advanced to a point that all diseases had been eradicated and the aging process had been slowed, but they weren’t “immortal”—for lack of a better word—in the same sense, they just lived longer than most humans.

This species appeared to be though.

The idea of biological “immortality”—wherein the cells of a being reproduce at the same rate without damage or change so a species lives a long natural life without aging until that life was cut down by disease or ended by death of an unnatural means such as murder—had always intrigued Alex. As a child, she’d been allowed a small aquarium of fish for pets. As one of her first real attempts at experimentation, her five year old self had kept a research journal documenting the lifespans of her fish and how they were effected in a controlled environment by different brands of fish food being introduced into their diets. After six months, she’d given up on the experiment though because—regardless of which brand of food she bought—aquarium fish had a relatively short lifespan compared to humans anyway no matter which species was being tested.

Still, she’d pursued any sort of material she could find on the study of epigenetics, genetics, microbiology, etc. in her parents’ scientific journal collections which referenced the process of aging, the life cycle of a human cell, gene expression, DNA, etc. until she’d become convinced that halting or reversing the biological aging process was possible and she’d dreamed ever since of what that sort of dream would manifest itself as in humans. Having J’onn and Kara in her life had helped mold that hypothesis from simple theory into something that approached parallel practice—not to say she could suddenly make humans more long lived, but now Alex could compare other similar beings with longer lifespans to the improvements which human biologists aspired to achieve.

"suggest the possibility of “biological immortality” in Alien Species KCS2152. More test cultures needed to procure positive or negative conclusive results."

Alex closed her log book and set down the pen beside it with a click that echoed through the quiet lab, deserted by all save her at this still early hour.
Many of the lab’s researchers had the week before Labor Day off and were spending the time through the holiday with their families making up for all of the late summer evenings and early mornings their dedication to their jobs had robbed from their families. Alex—who preferred to be able to work alone on her own projects—usually took the time around holidays to refamiliarize herself with the research lab that she wasn’t able to spend much time in when she was on active duty and she usually stayed there until Kara dragged her back to unavoidable revelry, tense family meals, and the alcohol that helped Alex get through it all.

She ran a hand through her hair exhaustedly, noting that she would have to get it trimmed up before she took her bike out on its next desert ride. Alex leaned back in her laboratory chair and let out a sigh. When was the last time she took her Ducati for a ride? Alex couldn’t even remember the day. She didn’t often do more for herself than was necessary for survival. She paid her bills, bought food and alcohol, went to sleep at night, and got up in the morning to go to work. That was enough—or at least Alex had convinced herself that it was.

Since she and Kara had become close in High School, Alex had stopped thinking about herself solely as a, “I”, but as the lesser part of a, “we.” She’d put whatever childish dreams she’d once nurtured aside and did everything she’d been expected to do at 100%. She’d even sacrificed her self-loathing alcohol lubricated nights dancing at clubs until she was too drunk to drive for a job where she could channel that self-loathing into protecting her sister against the wider world. Anything, she’d ever wanted from then on had been pushed back down deep into her subconscious and forgotten.

Apparently, she’d hidden her wants and desires so well that not even Kara had noticed. Her little sister had simply rationalized it away, by saying to herself, “That’s Alex for you.” Alex hadn’t become aware of that until after Myriad, after they’d both almost died saving the world and each other. Kara had been ashamed of it, but Alex hadn’t held it against her. How could she? Kara had been right. That was how Alex was. It only occurred to Alex then that she’d ignored her own thoughts, desires, emotions, and any greater sense of self-reflection for so long that she didn’t even know what those things were anymore.

Now, whenever Alex felt a flash of something, it was instinctively buried before she could determine what it even was and this empty neutral-ness took its place automatically, dictating her reactions and facilitating her denials. She felt and knew that her life wasn’t important—not for herself, not without Kara. She’d poured everything into their friendship and had fought for her for so long that she knew Kara’s habits better than own. She knew what Kara needed: security, a sense of purpose, a job that made her feel like she was contributing to the world not just as Supergirl, but as her mild mannered alter-ego Kara Danvers before she could be happy.

But what was it Alex needed? What was it that would make Alex happy?

Alex loved her job, but there was a hollowness to what she did day to day now, this feeling that
there was a lack of wonder, a lack of...anything really. She went through most of her days on autopilot until some Big Bad came to the city and threatened Kara, then she knew what she was doing and that too came to her on an instinctual level, not a conscious one. Could she—not only in theory, but in practice—continue to live like this? Would this be her life until she was too old to do roundhouse kicks or lift whatever DEO standard issue weapon would be adopted in the future?

Just then, her phone buzzed against the top of her desk across the room, and the distinctive rendition of “Mr. Brightside” came blasting out of the tiny device. Alex grinned and all but skipped over to the desk, sliding the last few steps of the way with more grace than a professional baseball player. She picked up the phone and—seeing the now familiar name on the screen and the short message beneath it—felt the smile on her face warm her entire being.

Maggie: Morning Danvers. Got any plans for this evening?

Alex raised her eyebrows and chuckled at that. Either Maggie had the flighty memory of a Goldfish or she was play with her. Well, Alex could play back.

Alex: You know, I think I might’ve? Let me check my calendar...Nope I’m all yours.

Alex hit the send button with her thumb and immediately regretted it, realizing that her comment could be taken two different ways. Couldn’t it? Alex looked back down at the screen just as the little green checkmark popped up below her message that showed it had been sent and seen.

Crap, crap, crap! Alex mentally berated herself, panicking internally. Every nerve in her body was screaming at her to do something—anything—in the name of self-preservation. Then the brake was pulled down and the well-oiled gears of Alex’s mind came to a sudden halt.

Wait, why did Alex care that what she said could be taken two different ways? Maggie was a cool level headed woman. She would know how Alex had meant it. Wouldn’t she? It wasn’t like one oddly worded text would destroy the prospect of their burgeoning friendship. And anyway, Maggie was a lesbian. If she did take Alex’s comment the wrong way, she’d probably understand that Alex had meant it in a platonic way, you know, through experience, right? Or was she way overthinking everything right now? Why did she even care so much?

Because you want her to like you, idiot, Alex’s brain supplied unhelpfully.

Just as Alex had decided to compose a not too rambling explanation for her choice of words just in
case, three little grey dots appeared dancing in a line below her last reply, indicating that Maggie was typing.

Alex just stood there, staring at the screen. Then those three little dots disappeared from view with no accompanying message after it and Alex almost had a heart attack. It was a small thing that was usually just frustrating when it happened when she and Kara were messaging back and forth, but this was different. Then it happened again. The three dancing dots came back, danced like the rotating colors of a traffic light for what felt like an eternity, and then disappeared into nothingness again!

“God fucking dammit!” Alex cursed.

In a move of pure exasperation, Alex tossed the offending object back down on the desk. She needed to stop obsessing and get her mental and emotional equilibrium back before the work day started up properly and she had to face whatever hell was coming their way while pretending that everything was fine. Alex checked her watch.

6:39 A.M.

Not so early anymore, apparently, but Alex still had time to go down to one of the training rooms and give one of the punching bags a good beat down. No sooner had Alex stood when the chorus of “Mr. Brightside” started up again. Alex’s hand reached for the phone so fast that it jumped out of her hands like a fish and bounced ineffectively off the knuckles of one hand, then glancing off of the grasping fingers of the other before finally Alex caught the phone in her grasp and held it up to her face.

Maggie: *That’s the spirit, Danvers. How about I pick you up around 7pm?*

Alex let out a relaxing breath, finally letting the tension ease out of her muscles. Then the agent’s thumbs immediately went to work, firing off a rapid response.

Alex: *Seven’s good. May I ask where we’re going?*

Maggie: *You can definitely ask. ;)*

Alex: *..........And???
Maggie: And…it’s a surprise. Think of it as an adventure, Danvers ;) 

Alex: Alright, I’ll bite. What’s the dress code? 

Maggie: Wear something casual, but two caveats: 1) wear long pants of some type, and 2) wear boots you can hike in. 

Alex raised her eyebrows at the phone screen. 

Alex: Um…okay? I’m just brimming with confidence now about…this lumberjack convention we’re apparently going to? 

Maggie: …..Ha, you wish we were going to a lumberjack convention! I have all the best button ups for it. ;) No really, though, it’s going to be fun 

—not the lumberjack convention, I don’t even think there’s one in town—but I mean the date, this date of ours is going to be epic! 

Alex felt her face heat up. Was this a date? Was it okay that this was a date? Maggie was pretty amazing. She just had this quality about her. In high school, it would’ve been described as “the cool factor,” but in the world of grudging and regressive adulthood, it simply became this indescribable “thing” that someone had. Sometimes the phrase, “they have it all together,” was used, but all of those descriptors were just too…common for Maggie. She was someone who defied description. She was extraordinary and Alex didn’t know why, but she wasn’t at all bothered by the thought of going on a date with her. 

True, she’d gone into this with just an undeniable need to be closer to Maggie and little understanding of what that need might mean, but Alex found that she didn’t care. She’d never really fit just into one box—she didn’t have a dating life or even a social life—but that didn’t mean anything about her, not really. Alex could run 3 miles at full tilt in 25 minutes flat. She could torture someone with an index finger until they spilled every secret they knew and she could also grow alien stem cells. 

Could your average twenty-something fiancée of another hot twenty something do that? No. Well…maybe, but generally the answer would be no.
Alex Danvers was an accomplished, attractive, brilliant woman and if she wanted to go on a date with another woman because that woman was amazing and made her feel alive for the first time in years…well that was her own business, no one else’s.

Alex: I can’t wait.

Maggie: Till 7, Danvers. :)

“Someone’s in a good mood.”

Alex looked up from her phone screen to see Kara standing three feet in front of her, still in her reporter get up and glasses, smiling because Alex was smiling.

“What?” Alex asked, innocently, setting her phone back on her desk face down.

“Wow, you just…you just look really happy is all. What’s got you all excited?”

“I’m going out with a friend tonight.”

“Who?”

“Um, you remember Maggie, right?”

“The detective we ran into at Noonan’s the other day?”

“Yeah.”

“What about her?”

“Um…we…I mean her and I are going to hang out tonight.”
“That’s awesome, Alex! Good for you.”

“Um, thanks?”

“So whatcha doing?”

Alex gestured over to the incubator where cell cultures were growing, “Oh, you know, just… research and busy work.”

“No, I didn’t mean right now,” Kara corrected, watching as realization dawned and another smile brightened her sister’s expression. “I meant tonight, with Maggie?”

“Uh,” Alex paused.

Was it a good idea to tell your only sibling and closest friend that you were going to an undisclosed location with a woman you’d only met two or three times and didn’t really know? Was it a good idea to even do that in the first place? Alex knew what her answer would be if it were Kara going out with Maggie. Kara may be bulletproof, but she was still Alex’s baby sister and—come Hell or high water—Alex would always stand in between her and danger. But Maggie…wasn’t dangerous. Alex felt it, she knew it almost instinctively like she knew when something wasn’t right. Still, that wouldn’t be enough to stop Kara from worrying for her.

Alex scratched her head and smiled sheepishly, “Um, I don’t really know, actually, isn’t that crazy?”

“Uh, you don’t know where you’re going with a woman you hardly know?” Kara asked skeptically, folding her arms over her chest and looking Alex up and down. “Who are you and what have you done with my overly careful big sister?”

“Nothing!” Alex defended. “I’m just trying something new you know? Being impulsive, seizing the day?”

Alex knew her smile looked terribly forced right now, but she didn’t feel like she understood her dynamic with Maggie enough to talk about it yet and she wasn’t sure what she’d say even if she
could. Alex had always talked with Kara about Kara’s love life and whenever her failed dates were mentioned, she’d shrug off Kara’s oversight and reassure her sister she was fine.

But Maggie? Maggie was—Maggie and she was different for her—and Alex wasn’t entirely sure what that meant or even how to put what the tiny woman made her feel in two/three meetings into coherent sentences.

“Are you feeling alright? Maybe you should lay down.” Kara asked, suddenly standing right in front of Alex and feeling her forehead. “I think I’m going to go get J’onn.”

Alex slapped Kara’s intrusive hands away.

“Hey!” Kara pouted, rubbing her wrist even though they both knew that there was no way in hell Alex would ever be able to hurt her physically. “I’m just trying to look out for you.”

Alex lunged forward and clasped Kara in a brief hug, then pulled back, holding the younger girl by her shoulders and meeting her eyes.

“I know you are, Kara and I appreciate it, but I’m really fine okay?” Alex reassured her with a gentle squeeze to Kara’s shoulders.

Kara nodded, but she still looked unconvinced.

“BRB,” Kara said. Then she flashed away and was back standing in front of Alex in the blink of an eye. “Take this.”

She held out an overly large digitally faced wrist watch to Alex.

“A signal watch? Really?” Alex deadpanned, taking it in her hand. “I doubt Maggie’s going to turn out to secretly be an axe murderer, Kara.”

“You don’t know!” Kara argued, stubbornly. “And you are always and forever telling me that, ‘it’s better to be safe than sorry.’ Wear it, please? Then you can contact me if you need me and I won’t be so worried.”
Alex hesitated for a moment, turning the watch over and over again in her palm. It looked like a standard smartwatch. Leather wristband and blank black screen face. The only difference was a tiny silver button on the right side, which would easily go unnoticed by most people. Kara looked at her with puppy dog eyes, lower lip jutting out into an expression Alex had never been able to refuse.

Alex sighed in defeat, “Alright, I’ll wear it, but I really don’t think I’ll need it.”

“Yay!” Kara squeaked, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Have a great time tonight!”

“Wait,” Alex said, reaching for Kara’s arm as she started to float away. “Where are you going?”

“To my human job. CATCO worldwide reporter Kara Danvers reporting for duty!” Kara said, mock saluting Alex. “Talk to you later.”

Then Kara was gone and Alex found herself staring at the watch in her hands again wondering how she was going to get through her evening with Maggie without making a fool of herself then wondering when in the hell Kara had found the time between her two lives to have signal watches mass produced.

GOOOOOOOO

Gotham City—August 1915

As far as criminal trials went, the third session in the case of The People of Gotham County v. Kurt Robbins and Wilmer Watkins had certainly opened with a show stopping performance—literally.

The trial was adjourned early that day and—though the case had only re-adjourned two days earlier from the opening statements—the next court session was set for a week away. If the intent was to be for the jury and reporters in that room to forget Kate Spencer’s speech, Maggie didn’t think that would be possible. She’d not been in Addams Square that day or in the park nearby—though it had been a Saturday and many families were out enjoying the sunshine by playing badminton, tossing horseshoes, and picnicking—but living and working near the East End, it was impossible for Maggie not to have been called to the scene.

The fire was under control by then and all that was left was a charred out tower, a horrified mob of
on-looking Gothammites being kept back by uniformed officers, and the bodies of the poor women and men—some of them still smoking—that the police were picking up and setting side by side in the square with reverence. Though the CEOs were currently on the line for manslaughter—there hadn’t been anything for a homicide detective to do on the case at the time—yet Maggie and Bartlett had volunteered to sub in for some of the patrol officers when they grew too green or pale to be able to carry on with their gruesome tasks.

Everything Kate Spencer had said had been true and—though Maggie had been there that day—she hadn’t known this was the trial Toby had been slated to attend and she’d not been ready for the emotional repercussions being faced with the losses of that day would bring back. So, Maggie had descended the stairs on McCourt Street, knocked on a locked wooden door, and entered Mollie’s—the only bar in the city that catered to open lesbians and gay men and everyone in between. The fact that it was underground and had two ex-soldiers as door guards was just an added bonus that had come in handy more than once when one kid or another had been fleeing their tormentors and been welcomed in by the stalwart no-bullshit Mollie Malone.

Mollie was a middle aged woman who’d been born in Cookstown, County Tyrone, Ireland, could joke about surviving the coffin ships over the Atlantic, and liked to say fondly that she took in strays of all creeds and that the only things Irish about her place were the Whiskey, a framed portrait of Hugh O’Neill over the bar, and herself. But for all her good-heartedness, if you caused trouble in her bar for any reason, Mollie would throw you out on the pavement herself and you’d never be allowed back in. Aside from the discipline, Mollie’s was indistinguishable on the inside from any other saloon in Gotham open exclusively to men, only it was open to the persecuted, the oppressed, and those without friends or families who then made a citywide family of their own—one that transcended language, cultural identity, skin color, and sexuality.

“Aunt Mollie,” as she was known, was the beloved figurehead of that hangdog community and—like other saloon keepers in the city—Mollie would do things for her patrons that weren’t on the drink menu such as collect their mail for them if there was a patron who didn’t feel particularly safe being themselves in their own home and for those who—like Maggie—had been disowned by their families, she offered free beds and hot meals in her lover’s boarding house to all who needed them in exchange for a few hours of voluntary work at the bar or the boarding house to pay the fare.

To those who depended upon her, Mollie was a Saint. To those who’d been thrown on their keisters by her for whatever reason, she was the living incarnation of the shillelagh-hugging immigrant Devil caricaturized in urban newspapers. To Maggie, she was simply Mollie and Mollie had adopted Maggie as easily as any of her other wayward charges. When Maggie had started to feel comfortable enough, she’d told Mollie that her great-grandfather—Ignatius—has been born in County Tipperary before he’d been brought by his parents to America to escape the Great Hunger. After a few unanswered questions and short answers, Mollie must’ve figured that Maggie might not have the best relationship with her family and had stopped using her surname altogether—calling her instead just by the Irish variant of her name “Máiréad,” or “Tipp,” or “The Fine Lady of Tipperary,” whenever Mollie was in particularly fine fettle.
It made Maggie feel oddly special—to have a nickname bestowed by someone who wasn’t trying to insult her or create a semi-fictional hero out of her for a newspaper headline—but by someone who regarded her fondly and respectfully like Maggie’s Aunt Tilda used to. They weren’t actually that different from one another—Tilda hadn’t been Irish, true, and Mollie was a bit more buxom—but the way both of them had gone out of their way to accept Maggie for who and what she was remained the same and Maggie was grateful for them both.

Tonight though, all Maggie wanted to do was forget everything she’d heard and been through that day and she’d found that the only way to do that in Gotham city which wasn’t illegal was with a good single malt bottle of Scotch so she’d staked out her usual seat at the bar. Her rubber soled shoes immediately found purchase on the brass foot rail, allowing Maggie to hoist herself up into a chair that was just a little too tall for her to conquer herself without becoming the brunt of someone else’s laughter. Once she was comfortably settled, she leaned her elbows against the bar’s polished oak surface and cradled her face in her hands, allowing the light from the bright—if not sporadically placed—electric ceiling bulbs to be kept at bay from aggravating what was sure to be another painful headache brewing in Maggie’s head.

“Has that bloody blonde banshee done your head in again?”

Maggie chuckled, immediately feeling the tightness in her chest ease and the ghastly specters of corpses—most of them bleeding out of the mouth or ears or burned too much to be identified—gave way at the sound of the slightly annoyed yet concerned raspy accented voice. Maggie pulled her head out of her hands, flinching at the knot of pain that had begun to throb between her eyes as the brightness of the lights came back into view.

“Toby did help to facilitate the shit show of a day I’ve had, but believe it or not, she wasn’t the cause of it this time,” Maggie replied numbly, nodding gratefully as a highball glass with a double shot of Scotch was slid towards her without preamble.

“I’ve known that girl was trouble since the day she first set foot in my place. I thought about driving her off when she caused a squabble between two previously well behaved girls of mine, but my Kiki stopped me before I could throw her out on her arse. Now, I wish to Christ she hadn’t. Just look at the state of you.”

Maggie looked down at her rumpled three piece suit, noting the few buttons that’d popped free of their holes at some point, the paleness of her reflection in the mirror-like shine of the oak, and the slight shaking of her hands as they tried to pull the Scotch glass closer without spilling it. Suddenly, Maggie regretted taking the B train into the Bowery instead of heading home to her own apartment. The ache in her head doubled and felt like someone was trying to chop her skull up for firewood. Maggie was also reminded by her dry throat that she hadn’t drank much during the day aside from coffee and her empty stomach suddenly started to go into rebellion.
Maggie blinked, but looked back up. Mollie stood there staring at her with drawn up eyebrows while Kiki de Montmartre—as Mollie’s lover, a former artist’s model and nightclub singer in Paris preferred to be known—reached forward and brushed a soft pale hand across Maggie’s cheek in concern. Somehow she’d appeared from nowhere without Maggie noticing and that didn’t speak well to her detective skills right now.

“Es tu malade, Marguerite? Feel her forehead, Ma beauté. She is not well.”

Mollie reached a hand out to touch Maggie’s forehead while Kiki kept her palm against Maggie’s cheek so she couldn’t shy away from the touch. To be honest, Maggie wasn’t feeling quite well. She’d woken up with aches in muscles all over her body that she’d forgotten existed. She’d been tired for days and hadn’t eaten many solid meals, but hadn’t thought it anything out of the ordinary. When she was working, she often exchanged her appetite for the dog-with-a-bone mentality that allowed her to excel at what she did and working long traumatic hours as she did—Maggie didn’t always sleep the greatest. During the trial though, Maggie had noticed a consistent throbbing in her side, but she’d attributed it to the fact that the courtroom was overly warm and that she’d been squeezed in between Toby and the armrest at the end of their row.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! You’re hot enough to scald a kettle,” Mollie exclaimed, stepping back from her.

In another moment, the people chatting on either side of Maggie parted and Mollie was suddenly pulling her down from the stool into an awkward embrace.

“Get your hat, you’re coming with me.”

Maggie didn’t argue and allowed herself to be shifted through clumps of people and through doors until they arrived in the kitchen where Maggie was pushed into a steel chair against the brick wall. A girl with oddly cropped black hair paused in her washing of dishes when she saw Maggie, but went back to her task as Mollie scuttled out of the room muttering to herself. Sweat was dripping down from Maggie’s hairline and she could feel it slowly drenching the back of her neck and soaking into her paper collar.

Desperate for some sort of relief, she leaned her aching head back against the cool wall behind her and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, the girl who’d been washing the dishes was
standing wordlessly in front of her with a tin cup of something. Maggie cleared her throat to ask what the girl needed, but before she could speak the cool cup was placed between her hands and the girl was wiping her hands on her apron before returning to the remaining dirty dishes and the sink of soapy water.

Maggie lifted the cup to her lips, her arms shaking with the effort and let out a pleased moan when the cold water hit the back of her throat. The water, though tasting faintly of metal, was the best thing she’d tasted all day and Maggie found herself greedily downing every drop in the cup. Then she settled her head back against the bricks and she must’ve drifted off because when she came to again, a woman in a thin white coat was prying open her eyes one by one and shaking her head.

“It’s typhoid,” the brunette said, shaking her head. “Her symptoms are milder than most cases I’ve seen, but it’s typhoid fever all the same.”

There was a slight gasp as Kiki—who was standing a few feet away—took a further step back and covered her mouth with her hands. Mollie stood across from her, her arms crossed over her chest as she shook her head.

“What have you gotten yourself into now, kid?” Mollie muttered.

“She needs a hospital,” Leslie said, nodding to herself and then she stood. “I can have her dropped off at Gotham General, then I’ll have to make a call. Every case of Typhoid has to be reported to the Health Department so they can look into the cause to prevent a potential outbreak.”

Kiki stepped up to her, wringing her hands out in front of her. “Oui, we will help you get her settled into your auto. Is it in the back, ye—”

“Like Hell we will!” Mollie fumed. She settled her hands on her hips and marched into Dr. Thompkins’ personal space until the woman retreated a step. “I know this girl. She’s a good egg and there’s no way I’m letting her be carted off to some hospital. Those places are ‘palaces of death,’ they are. My half-brother Andy took ill a year ago. Some fever it ‘twas. His wife took him into Gotham General and the doctors there gave him quinine and pills of white mercury enough that all of his hair and teeth fell out. Imagine it: a thirty year old grown man having to gum down oat mash like a gran of three generations? It was that bad. And they never found the cause of his fever either, but it ‘twas the pills and the doctors that killed him in the end. Of that much I’m sure. Mark my words, if you take that girl away on a stretcher you’ll be bringing her out again in a coffin and she deserves a better chance at life than that. No, she stays here. We’ll put her up in the boarding house for the time being and take care of her in shifts.”
Leslie Thompkins opened her mouth to defend the hospital system, but Mollie—standing in front of her as solid as one of the walls that held up her bar—continued to stare the good doctor down until she lost her nerve.

“You’ll have to wash your hands with carbolic soap and scrub every surface in this place with carbolic acid or bleach to stop the spread of germs.”

Mollie wiped her hands on her apron, “It’s near closing time anyway, won’t hurt our pocketbooks to close this place early. Cassie, love, go ring the closing bell would you? I’ll show our esteemed patrons out.”

Cassie did as she was told and Mollie untied her apron, throwing it in the corner by the oven and then turned back around to face Dr. Thompkins, “You lay one finger on that bonny wee girl over there and I’ll give you a proper hiding, the likes of which you’ve never had in your life, understand?”

Mollie didn’t wait for the doctor’s answer, but let her words linger in the air around them like an acrid smell as she left the kitchen just as the overloud ringing of a bell pierced Maggie’s consciousness, making her grit her teeth together. When the sound stopped, Maggie felt all of her strength leave her body. She sagged against the steel chair she was sitting in and once again closed her eyes. After that, the world around her faded in and out of focus. At one moment, she heard Dr. Thompkins’ polite voice telling someone to give her bicarbonate of soda and revert to ice baths if her fever didn’t go down. Then the world was moving and chaotic and every door, every, wall, every decoration looked foreign to Maggie as it blurred by. Then there was pain and shouting and cursing and crying as she heaved the non-existent contents of her stomach into a bucket.

Minutes bled into hours and hours bled into days of confused misery and limited consciousness, until one morning Maggie awoke to sweat drenched sheets, rays of sunlight warming her face, and the curious green eyes of an attractive stranger leaning over her. She was tall and lean with a flapper’s bob of red hair ringing her head and a pleasing mouth slowly drawing up into a cautious smile.

“You’re awake,” the stranger said warmly, leaning away from Maggie and dropping down into a chair by the bed. “I’d thought we’d lost you. You know, Mollie claims she loves all of her little doves the same, but when your fever got so high we had to drop you into a tub of ice, she seemed really distraught that she might lose you or at least distraught enough to threaten whatever demons were trying to steal away your immortal soul. I don’t know much about Christian theology, but I’d bet it’d be angels coming for you, not demons.”

Maggie opened her mouth, but a pained groan came out instead of coherent words. Suddenly, there was pressure behind her head as it was lifted up slightly and a cup of cool water touched Maggie’s
lips. She drank it like a woman dying of thirst and nodded for more when the redhead asked. When she was sufficiently hydrated, Maggie leaned back against her pillows and regarded the woman who’d reclaimed her seat and was looking at Maggie with a roguish smile that was probably meant to be charming, but given their circumstances, it seemed ridiculous.

“Who are you and wh—what are you doing at my sickbed?”

“Ah, my name’s Kate. I’m one of Mollie’s new strays. My sister and I were in the bar a couple of nights ago and Mollie almost threw us out. She mistook us for bullies because we’d played a prank on a friend and caused a stir, but when our friend vouched for our good character, she let us stay, but she gave us, um, what did she call it? Penance? That we had to do. Anyway, it’s to absolve us of our sins towards her apparently. Beth’s got kitchen duty today and, well, I got you.”

“Kindness enforced by punishment, what a novel approach to patient care,” Maggie muttered, the sarcasm evident in her voice as she tried to push herself further up into a sitting position against the pillows.

“Whoa, easy there, let me help you.”

Before Maggie could retort that she had everything under control—even though every muscle in her arms and shoulders was straining with effort to lift the rest of her body—the red head stood from her chair again, slunk an arm between the damp sheets and her shoulders, while another hand grasped the back on one of Maggie’s knees firmly and lifted. The movement was slight and quick and before she knew it, Maggie was propped against the pillows and headboard behind her. The arm behind her shoulders was trapped beneath Maggie’s weight, which was causing Kate to lean awkwardly over her, their faces almost close enough to touch and eyes staring more deeply into one another’s souls than two strangers ever should.

It only lasted for a moment though and ended when the trapped arm was hastily reclaimed and the hand attached to it ran through the short bob of red hair and Kate exhaled, reseating herself this time on the side of the twin bed Maggie was in instead of the chair.

“So, are you truly feeling better or are you putting on a brave face until I leave the room? Come on, you can tell me, I won’t rat you out. Promise. Cross my heart.” Kate said with a wink, leaning her weight on her forearms which were in turn resting on her trousered knees.

“Something tells me your heart’s been crossed so many times the chalk doesn’t even stay on its mark anymore,” Maggie managed playfully, though every part of her was weighed down by bone deep exhaustion, she found herself wanting to match this attractive woman’s easy going nature.
Kate just raised her eyebrows suggestively and then looked down in a bashful way that seemed foreign to her features and it was that foreign sense of momentary insecurity which caused a geyser of warmth to bubble up in Maggie’s chest. It surprised her—this depth of feeling for a woman whose last name Maggie didn’t even know, but in a way the sincere surge of emotion was welcome. It’d been so long since she’d felt the pure and simple sentiments that colored the beginnings of love and Maggie found herself just enjoying the moment without further expectation.

“So, you’re a detective?”

“And you know this how?”

“I read the papers. Those Ponzi illustrations don’t do you justice by the way. You’re way more beautiful in person than any ink etching could make you look.”

Maggie snorted in amusement and raised her eyebrows at Kate.

“Really? I’ve been trussed up in these sheets for God knows how many days sweating, vomiting, and probably doing worse things every day. Yeah, I’m sure I look absolutely fucking stunning—a real Venus de Milo in action.”

They both laughed heartily and when the humor had left them, their smiles remained. Then their eyes met and held.

“Something like that,” the redhead admitted, her green eyes looking at Maggie as if she could see into her soul.

“Still,” Maggie replied, blushing a bit. “I’m sorry you were put on invalid duty. I know it can’t be fun.”

“Actually,” Kate said, her face turning such a deep red that it almost matched her hair. “I’ve found that it can be…if it’s with you.”

They both chuckled at themselves, but it wasn’t in self-deprecation or embarrassment, it was in acceptance of this warm and effortless connection they had after only five minutes of knowing one
another.

Maggie raised her eyebrows, a huge, dimpled smile splitting her face. “You really can’t help yourself can you?”

“No,” Kate laughed genuinely, scrubbing a demurring hand over her face. “No, I really can’t.”

OOOOOOOO

National City—August 2016

Maggie Sawyer hated nursing homes. The halls were bright like a hospital, but usually painted in some ridiculous pastel color that’s supposed to make the place seem more like a home and less like a medical prison. The air always smelled like a mixture of antiseptic, baby powder, and decay and then there were the residents themselves. People who’d been dropped off by their children when they became too much of a burden to care for. The ones who could, received visitors and moved freely from room to room.

Those who were bedridden, stared at their TVs or lay curled in on themselves watching others enjoy the mobility they no longer could, and then there were the people who couldn’t remember who or where they were. Their voices repeatedly calling out feebly, “Help me, help me, help me…” was enough to crush anyone’s soul and stomp on their heart for good measure. The one perk of biological immortality was—because her cells never degraded—Maggie would never waste away mentally or physically and for that she was eternally grateful.

Maggie hated nursing homes, but she visited the National City Jewish Home for Seniors at least once a week when she could. Every two weeks when she couldn’t. It was the same every time. She was buzzed in through the main doors, smiled at the receptionists, and signed in. Occasionally, she would pay the monthly bill, but then she made her way down the main corridor towards Room 3A. The name plate hanging from a piece of artsy twine—decorated with glitter, colored paints, or tied with rainbow ribbons probably by the local girl scout troop Maggie surmised—read “Timothy J. Kane.” She raised a hand to knock on the doorframe, but before she could, she heard a familiar raspy voice from the opposite direction in the main corridor she’d entered from.

“Moms!”

Maggie turned around on her heel towards the old man in the wheel chair being pushed towards
her. He’d raised both of his wrinkly arms in the air and instead of his usual single weave cardigans, he was wearing a hospital gown with a thin pink blanket thrown over his legs. As the orderly pushed him closer, he pointed at Maggie and looked back over his shoulder at the man.

“That’s my mom,” He said proudly, beaming up at the man guiding his wheel chair.

“Oh, yeah, sure,” the orderly humored him.

“No, seriously, kid. I know she doesn’t look it, but she’s over a hundred years old and she’s my mother.”

When they were a few feet away from the room, the orderly stopped to open the simple wood door and as he was walking back to the wheelchair, he gave Maggie what was meant to be a pitiful and yet somewhat conspiratorial smile and a wink that made Maggie’s skin crawl.

“Eh, don’t you be making heart eyes at her, boy!” Tim scolded, his wispy voice gaining some of the youthful vitality of his previous life. “I’ll give you such a walloping. I’m not too old to knock you on your ass, you know young fella.”

Maggie shoved her hands into her pockets and didn’t even both to try hiding her proud smile as her defiantly ranting Timothy was wheeled into his room. Then she quietly filed in behind them. The orderly helped the older man into an overstuffed red chair, draping the thin pink blanket over his legs. Maggie scowled and reached into a drawer to pull out a button down blue sweater that she tucked around Tim’s shoulders.

“He’s all yours,” the orderly breathed as he slunk past her.

Tim watched him go, glowering at his back the whole time. Once the young man was gone, he turned towards Maggie, “That bastard didn’t get fresh with you did he?”

Maggie chuckled and moved closer. She stopped in front of Tim, reaching out to lift his chin gently so she could look into his grey eyes, trying to reconcile the image of the little scrap of a boy she’d met in a Gotham orphanage what felt like a lifetime ago with this wrinkled old timer.

“He didn’t. Don’t worry about me, buddy,” Maggie reassured him, leaning over to lay an affectionate kiss on his forehead. Then she pulled a simple wooden chair up beside Tim’s lift chair
and—after taking a seat—reached out to clasp his hand between both of hers. “Besides, you don’t have to fight my battles for me, Timothy. I appreciate it, but I can look after myself.”

“I know that, but still. Never hurts to have someone in your corner especially someone who loves you. Remember, mother used to say that all of the time?”

“I remember,” Maggie nodded, briefly seeing a flash of Kate’s smiling face in her mind’s eye before she shook it away.

“He’s a shyster anyhow,” Tim raised his free hand to wave towards the door the orderly had disappeared through. “You know, these people who work in here, they think I’m crazy when I tell them who you are, but when I don’t recognize you or Hetty or the boys, they don’t bat an eyelash at that. It’s a strange thing, to be told you’re losing what’s left of your marbles when you’re telling the truth and treated like everything’s on the level when you can’t tell which way is up. I tell you, if Leo and his wife hadn’t convinced Hetty that I needed to move in here, I wouldn’t have signed my life away like I did. I hate this fucking place.”

“Me too.” Maggie nodded, pursing her lips together in sympathy, “I still wish you’d take me up on my offer and come live with me, Timmy.”

“I’d just be a burden on you,” Tim said, looking sadly up at her from beneath his bushy grey eyebrows. “I already am to my kids and their kids. They don’t say it, but then again they don’t have to if I’m shut up in here by myself, do they?”

Maggie squeezed his hand in hers and tried to keep the emotion out of her voice as her heart broke for her son all over again, “No, you wouldn’t be a burden. You could never be, you hear me, Timothy? I’ve already started making some renovations to the apartment. There’s a wheelchair ramp leading up into the loft from the main entryway, a new lift chair in your favorite color in the living room with a perfect view of the big screen TV that takes up half of a wall, and a new walk in shower bench with grab bars on either side. If you flee this place with me now, I’ll even throw in an elevator to the second floor billiards room.”

Tim lifted both of his eyebrows and grinned with as much energy as he could muster, “Ooh, fancy.”

“I know. See?” Maggie said, leaning down to lay a kiss on the top of his hand then sitting back up again, with a full dimpled smile. “Now you have to move in with me.”
“Hmph,” Tim grunted, patting her hands with his free one and leaning over the arm of his chair as if they were sharing a secret. “I don’t think my boys would like that. You know they made a big to do about calling over my ex-wife and planning a soul crushing intervention so they could convince me to move here, then I did, and now they only ever come to visit me on the High Holy Days? Have you ever heard such palaver in your life? I never thought I’d be one of those old farts who resented their kids for throwing them into an old folks’ home and throwing away the key, but then again I never thought I’d grow into an old fart at all. It’s BS, that’s what it is. I’d always dreamed I’d take after you and be young and stupid forever.”

Tim winked and Maggie snorted in amusement, shaking her head.

The constriction in her chest loosened a bit and she was reminded of times so long ago when Tim would put together his own slapstick routines and perform one or two of them for her after she got home from the precinct on hard days. She pictured a ten year old boy with straggly black locks and Kate’s French Foreign Legion cap covering his eyes as he meandered around like Charlie Chaplin in shoes too big for his feet and pretended to bump into things then fall over melodramatically before springing back up into a hand stand or a cartwheel. And then there was always Kate, leaning her hip against a sitting room chair or kitchen countertop and biting her lip to hide her laughter at their son’s antics before her green eyes would finally settle warmly on Maggie and then she’d smile that heart stopping smile of hers…

Maggie sniffed and blinked a couple times as her eyes watered. She drew in a deep breath as the tightness in her chest came back full force.

“Moms?”

Maggie turned her head away and swiped at moisture in the corners of her eyes. “Hm?”

“You were thinking about her again,” Tim stated, regarding her with a sad knowing look. “Do you miss her?”

Maggie swallowed and nodded, “Every day.”

“Me too,” Tim admitted. He paused, then continued more quietly. “I still miss them too you know, my mom and dad. I mean I’m glad they had the foresight to get me out of Europe and I’m so glad that you and mother adopted me, but I still think about them all of the time.”
“I know, Timmy, and it’s okay to miss them. They were your parents and what they did—their bravery—I know I wouldn’t have ever been able to do what they did.”

Tim nodded and reached with his free hand out to a small antique looking book of yellowed, multi-sized pages. On the front was something written Hebrew script Maggie had never been able to read. He held the book in his hand and gently thumbed the aging pages.

“I know I never really talked much about it. How my family ended up in the Ghetto in Warsaw, I mean. We lived in a town called Wyszków near Warsaw. My father was a school teacher at my primary school and my mother stayed home with my older sister baking and sewing things people brought her. I remember the siege. I remember hearing the bombs fall and being too afraid to sleep at night because the explosions shook the Earth. Then I remember arriving in the ghetto. I remember sharing an apartment with eleven other strangers I’d never met. I remember being so, so hungry all the time and I remember the bodies of school mates in the streets when they weren’t able to get enough food from outside to live and were just left to rot by the guards. I remember—getting sick. My older sister, Miriam, and I both got typhus and my mother and father bartered and sold a lot of the things they’d brought with them to get enough food to care for us. Then I remember waking up as weak as a kitten and Miriam not being there and my mother crying as she stroked my hair. I remember it was my mother’s birthday in late 1942 and feeling bad because I couldn’t get her a present so I made her this.”

Tim indicated the prayer book by shaking it a little.

“I worked on it for weeks. The paper came from posters and advertisements I’d filched from the sides of buildings, you can still see the faded ink on the backs of pages where some play or another was being advertised at the theater or when another edict was sent out for us to suffer under. I used the ink from school and wrote down the morning, afternoon, and evening prayers all from heart in the neatest Hebrew I’d ever written and when my mother’s birthday came and I presented it to her, I remember how happy it made her. I don’t think she expected good things anymore by that time.”

He paused, taking in great heaving breaths as his words began to break, but he didn’t stop, he couldn’t stop talking. “She and my father had simply resolved themselves to surviving for as long as they could I think, but when she held this prayer book in her hands…she wasn’t crying sad tears. Instead they were happy and I’d felt so proud of my nine year old self for making her smile again. Two days later, my parents bundled me up and handed me over to a Polish social worker in the dead of night. Before they let me go, my mother gave this book back to me and told me to be a good boy and live a good life and that she loved me. Then the Polish woman took me away to stay at a priest’s house and another after that and well—you know what happened then. I never saw my mother or father again and often, I wonder what they would think about the life that I’ve led since. The mistakes I’ve made and such. I think about it more the closer to death that I get. Is that normal, do you think?”

“I think it’s perfectly normal,” Maggie reassured. She lifted a hand to the corner of her eyes to wipe away the tears that blinking couldn’t now stop.
She remembered when Kate had agreed to officially foster Tim—since Maggie wasn’t supposed to legally exist anymore—and how lost and defiant and angry he’d been when they brought him home that first day. It wasn’t until 1947 when Kate’s connections had discovered that his parents had been sent to Treblinka just two months after he’d been spirited away, that they’d asked Tim—as his anglicized name now was—for permission to adopt him and he’d agreed. It’d always amazed Maggie how easily he’d come to accept them and even love them in such a short time, but she’d always known he grappled with the demons of his past.

And now she knew that he struggled still. Her poor boy.

“I’m so sorry, son,” Maggie whispered, clasping the old man in a brief hug. “For everything you’ve been through, but I have to say that I’ve always been and still am so proud of how strong and kind and resilient you’ve always been. And I know your parents would probably be too. You’re here, a testament to their faith in you and to their love. They knew you’d make it out. They knew you’d survive and they knew you’d grow up to be a good man. If you believe nothing else, believe this—they believed in you—and don’t you ever think otherwise.”

Timothy sniffled and Maggie moved to grab a few tissues from a cardboard box on the TV stand. They both cried silently for a few minutes, Maggie wiping way Tim’s tears and the snot from his nose. After a half hour, they’d both settled. Tim leaned back in his chair, exhausted, and Maggie felt the beginnings of a headache beginning to throb above her eyes. They sat quietly for a bit longer, each trying to manage their own pains.

Then Tim shifted slightly in the chair and grimaced.

“What is it? Timothy?”

He pulled his hand free from hers and moved to scratch at the underside of his opposite forearm, where an intravenous needle and catheter had been taped down and shut with a plug cap.

“What happened there?”

“When I woke up this morning I had a slight fever and was shaking. The nurse checked me over and drew some blood. I was just being brought back to my room when you got here so I don’t know why yet.”
Maggie reached out to put her hand on Tim’s forehead and waited. He did feel warmer than he should be, but he wasn’t burning up by any means. How had she not noticed this until now? Still, better late than never. Tim was her only son after all. After Maggie’s aunt died, she never thought she’d have a family to belong to again, but Kate and Tim had become her family and now there was only two of them left.

“Did they give you something for the fever? They didn’t give you aspirin did they? It’s in your medical chart that you can’t mix it with your blood pressure medication. You need warmer clothes than this flimsy examination gown. Why didn’t that damn orderly cover you up better? Are you cold, sweetheart?”

Suddenly, Maggie was up and bustling around the room, talking to herself and collecting blankets from chairs and the bottom of the bed before wrapping Tim up until he was ridiculously bundled.

“I feel like the kid from A Christmas Story. The little brother you know?” Tim commented, trying genially to move his arms out of the cocoon of knitted afghans, quilts, and at least one duvet his mother had wrapped around him and failing.

Maggie, for her part, didn’t seem to hear him. She threw open cupboard doors until she finally found what she’d been looking for: a plastic bottle of sickly pink Pedialyte. She poured a cup full and added a plastic straw before moving to sit beside Tim again.

“Ugh,” Tim grimaced, eyeing the cup ruefully. “I thought I threw out that damn sugar water.”

“Hush, just drink.”

Tim looked at her like she’d grown a second head and Maggie’s expression immediately settled into her detective face—which had also doubled as her immovable Mom face at one time—and Tim relented with a sigh. She brought the straw up to his dry lips. Tim took a short sip, then a longer one when Maggie glared at him meaningfully. He drank half of the contents before he motioned for it to be taken away. Maggie set it on a side table and sat back down.

“I’m going to buzz for the nurse,” Maggie said, pacing once from the chair towards the foot of the hospital bed a few feet away. “I can’t believe they let you come back here without doing anything else to care for you. No blankets, no fluids, nothing.”

She was wringing her hands and having a hard time standing still. It wasn’t like her and that
worried Tim.

“Moms—”

Maggie raised a finger to her lips to quiet him and started throwing open cupboard doors and drawers again. Then she returned to Tim’s side with an electric thermometer.

“Moms—“

Tim was stopped from continuing when the thermometer tip was shoved into his already open mouth.

“Don’t move and don’t talk until that thing beeps,” Maggie ordered, pacing again.

Tim just sat there, his indignant expression peeking out from beneath the pink crochet blanket Maggie had wrapped around his head and shoulders. Maggie—distractedly walked back and forth a few steps—muttering to herself about common senior health problems, infections he might have that they should be checking for, and the risk of anything else the in house nurse may’ve missed during her examination. Finally, the thermometer beeped, and Maggie stopped to collect it.

“An even 100 degrees. You have a low grade fever then. Did the nurse say when she’d have your results ready by?”

“Moms!” Tim interrupted her shrilly before she could stress them both out more. Then in a calmer voice he continued, “Please, sit down and relax. It’ll make me feel better.”

“I don’t think I can until I know what’s going on with you,” Maggie looked at her watch, then bit her lip anxiously and pulled her phone from the back pocket of her jeans. “I’m going to cancel my plans for tonight and stay here until we know what’s going on with you.”

“Like hell you will!” Tim said.

He’d shimmied out of his cocoon of blankets enough when Maggie wasn’t looking to be able to reach out and snatch the device right out of her hands before she could even begin to type out a
“You barely have a social life as it is and it’ll be a cold day in Hell before I’ll let you cancel one of the few times you’ve allowed to enjoy yourself on my account.”

Maggie held out her hand and gave him a stern look, “Timothy, give me my phone back.”

The old man’s grey eyes were defiant as he shook his head like a petulant child, “No.”

Maggie’s tone was a warning. “Timothy, I don’t play games, remember?”

The spark of resistance in Tim’s eyes died and he looked down sheepishly looking for a moment every bit the boy he’d been whenever he’d do something he wasn’t supposed to and Maggie was left to discipline him because Kate couldn’t bear to do it.

“I do remember, but I’m too old now to be sent to my room or scolded.”

Maggie dropped her arm, huffed, and slunk back down into the chair she’d started out in.

“There are you happy now?”

“Very. So tell me about this girl you’re going out with?”

“I never said I—”

“Is she pretty? I bet she’s pretty,” Tim commented, his eyes lighting up with excitement. “I can’t believe you were going out on a date and you weren’t even going to tell me.”

Now it was Maggie’s turn to be petulant, “Hey, I might’ve!”

Tim didn’t say anything right away, just fixed her with a perfect imitation of her no-bullshit-
detective look. No wonder he’s made Superintendent before he’d retired. She’d taught him well, too well.

“Fine, I wasn’t going to tell you,” Maggie admitted quietly. “Are you happy now?”

“No. Why wouldn’t you have told me?”

Maggie sighed, wrapping her arms around herself defensively. “It’s just—”

She faltered. Was she really discussing her dating life or lack thereof with her son?

“Oh, come on, Moms!” Tim argued. “I’m a grown man and you lived with me during my teenage years. Between playboy and the talks we had to keep having, we don’t have any boundaries left between us.”

“Oh, god, Timothy, please don’t remind me,” Maggie shook her head, pinched the bridge of her nose and shuddered.

The part of being a parent Maggie had struggled with—aside from always being the bad cop—was being able to explain puberty to her new son. Maggie knew what it was to wake up one day and feel different, but aside from that feeling, Maggie’s own experience of adolescence bore no resemblance to Tim’s. If he’d been a girl she could’ve shown her how to fasten a belted sanitary napkin and soothe cramps with a hot water bottle and a hot toddy, but Maggie was at a loss for what to tell a son. So she’d gone back to reviewing her medical books so she could give him an exact biological interpretation of puberty—which had scarred both of them for life. Kate had taken over then and she’d seemed to handle it better than Maggie, but for whatever reason Tim had never felt comfortable talking to Kate about private things.

Maggie was always his go to Mom and—though she secretly relished that distinction above her lover—she’d seen, heard, and found things that were burned into her memory.

She shook her head ruefully, but met Timothy’s impatient gaze head on. “I just didn’t want to tell you because I had thought…that the…’romantic’ part of my life would end when Kate died. She was my wife in everything by law and she was your mother as well as I am. I just thought it would be a bit much for both of us…”
“—And you were scared shitless,” Tim finished for her bluntly. “That’s okay. ‘I’ve got your back, Moms,’ as the kids say now.”

“Timothy!” Maggie shouted, causing the old man to cringe at the level of her voice. “Language!”

“How many times do I have to tell you not to use that word?”

“Really, Moms?”

Some things never did change no matter how much time passed by.

OOOOOOOO

It’s a temperate night—not scorching hot and not quite cool—for which Alex is grateful as she paces back and forth on the sidewalk in front of her apartment building. Why wasn’t Alex waiting in the lobby or why hadn’t she asked Maggie to pick her up at her door like a normal person? Those questions were warring with the twisting nerves in Alex’s gut for her attention. She looked down at the watch on her wrist for the fifth time in ten minutes.

7:02 pm

What if she didn’t give good enough directions? What if Maggie didn’t show up at all? What if Maggie had just been playing with her? What if Maggie wasn’t who Alex thought she was at all?

“Deep breaths. You need oxygen to live,” Alex reminded herself out loud as she sucked in air until her lungs felt like they would burst open then let it out again.

The panic in her chest receded somewhat, but it was still there and wasn’t likely to ease anytime soon. Why was she like this? Alex had never agonized over a date like this before? Hell, she’d even cancelled dates with guys in college for lesser offences than being two minutes late—mostly because she’d agreed to go out with them so they’d stop bugging her and leave her alone and cancelling on them via text had seemed like the lesser of two evils. Now though, Alex couldn’t help feeling some latent sympathy for those dickheads because she knew if Maggie didn’t show up tonight she’d feel foolish and so, so humiliated just because she’d finally listened to her heart instead of her head.

Dusk was beginning to settle on National City. In the summer, night didn’t usually come full on until closer to 10pm, but the sky had been filled with ominously looking storm clouds all day and...
now they were blocking the sunlight, causing shadows to fall over the neighborhood where Alex was. What if Maggie couldn’t make it and hadn’t been able to let Alex know? Had she forgotten? Of maybe she’d been so engrossed in her work at the station that she’d lost track of time? What if she got stuck in traffic or what if she was hurt? Should she call Maggie? Was that too forward? Would it be considered clingy or pathetic?

Alex inhaled another chest full of air and tried to relax. Failing, she looked down at her watch again.

7:09 pm

Oh, god, what if Maggie really, really wasn’t coming? What if flirting with pretty women was just all a game to her? What if all she cared about was how many phone numbers she got? No, no, that’s—that wasn’t Maggie! They’d spent the time in between the meeting at Noonan’s and this “date” texting back and forth and bantering and just having fun getting to know each other. That couldn’t have all be a lie? It couldn’t have all be for nothing, could it? For a hot second, Alex was tempted to just go back inside, retrieve the Jack Daniels bottle from beside the fridge, and drink until she forgot about this entire mess, but Alex didn’t.

Instead, she stayed where she was and took another deep breath before looking back down at her watch on the inside of her wrist.

7:13 pm

Alex looked up at the sky, not caring that her sister could probably hear her. “I should’ve just gotten pizza with you, Kara. This…this was just so stupid.”

“Is that going to be your final answer?”

The familiar voice came from behind her in the direction of the street. Alex turned around. Maggie was standing about four feet behind her, hands shoved into her jean pockets and shoulders raised nervously.

“Because if it is, we should probably just go our separate ways.”

Alex ran her hands over her face and tried to keep the emotion—everything she’d been feeling from
fear, anger, and anxiety to self-loathing—from bubbling up in her throat and coloring her words.

“No, I don’t—I don’t think that. I was just freaking out because you weren’t here yet and then I started to imagine scenarios for why you weren’t here and I—I’m sorry,” Alex rambled.

Maggie walked up until they were face to face and gently took hold of Alex’s stiff shoulders. Soft brown eyes held frightened brown in a warm gaze.

“Hey, hey, Alex—it’s okay. Everyone has freak outs every now and again. I’m not going to hold that against you. I’m also not going to hold it against you if you decide that this is too much for you right now. If you don’t want to go out tonight, we don’t have to. I just want you to be happy.”

Alex swallowed and stared into Maggie’s dark eyes. They were different than hers, Alex noted distractedly. They were brown, true, but they were a lighter brown up close than they usually looked. Almost, like an ochre color. The darkness came from a series of black lines around the rim extending inward towards the iris in the center. It was perfect like a classical work of art. And below that was a cute nose and soft, soft lips…

“Danvers? You still with me?”

Alex nodded and blushed.

“Good, because we should probably decide what to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you still want to go out tonight?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course!” Alex said, the words leaving her mouth as soon as she thought them. “I—uh—yeah, I really do.”

Maggie chuckled and nodded, starting a slow backwards walk towards her Triumph T100, “In that case, this way, milady. Your chariot awaits.”
When they got closer to the Triumph, Alex looked at the bike with a perplexed expression. She remembered Maggie saying that she had a Triumph T100 and Alex had assumed it would be a T100 Bonneville, but it wasn’t. Instead, this model was sleeker, the handlebars were shorter, the fuel tank was painted a Mike & Ike red, and the long black leather seat reached all the way back to the tail light.

“What?” Maggie asked, pausing mid-reach in handing over the extra helmet.

Alex took it without looking at it. “This…this is a vintage bike isn’t it?”

“Yeah, Triumph T100R 1972. Why?”

“It’s beautiful. My dad used to have a 1971 Boat-tail Sportster XLCH he would pull out of storage to take my mom out on dates with.”

“Sounds like your dad has good taste. Watch it though, Danvers.” Maggie said, fastening her Biltwell helmet with a side glance at Alex, “No one, flirts with my baby but me.”

Alex snorted and rolled her eyes, but said nothing, merely tightening the catch on her helmet until it was comfortable. Then Maggie mounted the bike and Alex got on behind her. Before Alex knew it, they were merging into city traffic and accelerating to get onto the freeway.

By the time they’d pulled off of the freeway and into the outskirts of the city, Alex was beginning to regret not making Maggie tell her where they were going before they left. They drive through near suburban streets until they’re on a road bending around the coastline. By the time they pulled into a middlingly full parking lot next to what looked like a creepy common warehouse, Alex was itching to get her feet on solid ground—not that having her arms wrapped around Maggie’s waist was a hardship by any means—but because she was more sure of her ability to defend herself if she was stationary.

“Here we are!” Maggie exclaimed excitedly, as she removed her helmet and set it down on the seat.
“Where’s here?” Alex asked, a healthy amount of suspicion in her voice.

“Come on it and you’ll see,” Maggie said, slowly walking backwards towards the five panel double doors with what looked like an old fashioned Edison bulb in a rusted metal hood illuminating the few feet around it in faint yellow light.

“No, Maggie, I’ve been patient, but I’m not good with surprises, especially surprises from strangers.” The last words left Alex’s mouth reluctantly. Maggie wasn’t a stranger to Alex—not really—but the whole location was confusing and surprises were stressful. Alex just wanted to know so she could know if she could be happy or if she’d have to kick someone’s ass. Either way, she was done waiting.

Maggie sighed defeatedly and walked towards Alex. She shoved her hands into her pockets as they regarded one another, then raised a hand to point above them.

“Look up,” Maggie suggested, quietly.

Alex looked up. She saw a dazzling array of stars—given that there was very little light pollution on this side of the city—and a faintly glowing billboard whose paint was peeling so badly that half of the letters in Large Marge’s Drive-in Restaurant were silver instead of orange. Alex looked back down at Maggie who was smirking proudly.

“What is all this?” Alex asked, surprised.

“Remember yesterday evening when you told me about that drive-in you used to go to with your parents in Midvale and how you wished there was one near National City?”

Alex nodded.

“Well, I couldn’t find an actual drive-in, but this is a restaurant whose entire gimmick is to simulate one so I thought we’d watch B horror movies and guzzle milkshakes. That’s, if you still want to do it? I can drive you back if not.”

“Are you kidding me?!” Alex asked in disbelief. She was still mostly awed that this place had existed without her knowledge and she still wasn’t sure how Maggie knew about this place, but she wasn’t about to retreat now. “I’ll race you.”
Alex suddenly burst past Maggie towards the double doors. Maggie gained on her and then stopped to pull open one of the double doors for Alex, practically purring, “Milady,” in a way that both made Alex blush and giggle at once. The diner staff inside were dressed in retro outfits, girls in poodle skirts and men in all white with bowties and soda jerk hats. A hostess took them back into the main restaurant area which was a huge open expanse in the warehouse where a bunch of booths made up to look like cars faced a floor to ceiling screen. And the ceiling—the ceiling took full advantage of the lack of light pollution—the entire thing made up with glass panes that showcased the stars overhead.

They were directed to a book sandwiched in between two halves of a cobalt blue Studebaker. The hostess left them and Alex gazed around, taking in their surroundings.

“This is…” Alex started.


Alex turned to Maggie who was sitting beside her in the booth and raised her eyebrows in amusement, “Eh, it’s okay.”

The menus were already on the table, stuffed between the side wall of the booth and two glass bottles of ketchup and yellow mustard. Maggie grabbed them both and handed one over to Alex. In front of them, a trailer for *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was playing on the big screen, filling the restaurant with melodramatic music and the fearful screeching of meticulously styled blonde actresses.

“Hot liver and onion sandwiches at a Drive-in?” Alex recoiled, turning the page of the menu. “No thanks.”

“That’s kind of a risky offering for Friday night date fare,” Maggie agreed. “Lobster fritters and shrimp salad isn’t much better or Spaghetti marinara and coffee. Of my personal favorite a bowl of pineapple and cottage cheese.”

“Also, steak fingers,” Alex observed with sarcasm. “Who knew steak had fingers? Did you know that? I didn’t know that.”

They both snickered like unruly children, but sobered as their waitress came over to their table to
“Hi, my name is Stacey, I’ll be your server. What can I get started for you two for drinks?”

“Cream soda please.”

“Just water for me.”

Stacey jotted down their orders and excused herself. Maggie glanced sideways at Alex and smirked.

“Cream soda? Really, Danvers?”

“It was a childhood favorite of mine. My dad and I always used to get them whenever my mom sent us downtown to get something she’d forgot from one of the stores. It was always our special thing.”

“Sounds like you and your father are close.”

“We were close,” Alex amended with a sad smile. “He died with I was fifteen.”

“I’m sorry,” Maggie said, her look growing serious. “That must’ve been hard to go through.”

Alex shrugged and looked down at her menu and changing the subject.

“What about you?” Alex asked with newfound interest. “Are you close to your parents?”

Maggie hesitated. Her first instinct was to say: No, they’ve been dead for eighty something years so it doesn’t really matter anymore, but Maggie caught herself and blurted out the familiar answer that she often gave: the half-truth.
“Uh, no, not really.” Maggie said, shifting in her seat uneasily. “They died years ago. We never were close though when I was growing up anyway.”

They descended into silence as they both gave their attention back to their menus.

“I think I’ll get a lettuce and tomato sandwich. It’s one of the only things on the menu without meat and I’m not really feeling grilled cheese right now,” Maggie announced.

“You don’t eat meat?”

“Not usually. On occasion, but I try to eat as healthy as possible whenever I can.”

Alex shook her head in amusement, “Food snob.”

“Hey! I am not a food snob. What pray tell are you getting so I can criticize your dinner choices?”

“I’m thinking the twin burger platter.”

Maggie raised her eyebrows, “Wow.”

“You know what, when it comes to gourmet burgers, go big or go home.”

“I’ll make sure they inscribe that on your tombstone.”

Alex chuckled and blurted out, “I wouldn’t worry about it. I’ll just have Kara—”

Alex stopped speaking suddenly as her brain caught up with her mouth and she realized the massive mistake she’d almost made.

—have Kara burn it in with her heat vision. It’d be cheaper and probably easier…
Had she really been so unguarded that she’d nearly given out Kara’s secret—the secret she’d painstakingly built her entire adult life around—to a civilian? It was too easy to talk to Maggie. It was too easy to say things. She needed to get back to her safe, boring life in the city. She needed to make an excuse and get out of here. Kara would run a fly-by if she asked her to or she could call a cab—

A soft touch of a hand on her arm brought Alex out of her own thoughts, “Alex? Hey, you good? You seemed like you went somewhere else for a bit.”

Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” Alex waved off Maggie’s concern and the warmth it brought to replace the panic in her chest. “I just lost my train of thought is all.”

“Ah,” Maggie nodded, patting Alex’s arm sympathetically. “No worries, Danvers. I’ve had many a train of thought leave the station without me.”

Stacey came back with their drinks before Alex could even attempt to make a half-hearted escape and she realized—with more relief than anxiety—that she was stuck. They both made their dinner orders then they were left alone again. For several minutes they were quiet, both watching the pilots in *The Thing From Another World* talk amongst themselves.

“So…”

Alex echoed. “So?”

“So, you want to talk about it?” Maggie asked.

Alex lowered her eyebrows in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Maggie shrugged and leaned her arms on the table. “You looked for a second like you were going to bolt out of your seat.”

Alex flinched unconsciously, but Maggie’s expression wasn’t judgmental or expectant like she was used to. It was sympathetic and quickly it disappeared as Maggie shifted her attention to her water, stirring the ice cubes around self-consciously with a paper straw. There was an awkwardness
between them then that felt weird resting between the two of them. The natural connection they shared was still there, it was just muted all of a sudden, and that made Alex feel guilty. She’d never been good on dates and to be honest, she’d never cared with one of her dates with some male acquaintance she’d met would go badly. It would just be another failure in the long string of failures that had always made up her love life. Those failures had never bothered her before. She usually just let them pass her by, then she would move forward, but being with Maggie was different.

Maggie mattered. What she thought and what she felt mattered to Alex, especially when what Maggie thought and felt was brought about by Alex.

“I’m sorry,” Maggie said, with more humor than she felt.

Alex straightened. Why was Maggie apologizing? None of this awkwardness between them was her fault.

“I’ve never been good at saying the right things at the right moments,” Maggie confessed with a smile that was so different from the confident one Alex was used to. “Especially not on dates. It’s like my foot is constantly in my mouth.”

Alex shook her head defiantly, “No, no you’re amazing. I just…I sort of freaked out for a minute because I…my job requires me to keep a lot of secrets for the sake of…National Security and I almost told you one of them without even thinking about it. I’m not usual so open with people and it’s so easy for me to be…open with you, so…I was just trying to mentally figure out how to deal with that. Usually—I’m not proud to say—I can lie my way out of admitting something about the secrets I have to protect, but for whatever reason, I just can’t lie to you and so I panicked. I’m the one who’s sorry, Maggie.”

“I—I—.” Maggie suddenly found herself shaking her head and wanting to confide in Alex that she wasn’t alone in feeling the way she did about their situation.

Maggie wanted to tell Alex that she understood everything Alex was saying. Maggie wanted to tell her that she too had been reduced to living a life that was in part closed off from the world. A life filled with half-truths because, for whatever reason, you couldn’t live your life for yourself anymore and ended up living it for the secrets you keep instead. That year after year of that kind of existence took its toll on a person. It was easier to pull away from family members, friends, potential lovers and sequester yourself in work or training or even alcohol. For all Maggie’s knowledge of the world and the humanity who ran it—she knew—that living their lives the way she and Alex did wasn’t a way people were meant to live their lives because it wasn’t really living at all. It was surviving and after 5,000 plus years of human civilization, didn’t people finally deserve to live not just survive?
Maggie didn’t know about herself. It was probably too late for her, but not for Alex.

Alex deserved to be able to live her life fully, without being constrained by her occupation or those who Maggie was sure loved her—like the exuberant blonde puppy sister—but didn’t understand that their lack of understanding was letting Alex put her life on hold for theirs. After their second/third meeting at Noonan’s with Bette and Kara, Maggie hadn’t been able to shake the feeling that she’d seen Kara’s face somewhere before. She’d been walking by a news stand on her way to visit Timothy that afternoon when she’d seen Supergirl soaring across the cover of Catco Magazine that everything had clicked into place for her. Alex—the passionate big sister—with a job she couldn’t talk about and a sister she was obviously close to who had a secret identity that needed protecting at all times. Living like that—it couldn’t feel good and Maggie wasn’t to ease Alex’s burden by at least a tiny bit if she could.

“I’m guessing what you do for a living is super-secret and—,” Maggie halted looking around them to the other cars to see if anyone else was paying attention to them. When she was satisfied no one was, she continued in a soft voice, “—having a sister who’s Supergirl probably doesn’t make it any easier, does it?”

Alex’s eyes went wide, her expression went from slightly guilty to guarded, and she slid to the edge of the booth seat, regarding Maggie now as a potential threat.

“How do you know that?” Alex said, voice low and defensive.

Maggie shrugged, “I’m a detective, Danvers. I detect and I’ve been doing this a long time. After seeing you and your sister in Noonan’s the other day, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I knew her from somewhere. Then I saw the cover photo for today’s issue of Catco Magazine at a news stand and I put two and two together.”

Alex regarded the woman across from her in strained silence for a minute or two, then let her shoulders drop and exhaled loudly, “I told her those glasses weren’t going to be enough to fool everyone.”

“Some people’s kids, Danvers, what can you do?” Maggie said, shrugging her shoulders again and smiling warmly to try to dispel the tension.

“Not enough,” Alex groaned, leaning her elbows on the table and covering her face with her hands. When those hands finally fell away, Alex was looking at Maggie seriously, dark eyes pleading.
“You can’t tell anyone and not just in a pinky swear kind of way, you seriously can’t tell anyone. No one you got that? My sister’s life in on the line.”

Maggie instinctively reached out to Alex, but the other woman flinched slightly and Maggie pulled back her hand.

“Believe me, Danvers, I understand the importance of keeping confidential information confidential.

“I’m sorry, I’ve just always been responsible for Kara—not that I’m complaining, she’s my only sister and I love her to death—but it makes it hard to get close to anyone when any one of the people trying to get close to me could be doing it to get at Kara.”

Maggie felt a twitch of annoyance run through her body at that remark, but it was more because Kara was an adult and actually bulletproof and Alex was still taking it upon herself to protect her than it was about being offhandedly accused of only wanted to get to know Alex because of Kara. The bubbly blonde was friendly, but Maggie wasn’t interested in her. She was interested in Alex for Alex and the woman deserved to have that in her life—even if it wasn’t from Maggie.

Alex leaned back, relaxing again into the leather seat, “Do you have any siblings, Maggie? I never asked before.”

Maggie raised her eyebrows at the sudden changed in demeanor and topic from Alex, but she was willing to move on if only so Alex could let herself be happy for once.

“Yes, a brother.” Maggie managed. “Like my parents though, we’re not close.”

Alex just nodded and took a sip of her soda, closing her eyes briefly in bliss at the taste that always reminded her of carefree summer days and afternoons spent hanging out with her father like they were the only two people in the world.

“Happiness looks good on you, Danvers.” Maggie commented, in a voice that was surprisingly hoarse. “You should make a habit of wearing it more often.”

Alex opened her eyes, but Maggie was taking a drink of her water, not looking at her. Then the detective looked around them furtively and when she spoke her voice was the same silky tone it
always was.

“Ugh! When are they going to bring our food, I’m so hungry that I’m starting to get hangry,” Maggie whined, her bottom lip pushed out petulantly until she schooled her expression into grumpiness and fell back into the seat, crossing her arms over her chest.

Alex chuckled at the uncharacteristic display of childishness and leaned her head back against the booth, regarding Maggie softly.

“Who’d of thought the stoic, badass detective could lose her cool over a lettuce and tomato sandwich?”

Maggie turned towards Alex, eyes narrowed playfully. Were they closer than they’d been somehow? Maggie hadn’t seen Alex moved from the front of the booth to resume the cozy position they’d shared before, but it didn’t seem to matter now.

“It’s not the lettuce and tomato sandwich, Danvers. It’s what it represents: food that needs to be in my belly now.”

Alex snorted in amusement, “You’re just as bad as Kara. I mean I know she had to eat more than most of us to get the amount of calories she needs per day, but still. That girl loves her food.”

“That’s the second thing we have in common then.”

“What’s the first?”

Maggie chuckled, but answered her honestly. “You.”

Alex felt her cheeks heat up at the word, but she didn’t look away from Maggie’s eyes. After a few seconds of just staring, Alex’s eyes did drop, but they dropped from Maggie’s gaze to her teasing smirk, to her lips…

“Here’s your food, ladies,” Stacey said, suddenly appearing out of nowhere and startling Alex out of her skin. “Now be careful, the plates are still a bit hot. Can I get you gals anything else?”
“Nope, we’re good for right now. Thank you,” Maggie assured her with a brilliant smile.

Alex hadn’t felt particularly hungry since they’d arrived, but now with a steaming double-pattied burger almost larger than her head in front of her and a platter full of fries, her stomach growled loudly.

“Looks like I’m not the only one that was getting hangry,” Maggie teased, unrolling her napkin and silverware.

They ate in silence, both energized by the warm comfort food filling their stomachs. The trailer for *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* was now playing, though Alex couldn’t tell if *The Thing From Another World* was over, but if it was they’d been waiting and talking for way longer than it felt like they had. To her surprise—and a little shame—Alex actually managed to eat all but ¼ of her massive burger. Maggie’s sandwich was half the size, but she’d only eaten half of it before starting to work on her crinkle fries. Alex didn’t even want to think about the fries.

“Whoa, I’m definitely not going to be eating again anytime soon,” Alex admitted, rubbing her belly and watching as Maggie popped a couple of ketchup covered fries into her mouth.

Wait, was it ketchup? It was more orange than ketchup usually was—Alex noted—and the consistency was different.

“What’s on your fries?” Alex asked, eying the blob of orange goop on Maggie’s platter warily.

Maggie chewed and swallowed, then wiped her hands on the napkin in her lap before reaching nonchalantly for another fry, “Hot sauce.”

Alex shook her head, “with fries?? Gross.”

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it, Danvers,” Maggie replied, wiping her hands on the napkin again and then pushing the platter away. “Definitely full now though.”

“Please tell me you aren’t one of those people who put hot sauce on everything?”
Maggie thought for a moment, then turned to Alex, smirking. “Define everything.”

“Ugh, Gross,” Alex shuddered.

They’d stayed until long after their plates had been cleared away and the last movie had started. When they split the bill between them, they were two of four people left in the place and the other two were Drive-in employees. The drive back into the city was calm and comfortable. Alex hugged Maggie’s waist as tightly as possible, not because she’d needed to or not because she was afraid, but because she could. She was almost disappointed when they came to a stop outside of her apartment building to have to give up the warmth of Maggie’s body beneath her, the woman’s oddly alluring scent of mint and coffee, and the divine places between Maggie’s shoulder blades that Alex had made her pillow.

“Danvers? You sleeping back there?” Maggie called, when the engine on her bike had been turned off and the kickstand had been put down, but the woman clinging to her with the ferocity of a kola didn’t let her go.

When there was no immediate answer, Maggie started to roll her shoulders. Alex made a disgruntled sound, but didn’t relinquish her hold.

“I could seriously sleep like this,” Alex murmured. “You’re so comfortable and warm.”

“Now I know you were asleep, Danvers, cause you’re just rambling right now.”

“No!” Alex defended, indignantly. It seemed to work until Maggie heard her yawn and started to chuckle. “Shut up, you.”

“I can’t promise anything, Danvers. You bring out the smartass in me.”

“Okay, well that’s enough of you,” Alex leaned away from Maggie’s back, getting ready to swing her leg over, but Maggie grasped her hands around her waist and stopped her.

Maggie hadn’t stopped to think about it. She’d just laid her head back on Alex’s shoulder to try to keep the woman there, but when Alex said something and she turned her head to answer and Alex
was right there—so close they could feel the puffs of breath coming from one another’s mouths—she found herself leaning closer. Alex didn’t move. For the first time, what she’d been daydreaming about for almost twenty-four hours was within the realm of possibility and Alex was many things, but a coward was never one of them. She closed the distance between them slowly, waiting for Maggie to object or move away or tell her that this just wasn’t the way Maggie saw her, but it didn’t happen.

Instead, Alex took Maggie’s lips in a tentative kiss. When Maggie leaned her head back further and deepened it, Alex let out a deep moan. A hand found its way into Alex’s short locks and trim fingernails scratched pleasantly at the base of her scalp. Alex held on and kissed Maggie passionately back, holding onto Maggie’s hips and allowing her thumbs to massage the soft leather of the jacket there. After what felt like an eternity, Maggie surprised Alex and pulled away. They were both breathing heavy, staring into one another’s eyes and wondering the same thing:

*Where do we go from here?*

Chapter End Notes

Hope this was a good read. Drop me a comment on the way out if you're so inclined.
Chapter Notes

Note: Definitely took huge liberties with history in this chapter in that I know that women didn't serve in the armies of the allies or central powers during World War I, but I can't not picture Kate Kane as some sort of soldier. Also, I know America took part in the Spanish-American war between the end of the Civil War and World War I, but I left it out of Maggie's musings on war because it was a really short conflict and I don't think it weighed as heavily on the U.S. in regard to whether to get involved in World War I whereas the Civil War changed everything for the country and was still in living memory in 1915. One last thing, the title of this chapter is taken from a song on Charlie Chaplin's 'The Kid,' which apparently has a soundtrack now?? Silent films with soundtracks are apparently now a thing and I love the music and the contradictions of that statement so, so much.

Alrighty, friends, enjoy the read! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

National City—August 2016

“So that was…” Maggie’s voice trailed off as she poured three fingers of Alex’s best tequila into two Old Fashioned glasses.

“Yeah…” Alex chuckled nervously, neither one of them willing to actually put a definition on the mind-blowing kiss that had occurred in front of Alex’s building only twenty minutes ago. Not before they talked about it anyway.

The kiss and the intensity that had fueled it had taken both of them by surprise. After separating, they’d stared into one another’s half-lidded eyes, trying to breathe and think and only really managing to do one of those things well.

What had possessed Alex to invite Maggie up to her apartment for a drink, she still didn’t know. Her rational brain was screaming at her to make an excuse and shoo the attractive detective out the door before she did something they both might regret, but every other part of Alex’s head and heart had taken up arms in rebellion and Alex had always been one to root for the underdog…

“So…” Maggie began again, the index finger of one hand tapping against the side of the glass, jostling the amber liquid within. “How are you feeling?”
Alex laughed nervously and downed the tequila in the glass Maggie had handed her in one swift gulp, enjoying the burn as it sizzled down the back of her throat and immediately ignited an inferno in her chest and belly.

“That good, huh?” Maggie observed, tipping back her own tequila and swallowing it. When it was empty she held her glass up to Alex. “Another?”

Alex nodded, handing her empty cup back over and trying not to acknowledge the shiver that ran up her arm when her fingers temporarily met Maggie’s. Maggie lifted up the teardrop shaped bottle of alcohol on the kitchen bar and admired it before pouring them another helping.

“Jose Cuervo Black,” Maggie recited from the label. “I’ve always been a staunch Fuenteseca fan, but this is really good.”

Alex tilted her head at Maggie—something that made the detective’s heart jump in her chest—and smiled that Alex Danvers signature smile before asking, “Have you ever had bad tequila?”

“Believe it or not, yes. The worst actually.” Maggie said, laughing with Alex conspiratorially. “It was when I was younger, when tequila was just starting to become more popular and several smartasses thought they—”

—could outsmart the bootleggers and the Prohis by peddling bathtub gin as tequila in back alleyways to poor working men who wouldn’t know any better…FUCK!

Maggie abruptly quieted and swallowed hard, realizing she’d said too much when Alex’s eyebrows went up in cute confusion. What was even she doing? Hadn’t she been avoiding personal relationships for over fifty years because she knew that giving herself away by accident was always a possibility? And now what? She was drinking in an attractive young woman’s apartment spilling her guts like she’d never had any secrets to keep. Maggie groaned, gulping back her second helping of tequila just as Alex had her first. She was almost as bad as an adolescent boy without any sense of danger, trying to impress the girl he liked without being able to see anything else.

Maggie looked back down to the beautifully printed label beneath her hand and ran her thumb over the slightly upraised calligraphy. She needed to leave. Right now. She needed to get out of here and go back to her safe and isolated life while she still had the chance. She’d already made enough slip ups tonight, she couldn’t afford anymore. How had she thought she’d be able to let someone like Alex into her heart and keep its walls raised at the same time? How was she so stupid?
“Maggie?”

Maggie startled and almost dropped the bottle at the sound of Alex’s concerned voice, much closer than it had been when she was sitting on the couch almost on the other side of the room. She swallowed thickly and turned around to find Alex standing now only a few feet away from her, looking for all she was worth like a pensive puppy who expected to be kicked—or worse—abandoned. It made Maggie’s heart lurch forward in her chest against her better judgment.

“Did I do something or say something wrong?” Alex asked, biting her lip nervously.

Maggie shook her head soberly and reached forward, hand cupping Alex’s cheek so she couldn’t look away, “No, not at all, Danvers. Why would you think that?”

“You just—you just went really quiet all of a sudden and I was afraid that I might’ve done something, said something that might’ve ruined things. I’ve been known to do that on dates in the past,” Alex rambled, smiling self-consciously to try to diffuse the awkward tension she felt like she’d caused. “Usually, I’d do it on purpose to get out of going out with some guy I wasn’t interested in just so I could keep my mother and my sister off of my back. But with you…I—I just really, really don’t want tonight to end. Being with you…it’s like going from spending your days in a dark room to stepping outside into sunlight.”

Alex’s deep chocolate brown eyes swirled with lines of a lighter honey brown that wouldn’t have been visible from farther away. The way they highlighted the bright hope and the equally ever present fear strong that seemed to radiate out from the other woman onto Maggie, caused the usually unflappable detective to suck in a sudden gasp of breath. Alex was staring at her pleadingly, probably without consciously meaning to, but damn it all if it didn’t push the air from Maggie’s lungs like a sucker punch and pull her in at the same time.

There was no way Maggie was leaving Alex anytime soon and she knew it.

“Tonight has been—hands down—one of the best nights of my life.” Alex confessed, those soulful eyes clinging onto Maggie and holding her captive. “Please, I just…I’m just terrified that if we stop this…if this night ends and we put it behind us like it never happened that I’m going to go back to nights spent going on obligatory dates with guys I don’t care about just so the people who love me don’t worry about me growing old alone. And then the vicious cycle will never end because I’ll go back to just going through the motions all so I can look like I’m living the sort of perfect life I’m supposed to be and…the truth is, Maggie…that couldn’t be farther from what I want. I don’t want to go back into the darkness now that I’ve seen the light. You make me feel…so much more than anyone else ever has. I’m sorry…I— ”
Alex’s words faded into a choked sob as she stepped back and covered her mouth with her hands. She felt like her chest was beginning to splinter apart from the inside out as she sank to her knees on the hardwood floor and tried to breathe through the sudden pain. What was wrong with her? Why was she panicking when panicking would only make things worse? She’d spent 36 weeks enduring Special Warfare & Survival Qualification Training right out of college while every bone and muscle in her body had screamed for her to give in. She’d had her arms and legs strapped to her sides and had been plunged repeatedly into 20 degree water until her lungs had threatened to burst in her chest from the pressure and the cold, yet she’d persisted. But now—now Alex felt like she was drowning for real and there wasn’t enough oxygen in the world to keep her afloat.

Her vision blurred as the pain and panic fed off of one another and grew stronger. She saw the dark amber of her apartment’s reclaimed wooden floors begin to move on their own and then suddenly, Maggie’s face came into view. Steady hands held Alex’s shoulders even and empathetic eyes bored into Alex’s, anchoring her to reality. Maggie’s lips were moving, words were being formed Alex could tell, but all she could hear in her ears was the rushing of her own blood. Sounds came through, faintly as if from far away.

“…breathe, Alex. I need you to breathe. I’m right here with you. There you go.”

Alex focused on the filling and collapsing of her lungs. It was painful at first, the tightness in her chest making it hard to draw in air, but after a few steady inhales and exhales she felt her shoulders begin to sag and an even calm spread over the frantically pulsing nerve endings that were trying to drag Alex back into full on panic mode. Maggie pulled Alex forward and hugged her, one hand rubbing soothing strokes up and down her back. Alex released a final breath and tucked her chin into the junction where Maggie’s neck met her shoulder.

She inhaled, relishing in the scent of whatever flowery laundry soap Maggie used and the way that it subtly complimented the slight snap of spice in the cologne that she’d chosen to wear for their date that night. As she let herself be held, Alex felt the rushing of blood leave her ears and her pounding heart begin to settle down with every inhale and exhale. Before long, she was calm again, but she didn’t want to let Maggie go so she didn’t and Maggie held onto her just as tight in return. Finally, after what felt like too soon, Maggie pulled back slightly. She’d intended to ask Alex how she was doing, but those honey brown eyes were closer than they’d been before and the detective felt herself fall into them.

Suddenly, Alex was moving towards her.

They came together like two magnets and Maggie was taken aback by the force of attraction that grew stronger the moment Alex’s lips met her own. A fire was ignited that Alex took control of more confidently than she’d thought she’d ever be able to. Kissing others had always been an
exercise in endurance and stubbornness for Alex. She’d always seemed to be kissing the wrong people—people to whom she wasn’t attracted and people to whom she’d felt like she’d needed to kiss to make a point—but kissing Maggie wasn’t like that. Kissing Maggie was like getting caught up in a tidal wave and struggling to breathe, feeling the air burn in your lungs in the best way as you were pushed and pulled in directions you never knew you wanted to travel.

But it didn't last. Nothing lasts.

With more self-restraint than Maggie knew she had, she pulled back from Alex’s mouth.

“Alex, wait. We—we need to stop,” the words came out as a desperate whisper.

Brown eyes met brown eyes as they both struggled to pull themselves out of the moment and back to reality. When Alex’s brain finally wrapped itself around what she’d just been doing, her heart started to palpitate again and the urge to run shot through her muscles like freezing water.

“I—I’m so sorry, I—”

“Alex, Alex look at me.”

Maggie was calling her again and this time they were so close that Alex couldn’t do anything else, but listen. Warm palms slid over the sides of Alex’s face and settled on her jawline.

“You’ve done nothing wrong,” Maggie reassured her. “I like it when you kiss me. I like it too much.”

Alex was beyond surprise, “Really? You do?”

Maggie chuckled and that wide Maggie Sawyer grin that made Alex’s heart do figure eights in between her ribs lit up her face.

“Yes! Do you have any idea what being near you does to me?” the detective confessed. “When we’re together I feel—I just feel so much—but the last time I felt this strongly about anyone—we both rushed into it like fools and the fallout from not thinking before we moved forward turned hurt both of us more than we knew. But you Alex—you deserve the world—you deserve a wonderful romance with a woman who’s crazy about you without the pain of a broken heart
smarting in between the warmth and excitement. I don’t want to rush anything with you, Danvers. That’s why I stopped, not because I didn’t want to go on kissing you. I really do, but we need to take a step back and talk about what this is developing between us before we can start exploring it.”

“Talking seems like the least fun thing we could be doing right now,” Alex whispered, having to clear the sudden raspiness from her throat.

Maggie chuckled, “They’ll be time for plenty of fun after.”

Alex nodded, feeling chastised, but not self-conscious enough to retreat back into herself. They were moving forward now—both Maggie and her—and Alex would be damned if she’d let herself be dragged down by the weight of her own insecurities.

“So where do we start?” Alex asked.

Maggie stepped back holding one of Alex’s hands and directed her towards the sofa. They both sat down and looked at one another. Alex was expectant. Maggie was nervous, but fortunately for them somehow finding common ground was easier done than said.

“First, we need to tackle the elephant in the room,” Maggie said. She tucked a lock of dark hair behind one ear as she thought about how she wanted to phrase the question that needed to be addressed if they were going to move forward together. “Have you ever known yourself to be… before now, have you ever been attracted to women romantically the way most women are attracted to men?”

Alex startled slightly at the directness of the inquiry. Was she ready to answer that question? Alex had done a lot of thinking since meeting the charming detective that seemed to light up Alex’s world as no one else had in her life, but that thinking had been mostly about Maggie. There hadn’t been a lot of introspection into Alex’s past romantic life. If she was being honest, Alex’s adult romantic life wasn’t something she even wanted to remember let alone examine in detail. She’d always done what was expected of her.

When her friends started their melodramatic yearnings to be with boys they found attractive, Alex had feigned the same yearnings—once evening going so far as to claim having a crush on the same boy her best friend Vicki Donahue did even though she was more of an acquaintance to the boy who worked as intermediary delivering baked goods and notes from Vicki to him in their computer class. When her friends had started dating the boys they fawned over, Alex had given it a try too, though she’d never admitted to anyone that she’d never really felt the same excitement on her dates
with those boys as she did when she was just hanging out with other girls. Boys were easy to talk to, to a point, but Alex had found everything else with them forced. When Vicki had effused about how she was planning to give her virginity to Kyle Scotes—the athletic yet acne ridden captain of their school’s basketball team—Alex had professed a similar plan with Kyle’s best friend, Aidan, who she’d been dating for as long as Vicki had been dating Kyle.

The experience had been…regrettable.

Alex remembered Aidan pulling her into the back seat of his dad’s sturdy 1998 Jeep Wrangler. The mechanics of sex with Aidan had been simple enough to master—but after all, Alex was the daughter of two biologists, she’d learned what the birds and the bees talk was actually about long before any of her peers had known that it actually had nothing to do with birds or bees—but after it was over Alex had felt…hollow…and dirty. The act had been simple enough that Alex’s first thought after the boy had collapsed over her with a squeaky groan had been, ‘that’s it?’ After that night, Alex had broken things off with Aidan and suffered a falling out with Vicki not long after, souring her teenage zest for connection with girls or boys her own age until she’d been well into her freshman year at Stanford.

Sex with the boy-men she’d gone out with in college forever after had seemed like a distasteful chore. Especially, because she hadn’t really liked those boy-men, not really. She’d only gone out with them because they’d been the sons of her mother’s friends who’d been pushed towards Alex in a misguided effort to keep Alex from spending the rest of her life alone. But Alex had preferred to be alone mostly unless she was hanging out with Kara or the exuberant girls from her Biology Honors Club. One girl had made an impression upon Alex that stood out in her memory.

A British exchange student by the name of Vera Black, a beautiful and witty microbiology minor who’d taken more of an interest in Alex than the science. They’d worked out together at the Student Athletic Center on a daily basis and gone out on “thirsty Thursdays” to the Roses & Crown every week. They’d studied together in the Green Library every weekend until that fateful day in their junior year when Vera had kissed her. Alex could remember the fear rising in her chest that had quickly turned into molten heat. The way Vera’s lips had been softer than those of any boy she’d ever kissed and the burning trails the girl’s fingers had left caressing her face, neck, and back.

Though the friendship had virtually ended after Alex had fled the reading room they’d rented out, Alex had spent months dwelling on the feelings the encounter had brought up in her and if Alex was being honest with herself—it wasn’t the first time she’d felt that way. Vicki had once kissed her briefly on a school fieldtrip to Alcatraz Island. There was an old folk tale that if you made a wish when a wave was about to hit your boat and sealed it with a kiss, it would come true. So a bunch of the girls present had kissed their nearest friends, but after Vicki had kissed her—though it had been no longer than a second—Alex had completely forgotten where she was or what she’d wished. It’d been an embarrassing moment that Vicki had teased her about all that summer, but it had also prompted a moment of lucid clarity in Alex—a realization that wherever Vicki was, she wanted to be.
The feelings given life by that short platonic press of lips had been stronger and way more pleasant than anything sex with Aidan had dredged up. Perhaps, Alex should’ve known something then or perhaps she should’ve intuited something about herself after Vera’s kiss had weakened her knees so much that she’d almost tripped down the stairs in her haste to get out of that damn library.

And now there was Maggie.

Maggie whose dark chocolate eyes made her feel alive every time they met hers. Maggie whose smiles made Alex’s stomach do somersaults and her heart beat against her ribcage until she felt lightheaded. Maggie who was warm and loving and made Alex feel like she was finally home.

“Yes,” Alex answered after she’d had some time to think things through. “I never acknowledged it to myself, but yeah there were times, I guess, where I’d felt… an attraction to other girls. You have to understand, my whole life has been about being perfect. Perfect grades, perfect job, and the perfect older sister watching over Kara. But the one part of my life that I’ve never been able to make perfect was dating. I just never really liked it. I... I... And, you know, I mean, I—I tried. You, know I—I got asked out. I just... I never liked... being intimate. I just... I don't know. I thought maybe that’s just not the way that I was built. You know, maybe it just wasn’t my thing. I never thought it was because of... the other. The... that... maybe I... I mean... I don't... I don't know. Now... and now, I just... I can't... I can't stop thinking about...”

Alex stopped, biting her lip again and looking away from Maggie as she struggled to figure out where the hell she was going with this disaster of a confession, but Maggie wouldn’t let Alex pull away so easily. She reached out and took Alex’s hand in hers, weaving their fingers together and holding on until Alex acknowledged her again.

“About?” Maggie prompted softly.

Alex met Maggie’s eyes again. She wasn’t full blown panicking right now, but she was definitely afraid. Still, Alex Danvers was a braver woman than she gave herself credit for and she didn’t pull away, not this time. Her honey sweet gaze stared right back at Maggie as determined as she was terrified.

“You,” Alex admitted in a steady whisper. “And that kiss on the back of your bike and how, in kissing you for a few seconds, I felt more... just more of everything... than I’ve ever felt with any one of the guys I’ve been with in the past. With anyone really. You... you make me feel alive... like I’m awake for the first time.”
Maggie sucked in a sharp breath, focusing on her lungs filling up with life giving air, after unconsciously holding her breath waiting for Alex to continue, but now she was finding it hard to keep doing what usually came naturally to her. Alex’s beautiful words had knocked the air out of Maggie like sucker punch. Though unexpected though—it wasn’t painful—just surprising. Alex’s simple admission threatened to flip Maggie’s world upside down in a way she’d never expected could happen more than once in a lifetime.

“Maggie…” Alex swallowed nervously, squeezing the hand still held in hers to bring the other woman back to reality. “Say something…anything…I—I’m sorry—just for—”

Alex was nervous enough that she was either on the verge of falling back into another panic attack or of taking back everything she’d just been stupid enough to admit to the most amazing woman she’d ever met in her life. She started to recant, but the suddenly firm press of Maggie’s lips against her own stopped the flow of apologetic words before they could take back all of the progress she’d made in that last few minutes.

Maggie kissed Alex like she’d never been kissed by anyone else before in her life. Maggie kissed Alex like the detective was an inferno and Alex was the air she needed to continue burning. Alex felt her face being cradled softly on either side by smooth hands as teeth nipped at her full bottom lip. As if understanding an unspoken language, Alex’s lips parted, allowing Maggie to deepen the kiss before she started to pull away altogether. They’d only been separated for air for a few seconds before Alex took the initiative and sealed the shallow distance between them again. Copying Maggie, Alex nipped at a full bottom lip and took advantage of further access once it was granted with an eager whimper.

Shaking her head, Maggie pulled back again, “Alex, please—wait—I—”

But Alex found it hard to give Maggie up. Now that she finally had her the way she’d wanted her, letting her go seemed like an unbearable prospect. Alex’s mouth shifted from Maggie’s to the offer languid kisses to first the side of her chin, then her cheek, then her jawline, and finally the hollow behind her ear. Maggie gasped Alex’s name at the final caress spurring the younger brunette on, but fingers tugging lightly at her hairline brought Alex back up to the surface with a resigned sign.

“Whoa! You’re eager, aren’t you?” Maggie said, her breath coming in short pants as she struggled to remember why stopping was a good idea.

Alex pressed their foreheads together and lay a light kiss on the tip of Maggie’s nose, “Now that I finally have you, I don’t ever want to let you go again.”
“Me either, but we need to slow down…as much as I don’t want to. I want to do this right. Besides, if we’re going to be together, there’s no need to rush into things like it’s our last night on earth. You and I, Alex…well…we have all the time in the world. Let’s just enjoy being together.”

Alex smirked and leaned forward, whispering, “Let’s.”

OOOOOOOO

Gotham City – September 1915

“Natalie Clifford Barney hit on you?!”

The musical lilt of Kate Kane’s disbelieving laughter momentarily eclipsed the accompanying orchestra of clinking glasses, talking voices, and the wobbly rasp of Mollie’s Victor Phonograph recounting, “The Mournin’ Blues” in the background of everything else. When Kate’s chuckles had subsided she gazed back at Maggie across the table from her with a lopsided grin that was becoming familiar and sparkling green eyes that turned Maggie inhibitions to mush. They’d spent the last couple of hours just talking about anything and everything, finally settling on the topic of their time spent travelling the world separately—but apparently also at around the same age.

“That old bat’s still the undisputed Queen of the Paris lesbians. Even at forty she’s getting more action than the rest of us combined. What did you say?” Kate asked, wiping away a tear.

Maggie looked down at the tumbler glass in her hands that was empty of the amber liquid it’d contained only moments before, the lack of its burning courage falling short of its earlier promise. Despite her sudden upset of nerves, she met Kate’s curious gaze head on and answered more honestly than she would’ve done had she been out on the town with Bartlett or Toby.

“I told her that I was flattered, but that I could only ever be with one woman at a time and that I only shared another woman’s bed when I was in love with her.”

Kate nodded knowingly, not letting her eyes drop from the electric connection that seemed to course between the two of them whenever they were together as if they were the only two people in existence at that moment in the whole world.

“Natalie did always consider monogamy a bit of a turnoff,” the redhead commented offhandedly.
“Still, I can’t imagine she took being turned down by a woman as beautiful as you with her usual dignity and grace.”

Maggie felt her heart palpitate almost out of her chest at the word ‘beautiful,’ watching as Kate’s rouged lips caressed and poured over the syllables like water over rock. And suddenly the detective felt herself grow incredibly thirsty.

“S—She took it well actually,” Maggie choked out, clearing her throat in an effort to regain her composure and exorcise the tremor that had found a place within her voice. The detective had to clear her throat again to completely even out her voice before continuing. “Natalie was a friend of my Aunt Tilda’s from her travelling vaudeville days and maybe one of her lovers around the turn of the century. I don’t really know for sure, but Natalie said that I reminded her of a young Tilda, ‘a tenderhearted romantic until the end who would remain forever out of her reach.’”

Kate laughed again, a rich warm sound that made Maggie smile and chuckle like the carefree adventurous girl she’d once been, not the solemn detective she was slowly becoming with every new that day she spent fighting against Gotham’s dark heart. The child murders, the body she’d found buried on the construction site her very first day, and every stab of horror and guilt at each crime scene and every trial where the criminal went free: Kate’s joy made it all fade away as if it were all part of another life.

“Well, at least we know age hasn’t impeded her melodramatics.”

“What about you?” Maggie found herself asking. “How did you meet the Queen of Paris’s Lesbians?”

Kate’s cheeks reddened slightly as she ran her hand through her short locks in a movement Maggie was beginning to associate with self-consciousness.

“Ah, well, my twin sister Beth and I had just graduated from Vassar when we’d decided to go on our own version of the ‘Grand Tour.’ We thought it was a swell idea and our father gave us the cash without either one of us having to pitch why we even wanted it to him. I think he probably just wanted his ‘little hellions’ out of his hair again. So we went onto the British Isles and eventually into France and naturally Paris before ricocheting through the rest of Europe. Most of what I remember about that trip is a haze of wine and women, but arriving at one of Natalie’s infamous Friday evening salons stands out clearly from the rest.”

Kate bit her lip and her expression grew wistful as she paused, lost in her thoughts before shaking herself out of it after a moment and continuing.
“She was just…so unapologetically Sapphic, you know?” Kate said, regaining her earlier humor. “Meeting her, I felt like I’d always wanted to grow up to be just like her only I’d never known it until the moment she sashayed up to me and told me that I was a vision of classic Greek loveliness that brought back the specter of the first girl she’d ever fallen for.”

Maggie nodded. She could relate. It was odd to meet someone so unashamedly themselves who was confident of her ability to seduce, but wasn’t arrogant or impulsive. There was a certain manner about Natalie Clifford Barney that was so natural, easy, and uninhibited that it attracted both men and women—though Natalie herself had only ever had a romantic interest in women and had never tried to pretend anything different. Tilda used to tell a story about Natalie from around the time they’d met in 1899 that summarized the other woman’s personality more accurately than anything else.

At the turn of the century, Natalie had been enamored of a famous French courtesan—Liane de Pougy, the illusive “Sultana of Sex”—but the best courtesans had their pick of wealthy lovers and—if they were good enough—they could choose whether or not to take one for a night altogether. Natalie—unintimidated—had waited until the woman’s temporary suitor had left her side before approaching her one night at a dance hall in Paris dressed like a pageboy, bowing down to her knees and announcing herself as the, “Page of Love sent by Sappho.” De Pougy was one of the three most desirable courtesans in all of Europe during La Belle Époque. Wealthy men paid small fortunes in foreign monies and jewels just for the chance of seeing her naked and yet Natalie—at the age of 23 with no money of her own—had won Liane De Pougy’s affections with little more than astute observation, a flashy costume, and the characteristic audacity that would define her life going forward.

The stories Tilda and her friends used to tell of such single minded women had given the young Maggie hope.

Coming up from Blue Springs like she’d done, Maggie had suffered a loss of self fleeing her home town as well as the loss of everything else along with it. Travelling the world with Tilda had given Maggie things she hadn’t known she’d needed. Each new city and country her Aunt took them to added something to fill the void in Maggie’s heart, but there was very little in those early days that had been able to guide Maggie to feel like she could live a life that would be true to who she was in full view of the world. At the time, women who loved other women often cloaked that love in the guise of “romantic friendship” or a “Boston Marriage,” both of which were more socially acceptable means for prominent spinsters to live and love without the stigma and legal implications of the word “lesbian” hanging over them.

But Natalie Clifford Barney had never kowtowed to the social and familial pressure of hiding who she was—even before her father had dropped dead and left her financially independent at 26—and Natalie’s own brand of boldness had inspired Maggie to become her own woman with a mind, heart, and soul free from the burdens of the world. Paris—one of the only cities where women
loving women was not illegal or looked down upon—had done the rest.

“She just said it with such sincerity and at the same time, such confident ease.” Kate continued. “I’ve lived in some of the largest cities in the U.S. and travelled widely, but I’ve never met another woman like Natalie Clifford Barney.”

Maggie swallowed the sudden dryness in her throat as she registered in the awe in Kate’s tone of voice at the memory of the woman they’d both only now realized they had in common, “Did she proposition you at all while you were in Paris?”

Again Kate’s long fingers combed through her hair, “Oh, she almost didn’t have to. If I’m being honest, I think I was already half in love with her from that first moment I met her. If she’d asked me to do a handstand in front of a room full of people without any drawers on, I would have done it without question.”

Maggie found it suddenly painful to speak, “And? Did the Her Majesty seduce you?”

It was meant to be a teasing remark, but the words had left a bitter taste in the brunette’s mouth that was hard to swallow back down. Mercifully, Mollie came around at that moment with a bottle of Four Roses and filled Maggie’s tumbler nearly to the brim when she got a good look at her nervous pallor.

Kate—who never missed anything if she could help it—raised a critical eyebrow at the amount of alcohol Maggie had been served.

“Being a bit liberal with the bourbon tonight, aren’t you, Mollie?”

“I’ll not let myself be told how to run my own place by the likes of you, Katie Kane,” the middle aged woman snapped, “By Jesus, I won’t.”

Mollie gave Kate a look that could’ve curdled fresh milk to back up her words and the younger redhead, appropriately chastised, looked down at the hickory tabletop without any other objection. Maggie smirked at the sudden change in Kate. As much as she felt like self-consciousness wasn’t a look Kate was meant to wear, it was nice in a way to see the usually confident woman at a loss for words once in a while. Kate was younger than Maggie by only two years, but that eagerness to please and need to impress had popped up in Kate more than once in the times they’d met since Maggie had recovered from Typhoid. It was endearing, almost…adorable…to see Kate give up the
pretense that she knew everything there was to know about the world and then some in the face of Mollie’s no nonsense demeanor.

“Pay her no mind, girl, you drink that all up. You need to build up your strength so the next fever that comes ‘round takes one look at you and runs for the hills,” Mollie said, patting Maggie’s shoulder in what might’ve been a motherly gesture had it not been so forceful.

When Mollie had marched off to serve other patrons, Kate cleared her throat and lifted her green gaze from the tabletop to meet Maggie’s. The brunette reached for her newly filled glass and chugged the whiskey in it, then began to cough as some of the heady amber liquid dripped a trail of fire down into her lungs. If she could’ve breathed, Maggie probably would’ve dropped dead from embarrassment, but as it was, choking and sputtering was all she had the energy for. Kate’s worried voice easily reached her ears.

“Are you alright? Shall I call for someone?”

Maggie couldn’t bring herself to speak, but waved Kate’s concern off as well as she could as she sucked in shallow breaths. There was relative silence between them as the detective struggled and Kate watched her to make sure she regained her equilibrium enough to survive the night.

“In answer to your question,” pale fingers were raking through that red mop of hair again. “No, I didn’t give into the amorous advances of Mademoiselle Barney. I likely would’ve done so had I been on my own, but Beth was weary of Her Majesty right from the word ‘go’ and Beth and I are basically two sides of the same coin so if she has reservations, there’s usually a reason worth heeding. Turned out for the better really. Like you, I’m too possessive to be anything other than a one woman, woman and that Natalie can neither understand nor abide in her lovers.”

Maggie nodded, her throat still burning from the alcohol, “You joined up I take it?”

The detective gestured towards Kate’s colorful uniform. The redhead wore a dark blue stiff collared tunic with a scarlet pair of trousers and knee high shined boots. The cuffs of the tunic were embroidered in scarlet thread and Maggie would’ve bet money that Kate had had Brooks Brothers tailor her own unique design onto the dashingly flamboyant outfit of a French Foreign Legion officer. Maggie knew of no European army that was drafting women, but she also knew that the French had suffered horrendous losses since the war started in 1914. Perhaps, they’d opened up their ranks to anyone who was willing to fight, male or female?

Kate nodded, “French Foreign Legion. Fourth Women’s Marching Regiment. I enlisted with a few kindred spirits because I can’t consciously keep out of the fighting when there are so many people
suffering over in Europe because of the Kaiser’s imperial ambitions and overall poor diplomacy all around.”

Maggie moved to take another sip of her drink, but thought better of it at the last minute.

Since the sinking of the Lusitania in May, tensions over the conflict in Europe had escalated for Americans on a personal level. Families were divided on whether America should step into the breech or linger on the outskirts as a mere spectator to the carnage. Even Maggie and Bartlett had differing opinions on the war and what it meant to the U.S. Bartlett maintained that there was an ocean between America and the Kaiser and that made the war in Europe a European conflict that didn’t involve them. However, Maggie was of the opinion that neutrality was an untenable lie and that they would eventually have to take up their share of the burden or watch Europe collapse inward upon itself.

She could see why Kate and her friends had joined up rather than sit on their hands like the politicians in Washington and do nothing. Maggie had actually considered joining in the fray herself before she’d arrived in Gotham. In her youth, she’d loved France best out of all of the countries she’d lived in abroad and many young liberal minded Americans like herself shared that love and were willing to sacrifice their lives for it. A few of Maggie’s university friends had signed up to serve as ambulance drivers or nurses at the Front, but Maggie hadn’t been able to force her hand to sign her life over to the cause.

Did that make her a coward?

Maggie was 21 years old. She’d been lucky enough to see more of the world than most people were able to in a lifetime. She’d boarded the La Provence in New York with Aunt Tilda a few months after leaving Blue Springs by train. During the weeklong journey across the Atlantic, Haley’s Comet had been visible in the sky above them. Aunt Tilda had said it was a sign that the past was dead and their future was in the making. And it had felt like it was true. Maggie had left one life behind and began another in a faraway place. By the same metric, leaving Paris in the wake of the German army’s assault on Liège with Aunt Tilda dead and buried behind her had felt like a major defeat for Maggie.

She’d arrived back in New York again alone and directionless and—in some ways—it felt like she’d never left the States in the first place. Truly alone for the first time, Maggie had known far less than she’d needed to know about surviving on her own in her home country and she’d known even less about war.

The most she’d come into contact with the concept of War were the reports coming out of Belgium in Hearst’s newspapers about massacred civilians and demolished towns. And then there were the family stories her father had used to tell Maggie and Dominic about his father’s part in the four-
year War Between the States. Maggie’s grandfather had been killed outright fighting for the Union at Shiloh and her great-uncle had lost a leg to gangrene on the same battleground before returning home to marry his brother’s widow and raise his brother’s children as his own—Maggie’s father among them.

The Sawyer family story wasn’t unique in its level of tragedy. Every family in the country had stories like hers. In that dreaded War to Preserve the Union, Death had entered the lives of the average person on a scale that could neither have been imagined nor prepared for. Historians since had estimated that two and a half percent of the overall population of the United States had died in the few years between 1861 and 1865. Bones still littered farmer’s fields and main roads in the lower Northern and main Southern States where the fighting had been fiercest. So many soldiers had been killed on both sides that a National Cemetery had been founded on the grounds of the estae belonging to the leader of the defeated Confederate Army to house them into eternity. Old men and women—who’d served in secret—still wore their uniforms with pride during local festivals.

Unmarked mass graves were still being turned up every season by plows fifty years after the final shot had been fired, bones and clothing mixing with the soil of a new century and—for the first and only time—America could now boast having a president in office that had come of age in a country that had lost a war. The conflict in Europe was dominated by a much darker shadow that colored everything closest to home in shades of somber grey underneath the clouds remaining from the last great war America had committed itself to.

Perhaps, Maggie wasn’t a coward for not enlisting given all of those fucking givens, but she would never be able to claim later that she’d been brave in anyway either. She would never be able to give that “last full measure of devotion” that President Lincoln had made famous in his address honoring the dead still being buried in droves on the battlefield at Gettysburg one chill autumn day.

But bold and beautiful souls like Kate could give that last full measure and the thought of Kate—amazing, vibrant, witty, gorgeous, heart stoppingly kind Kate—caught in a haze of bullets and cannon fire filled Maggie with more fear than she’d ever felt at one time in her life.

In the interim silence that had settled casually between them, Kate had pulled a pack of Chesterfields from the breast pocket of her tunic and struck a match with her thumb. She lit the cigarette clenched between her teeth and drew on it until the tip glowed bright orange. Maggie remained quiet, still debating with herself internally while Kate drew on her cigarette and studied her. She watched Maggie until enough ash had accumulated on the tip of her cigarette to need an ashtray, in no apparent hurry to rush the other woman in light of the revelation she’d dropped on her as though she were piloting an airship over an enemy munitions factory.

“Are you afraid?” Maggie asked eventually.
“Terrified,” Kate admitted calmly, tapping her half smoked cigarette on the rim of the ashtray between them and meeting Maggie’s suddenly somber gaze. “Would you be?”

Maggie nodded, holding Kate’s green eyes with a possessive earnestness. “I’m afraid for you.”

Kate swallowed and looked back down at the tabletop, “You shouldn’t be. I’m not as brave as people take me for. I’ll probably be cowering behind the lines somewhere. You know, it’s ironic, my dad’s a colonel in the army. He was a member of the 1st “United States Volunteer Calvary and rode with Teddy Roosevelt in Cuba. My grandfather was a Union officer who’d suffered through the loss of most of his regiment in the Battle of Seven pines. Before him my great-granduncles served in the war with Mexico and before that, our ancestors fought in the War for Independence against the British. For as long as there have been Kanes on this continent, at least one of us has fought in every war and come home with honors, but I have a feeling that I may be the first Kane to die without distinguishing myself in any way.”

A horrified expression fell over Maggie’s features and suddenly she was angry with Kate for being drunk enough to be maudlin over something as serious as the loss of her own life.

“Don’t you dare say that!” Maggie hissed lowly, cold fear replacing the warmth she’d been feeling since they met outside Mollie’s hours ago.

“It may well be true,” Kate sulked, her usually self-assured personality taking shelter under a canopy of self-doubt as she slouched more against the chair back than any soldier would be allowed to even at ease.

“It might,” Maggie conceded more calmly, having taken a breath to steady herself beforehand. “But you can’t despair. The worst thing you could possibly do is to give up hope of coming back before you’ve even crossed the Atlantic.”

Kate shook her head, snuffing out her cigarette in the tray between them and straightening up in her chair, “You misunderstand me, Maggie. I’m not giving up. On the contrary, I fully intend to give my all in the service of the French people, but if the reports coming from the battles being fought on every front over there are even remotely true, then this may be the most destructive war ever fought in human history. The papers are saying millions have died already and it’s only been a year and a few months since the action started. I can’t be blind to the danger I’ll be facing. Regardless of what happens though, I’m determined to live every moment of the rest of my life as if it will be my last because it very well could be.”
Maggie snorted, her jaw quivering as she realized the real reason Kate had wanted to go out with her on such short notice, “Is that why you asked me out tonight of all nights?”

Kate pulled her shoulders back until her posture was as stiff as an arrow and that confident demeanor had returned to her face as smoothly as if it had never left.

“In part, yes,” Kate admitted. “You know that I’ve wanted to spend more time with you ever since the day we met. Every time we’ve seen one another downtown or in Robinson Park since then, I’ve found it difficult to leave your company and—after I enlisted—I only just realized why. I’ve fallen under your spell, Maggie. I think about you all of the time when I’m not with you. I know it sounds crazy, but it’s not. Without you I can’t sleep, I can’t eat, I can’t focus on the simplest of things…I want you—all of you—and I knew that I couldn’t get on a boat in a few days that might be taking me to my death for all I knew without seeing you again.”

Maggie’s cheeks heated up and she ducked her head shyly as the rest of her body felt like it was igniting from the inside out. She wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d spontaneously combusted right then and there and Mollie would have had to pull out that brass fire extinguisher she complained that she’d had to buy to comply with the new city standards. Maggie could honestly say in that moment that she’d never been happier to almost be turned into a human flame than in that moment, sitting across the table from a woman who’d kindled a fire in her hotter than kerosene and if Maggie didn’t act quickly—there might be nothing of her left.

“I’m…glad,” Maggie admitted, the words feeling foreign on her dry tongue as she struggled to form them with all of the moisture in her body being focused elsewhere. “I wouldn’t have wanted you to leave without…seeing me either or…vice versa.”

They laughed together, dispelling some of the tension of the moment and taking the edge off of their nerves.

“Let’s make a toast,” Kate said, smirking as she held up her fifth glass of Sherry that she’d been ignoring for the last hour, “To love.”

Maggie felt a strange sense of euphoria rise in her chest to join the blood rushing in her ears as that lopsided grin caught her by surprise and hear heart nearly burst out of her overheating body with joy.

She raised her still nearly full tumbler glass in a shaking grip.
“To love,” she echoed breathily.

They finished their drinks without much talking after that and left Mollie’s hand in hand. They’d walked the few blocks to Maggie’s apartment—stopping to trade heated kisses every so many feet—and had both fallen into Maggie’s bed together when they reached her home as naturally as if they’d been sharing it for years. Maggie was overwhelmed—but in the best way. She’d never felt so much for one person…so much everything and Maggie’s heart and her body had taken over where her brain would’ve usually intervened to keep her on her feet.

She gave everything in her heart over to Kate and had received Kate’s depth of feelings in return. They’d loved long into the night, hands and mouths and limbs coming together in a language of pleasurable devotion that was older than time itself. The moon was riding low in the sky when their passion began to fizzle out and give way to mutual exhaustion. Maggie started to drift away, her muscles limp and her desire satiated enough for her to think clearly again, though she could only manage one spoken word.

“Stay,” she whispered, staring up into those green eyes that shone in the dark bedroom like the only stars in her sky.

Kate didn’t speak, only nodded sharply once and kissed Maggie deeply as if sealing an unspoken promise between the two of them. They’d both fallen easily into sleep after that. When Maggie woke up to golden sunlight streaming in through her bedroom window the next morning, she’d found herself—once again—unbearably alone.

OOOOOOOO

National City—August 2016

Coffee lost some of its charm on mornings off when it wasn’t Irish or at least that was Maggie’s opinion. Bette’s love of spiked coffee hadn’t developed in a vacuum.

Maggie was standing in Alex’s cozy kitchen, stirring a spoonful of single malt whiskey into the cup of black coffee she’d just poured herself. A couple of egg white omelets sputtered in a pan on the gas stovetop. Alex was still asleep in her bed. After watching a few movies together, Alex had fallen asleep in Maggie’s lap and Maggie had dutifully carried the younger woman to bed and tucked her in. Not wanting to make Alex feel the same slurry of unsettling emotions that Kate had made Maggie feel on that first morning so long ago, Maggie had slept on Alex’s sofa and made sure to wake up before the other woman.
Making breakfast had just followed naturally after that. Maggie walked over to the stove and skillfully flipped the omelets onto a plate she’d fished out of the cupboard. She was about to start looking for a tray or something to serve them on when she caught a glimpse of disheveled brown hair out of the corner of her eyes.

“You make breakfast too?” Alex observed through a yawn.

Maggie grinned when she saw Alex in her rumpled clothes from the day before with an Alfalfa cowlick making the short locks in the back of her head stick up in static disorder, “Only for people I like. Count yourself fortunate.”

“I do,” Alex admitted with a wink.

She stretched her arms above her head languidly, causing the black t-shirt she was wearing to ride up, exposing the cream expanse of a smoothly muscled abdomen for a moment before the stretching ended and the peek of tantalizing skin went away. When Maggie looked back up she was met by honey brown eyes shining with amusement.

“In fact,” Alex said, circling the counter with a playful slowness. “I think I just may be the luckiest woman alive.”

“Oh?” Maggie asked, moving the plates over to the island counter, pushing one towards Alex who’d stopped to stand beside her. “And why is that?”

Alex shrugged, batting her eyes coyly. “Who else has the most amazing woman in National City making them breakfast?”

Alex’s lopsided smile, smitten with a kind of unself-conscious joy Maggie hadn’t seen a lot on the FBI agent very much since they’d met, made her appear younger and lit up her face brighter than a 1000 Watt light bulb.

“Nice, Danvers, nice,” Maggie said, trying to ignore the burning blush she was sure was blazing its way across her face and neck as she slid a cup of freshly poured coffee towards Alex.
Alex took the cup of coffee gratefully and looked around at her seldom used kitchen, “I’m actually surprised you were able to find anything to cook in my fridge.”

She couldn’t remember the last time she went grocery shopping to be honest.

“I didn’t,” Maggie admitted, sipping at her black coffee happily. “The bodega on the corner had the few ingredients I needed though.”

Alex lifted an eyebrow. “Bodega?”

Maggie rolled her eyes, “The corner store. I forgot you call it something different here. I’m always calling convenience stores ‘bodegas’ in my head. Symptom of living so long in Gotham I guess.”

Alex squirreled the bit of background info away in her mind for contemplation on a later day.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” the younger brunette apologized, her cheeks going a ruddy shade of pink.

Who’d have thought Kara would’ve been right about her needing to keep her fridge stocked ‘just in case’ she ever had company other than her over?

“My mom and sister are always after me to eat out less, but the truth of it is that I’m not home often enough to justify nearly burning the place down trying to cook myself something I can easily send out for or grab on my way home,” Alex confessed with a shrug.

Maggie shook her head, fetching forks from a neatly labelled drawer near the sink, “Don’t apologize to me, Danvers. I understand all too well what you mean. Your mother and sister seem sort of…critical of you. Are they like that a lot or am I misunderstanding?”

Alex’s first instinct was to grow indignant at Maggie as the other woman set a fork down on the side of her plate and watched her with those soulful eyes that seemed so much deeper than any other pair of eyes Alex had ever stared into. She wanted to defend Kara and her mom. Who didn’t criticize their family members every now and again? It wasn’t like Eliza and Kara mean anything by it really, they just cared about Alex too much to remain silent when they thought she was… living in a way she shouldn’t?
Now that she really thought it through, that argument didn’t really hold water, but still Alex wouldn’t fault her family for caring and she wouldn’t let anyone else fault them if she didn’t have a problem with it. Luckily, Maggie’s soft voice soothed Alex’s warring feelings.

“I’m not judging, Danvers,” Maggie corrected, moving to run a finger gently up and down Alex’s forearm. “Just observing. Let’s change the subject. Do you even like omelets by the way? ‘Cause I just sort of guessed and hoped.”

Alex nodded, letting out a breath, finally feeling at ease again, “they were one of the first things I learned to make for myself believe it or not. I used to make them so much when we were in school that Kara developed an aversion to eggs for a while. Did you remove the yolks when you made these?”

Maggie chuckled, watching Alex suspiciously poke at the more healthy breakfast with her fork, “It’s better for you that way, Danvers. The yolk is all cholesterol and—”

“—flavor,” Alex finished for her.

“—heart disease,” Maggie amended.

Alex raised her hands in the air in a placating manner and quipped with a snicker, “Well, you only live once right? Why not live a little then?”

Maggie felt the carefree joy that had been growing in her all morning evaporate all at once and it was hard to keep the strained smile on her face as a hollow ache took its place. Alex didn’t seem to notice the change in her though as she dug into her breakfast, her eyes going wide after the first bite.

“This is really good!” Alex effused, “but also hot!”

Alex blew into her hands, exhaling and inhaling air over her seared taste buds. Maggie shook her head and chuckled. Why not live a little, indeed?

OOOOOOOOO

*Gotham City—October 1915*
“Maggie!”

No answer. The loud banging of a fist on old wood reverberated through the fifth floor corridor of the apartment building.

“Margaret Ellen Sawyer open this damned door!”

Again no answer.

“Goddamn it, I know you’re in there!” The familiar voice berated. “I stopped by the station and Bartlett said you’d called in sick the last few days and you never call in sick. Hell, the end of the fucking world could be at hand and I’m convinced you’d still be at your desk taking care of bureaucratic trivialities.”

The silence only aggravated the voice further. What on Earth was Toby Raines supposed to do at this point? Keep shouting until the neighbors called in a noise complaint and the new love of her life had to come bail her out of the jail for disturbing the peace? No. There was only one solution that was sure to get results: threats. If investigative reporting had taught Toby anything it was that threats worked best when it came to leveraging people into doing what you wanted them to.

“Maggie! I swear to whatever stupid gods built this screwed up world, if you don’t open this door right now then I’m going to march up and down this floor and shout for all the world to hear that Margaret Sawyer is willing to sleep with any unmarried man in this building beer belly, back hair, lack of hygiene and all. I’m not joking. I’ll give you three seconds. Three. Two…”

Before the bullheaded blonde reporter could reach ‘one’, the sound of the Victorian lock to Maggie’s apartment door could be heard clicking open from the other side. Toby tried the small bronze door knob and was relieved when it twisted open on her first try. She was immediately met with a breath of stale air hazed with so much cigarette smoke, Toby was almost convinced the place had been on fire and she just hadn’t been able to detect it from the other side.

But even mired such as she was in whatever mysterious mood that had overtaken her, Maggie was too fastidious to let her apartment burn to the ground, if only to protect the lives of everyone else who lived in the turn of the century tenement building with her. But that care for the well-being of others didn’t extend to herself, apparently.
Empty bourbon bottles lay scattered around on the hardwood floor of the sitting room which flowed into a small shared kitchen and dining space. The drapes in the sitting room were closed and the only light in the common space came from a single pane window above the stove that had no covering of any kind to keep out the light. There was very little indication that anyone was there at all. Had Toby been less stubborn, she’d have cut her losses and left, but when she heard the sound of a door slamming and another lock clicking shut, full blown anger flooded her senses.

“Son of a bloody drunken bastard!” She cursed.

Toby tossed her autumn gloves and jacket down on the singular divan in the sitting room before marching down the narrow hallway that led to the bedroom.

“Maggie, you’re on my last nerve! Get out here and face me like a grown ass woman or I swear I am going to come up with something to do to you and you’re not going to like it!”

There was a loud sigh and then Maggie’s forlorn voice floated through the painted pine door. “Go away, Toby.”

“After what you just put me through? Hell no!” Toby growled.

If the two of them had not been equally as stubborn as one another, perhaps, the exchange would have been less ear-splitting, but as it was Maggie was sure stray dogs could hear them arguing as far away as the Robbinsville River. Usually, this would’ve bothered Maggie, but she hadn’t slept or eaten in days. She felt hollowed out and she didn’t have the energy to care what anyone thought of her right now.

“Go away!” Maggie shouted back.

“No, not just no, but HELL NO!” Toby countered, smacking her hand on the door.

Quiet moved in to fill the space their angry words left open. Finally, Toby released a few deep breaths, enough to calm herself down to a more normal volume as she leaned against the door frame, face pressed nearly up against the blue lead paint, “Maggie, please, come out and talk to me.”

“No, because I don’t actually want to talk to you!” Maggie choked out.
The words were terse, but they sounded more waterlogged to Toby’s ears than menacing and that was encouraging.

“You have to talk to someone,” Toby continued. “You can’t just hole up in your apartment with a million bottles of Scotch and 10 packs of smokes then expect the people who care about you not to worry.”

“What do you care? You don’t really care about me, you never have!” Maggie said, tears carrying in her voice. “If you did, then you wouldn’t have broken my heart all of those months ago not that you were the last one to break my heart into a billion tiny pieces and stomp on it…”

Maggie’s voice was gravelly and her tone lacked sufficient energy to have any real venom behind the words, but it was still recriminating. She was hurting. That much Bartlett had been able to fill Toby in on, the rest she would have to hear from Maggie herself, but only if she could get the stubborn mule of a woman to come out of isolation and talk to her.

“Maggie, please,” the blonde reporter pleaded. “If you just open up this door, we can talk and you’ll feel better. If you don’t open this door, however, I’m going to march my red heels back down to the landing and call Mollie. You know once she’s been summoned, she won’t stop for anything until she’s ripped into you for being a self-destructive ass. That’s the deal. It’s either Mollie or me. Choose.”

There was silence again. Then the faint pop of another lock snapping open. Toby took that as permission enough to enter. She pushed the door open to a more disheveled version of the bedroom she’d slept in only once. Collars, shirts, pants, vests, and a pair of shoes had been thrown haphazardly at various intervals across the floor. Silk ties peaked over the nightstand and the bedstead like streamers on Election Day and in the middle of it all sat Maggie. Her back was to the wall. She wore a white gauze sleeveless union suit that wasn’t really white anymore, speckled with amber colored patches Toby imagined was bourbon and some other stains around the collar she didn’t want to guess at. The detective’s silky dark hair was mussed and greasy. She looked like she hadn’t left the bed in days and the empty bottles on the floor around her seemed to back up Toby’s theory.

It was worse than the blonde could’ve imagined and her imagination had always been running at top speed.

“What happened?” Toby asked, taking a tentative seat on the side of the bed in her tailored suit dress.
“Nothing,” Maggie muttered.

The brunette pulled a bottle of Dalmore 62 from seemingly nowhere before downing the remaining two cups of top shelf liquor she’d been given by Tilda after passing her entrance exams in Paris. It was one of the most expensive gifts Maggie had ever been given. She’d promised herself back then that she was never going to open it because there would never be an occasion great enough for 62 year old Scotch, but Maggie had broken a lot of promises to herself lately, why not this one too? When it was empty, Maggie threw the bottle across the room to break against the door frame and leaned her head back against the plaster of the wall with a loud thump then closed her eyes.

“If this is nothing,” Toby commented dryly, watching as stars of amber glass shattered across the hardwood. “I’d hate to see what you consider something.”

“You were right,” Maggie said in a small tortured voice.

“Of course I was,” Toby acknowledged with her customary self-righteousness. “I’m always right, but what exactly was I right about this time?”

Maggie opened her mouth, but couldn’t form the words. She tried again, and admitted in a whisper.

“Kate Kane.”

Toby’s eyes narrowed as the gears in her head struggled to turn, but her eyes widened as she put all of the pieces together: the rumors circulating through their circle of acquaintances that Maggie had been struck down by Typhoid and nursed back to health by one of the Kanes in Kiki’s boardinghouse, the excited way the brunette had turned down Toby’s invitation to reconnect after she’d recovered without giving a reason why, and the days Maggie had spent cooped up in this room with nothing but single malt whiskey for company…Jesus. It was a miracle the woman was still alive…

“Oh, darling…no,” Toby commiserated, shaking her head. She struggled to reach out to Maggie in her tailored suit, but the sleeves only reached so much. “You poor thing…”

Frustrated, Toby shrugged off her suit coat and scrambled up onto the bed in her straight skirt and flaring white blouse. She wrapped her arms around Maggie’s shoulders and lay her head atop the detective’s as the other woman began to sniff and sob.
“I’m sorry,” Toby admitted softly. “I usually enjoy being right, but right now is not one of those times. I’m so sorry, Mags.”

The brunette in Toby’s arms shook. Aside from not being dressed, Maggie hadn’t looked any different from the doorway than she usually did, but holding her now, the blonde reporter could feel the lack of her. The usually taunt stomach was caved in slightly from not eating and the boniness of all of Maggie’s usually fit limbs were testaments to her misery. Had she really only been drinking alcohol alone in her apartment for the last two days? Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, no wonder she was all skin and bones…

Maggie continued to sob and Toby held her. After what felt like an eternity, Maggie sniffled and pulled away, leaning against the wall behind them for support. One of her hands grasped at the buttons holding the union suit closed over her heart and fisted in jersey the material.

“Wh—why does it hurt so much?” Maggie croaked, anger boiling up into her tone to join the misery already there. “We barely knew each other. We only spent one night together and yet it feels like someone’s cracked me open and is using my heart for target practice. Why won’t it fucking stop hurting?!”

Toby regarded Maggie neutrally as she waited on the details, “When did this happen?”

“Saturday night.” Maggie wiped a finger across the corner of her eyes even though they were too dry and irritated to make tears anymore. “We’d been spending time together after—after she took care of me when I was sick—and that night she’d asked me to meet her at Mollie’s for a drink like we sometimes did, you know? Then Kate told me she’d be fighting with the French Foreign Legion and didn’t know if she’d come back. We drank more and more and then we came back here and made love. When I woke up the next morning she was just gone.”

“Bitch…” Toby muttered absently. “Even I know to treat the women I take to bed better than that.”

Maggie had the good sense to ignore that and move on, “And I don’t know why it hurt so bad, but after I realized she was gone for good—I just broke. It was like a vital part of me had been taken away and there was no getting it back. I know I shouldn’t feel this broken up because we hadn’t been seeing one another long, but I fell in love with her, Toby, hard. And I thought she’d felt the same for me, but if she had then why would she have left me here without saying goodbye? I’m a fucking idiot is what I am.”
“No,” Toby refuted, snaking an arm around Maggie’s shoulders and squeezing them to her in a half hug. “You’re one of the smartest, most capable women I know, Mags. Kate and Beth Kane have reputations among the wealthier denizens of our community and not good ones. They’re known for throwing lavish parties, drinking too much, seducing women in droves, and then kicking them to the curb almost as quickly as they found them. Kate Spencer grew up in the same circles with them. She told me in confidence once that their father was never around and their mother was dead and that’s why they don’t know how to treat people like they should be treated, but common courtesy isn’t contingent on having good parents. I’m proof of that. Nothing that that blue blooded bitch chose to do was your fault, do you hear me? You’ve done nothing wrong, Mags, and I know it doesn’t feel like it right now, but you’re going to be okay.”

Kate’s lopsided grin and vivid green eyes flashed in Maggie’s mind in an unwanted vision of perfection and she closed her eyes, squeezing them painfully shut to distract herself from the face of the woman who’d once made her feel so much joy and now only made her feel agony.

“How about I pop down to the drugstore on the corner, get us a couple of cold lamb sandwiches and a couple of root beers? Getting some food into you is a step in the right direction to getting you pieced back together.”

Maggie hunched over her knees, groaning as she tried to fight off a wave of nausea at the thought of food.

“I don’t think I can eat anything.” Maggie said, feeling the stomach acid already clamoring to climb up her throat at the mere mention. “I’ve been subsisting on cheap Scotch and cigarettes mostly.”

“And water?”

Maggie’s head lolled to the side as she closed her eyes. Her temples were pounding to the rhythm of her heart and it felt like someone was squeezing the sides of her head in a vice. Focusing on any one thing caused her more pain than anything else, but she had to remain lucid for just a little while longer.

“What water?” Maggie muttered.

Toby released an angry string of curses that would’ve made any sailor in Gotham Harbor proud and stomped out of the room and down the hall. Maggie nodded off and when she came too, a wet rag was being roughly rubbed over her face and neck. Then the cloth was taken away and cold water took its place splashing Maggie back into a state of semi-alertness. Her hand was molded to fit
around a mason jar filled with water until it was gripped tightly enough not to be dropped on the bedspread.

“Drink all of that,” Toby’s voice commanded.

Maggie grimaced, her stomach roiling, but drank from the jar anyway, feeling the cold water hit her like a kick in the gut.

“Ugh! Christ!”

The exclamation came from somewhere off to Maggie’s side. Then there was the acidic stench of vomit and stale urine. Toby must’ve found the chamber pot. Maggie had meant to take it down to the common lavatory and flush it, but she hadn’t been steady enough on her feet yet to do it.

“Sorry about that, couldn’t make it down the hall,”

“You owe me so much for this,” Toby complained.

The smells disappeared as footsteps faded down the hall and out the door and then came back. A bedroom window was opened and the cool air brought some relief to Maggie’s overheated skin. Then Toby left the room again and when she came back the empty side of the bed beside of her dipped down to accommodate a second weight. Maggie opened her eyes to see a tray with a large glass full of milk and a plate heaped with slices of corned beef, cabbage, and potatoes balancing in her lap. The rich smell of the beef and cooked cabbage besieged Maggie’s nose and she closed her eyes again and groaned.

“Don’t you turn your nose up at that, Mags. You’re landlady was kind enough to leave that on the rug in front of your door. Guess your immediate friends aren’t the only ones who’ve noticed your absence from public life. You need to eat and I don’t care if you can only keep half of that plate down, I’m not letting you go the way of the career alcoholic without a fight. These last few days alone have probably taken five years off of your life and fifteen off of your liver…”

“One can only hope,” Maggie murmured, feeling defeated.

She opened her eyes again and took deep breaths in through her nose until her stomach settled enough to try to eat. The first bite of corned beef melted in Maggie’s mouth and her stomach
grumbled immediately for more. She cleaned the plate and felt less nauseous than she’d anticipated afterwards.

“Thank you for everything.”

“Like I said, you owe me big,” Toby said with a wink.

They were both again leaning back against Maggie’s headboard, laying side by side. They rested for a bit longer in peace until Toby spoke up.

“Why do you still live in this dilapidated two room death trap anyway? I know you can afford better and it’s high time you blew the Lower East Side for a better locale. Who knows, it might be the cure to what ails you.”

Maggie shook her head no, “I work on the Lower East Side and I continue to live here because I never want to turn into one of those overstuffed city officials who claim to be fighting for the common people, but have forgotten what it feels like to be one of them.”

“Just don’t turn into another Emma Goldman,” Toby pleaded. “I don’t think the world could survive more than one of her.”

“You mean you couldn’t?” Maggie asked with a raised eyebrow.

Toby grinned, “That too.”

Maggie found it impossible to stop the laughter fighting its way through the heartbreak that had overtaken her completely the past few days. She had to admit, she was feeling better and that was all due to Toby. For all of the arrogant blonde’s faults, Toby could be a loyal and wonderful friend when she wanted to be. If Maggie had known then how short their time together would be in the long run, she would’ve appreciated the other woman more, but no one could’ve seen what was coming for them.

“Thank you,” Maggie said again, feeling like she couldn’t say it enough.
Toby could be entirely self-serving, but she could also be self-sacrificing too and she’d come all the way down from the Gazette’s headquarters in the heart of Old Gotham to check on Maggie when she was under no obligation to do so. That was worthy of the detective’s continual gratitude.

“Whatever for, Sweetums?” Toby asked.

She’d reached out a hand so her fingers were raking softly through Maggie’s tangled hair to message her scalp.

“For being here when you didn’t have to be and taking care of me when I needed you. I know I haven’t made it easy on you today and for that I’m sorry,” Maggie clarified.

“Nothing fun or worth doing is easy,” Toby rolled over on her side and rested her head on her hand, looking down at Maggie. “You know, part of me really does wish I’d snapped you up after the night we’d spent together, but the rest of me knows the truth: we’re better off as friends, you and me. Always have been, always will be.”

“Always,” Maggie nodded. “Though I know better than to think that your heart could’ve ever truly been mine. In fact, I’ve been hearing rumors that a certain lady lawyer has snatched it up. Is that true?”

Toby grimaced, “Damn that old Irish biddy and her big mouth!”

Maggie laughed out right, wiping away the first tears she’d shed in mirth in days.

“Don’t hate on Mollie,” Maggie consoled. “She had to catch me up on what was going on in the world after the involuntary absence my illness imposed on me. You could’ve come to tell me in person, you know. Everyone and their barber knew where I was that week.”

Toby shrugged, rolling onto her back again, “I would’ve gotten around to it eventually. When I was ready.”

“So has the devoted social justice and women’s rights warrior managed to change your mind about being a romantic partner person?” Maggie asked curiously.
Toby shrugged again, “Maybe…she…she’s taken my heart, Maggie. I honestly didn’t know I even still had one to take and—in the tried and true style of the law—that little sneak had me in her skirt pocket before I knew it. It’s terrifying—realizing that someone has that kind of power over your feelings, you know?”

Maggie sighed and closed her eyes at the dull ache in her chest, “Yeah, I know.”

She took a shaky breath, feeling the shadow of devastation loom over her again like a dark cloud.

“Oh, darling,” Toby cooed sympathetically. “Kate Kane is many things, but worthy of you, she is most certainly not. You’re well rid of her and we’re going to find you a woman who will worship every step you take in those sad little wingtips you love so much.”

Maggie raised her head and glared at the other woman who smiled up at her in the perfect picture of complete innocence.

“Watch it,” Maggie warned. “Those shoes crossed the Atlantic with me from Paris.”

“Yes, and their youthful good looks and the endless promise they represented was left behind there. Actually, come to think of it, I know just the thing to make you feel better. Get dressed. No, wait, scratch that,” Toby sprang up from the bed and rustled around in Maggie’s wardrobe as if it were her own. “Go draw yourself a bath. Bathe, then get dressed, we’re going down to Tailor’s Row.”

A pair of flannel drawers and a flannel undershirt landed in Maggie’s face. Then a bar of Wright’s Coal Tar Soap smacked her in the forehead followed by a towel.

“Ouch!” Maggie yelped. “Warn a girl next time you throw something, would you?”

“Chop, chop,” Toby ordered, ignoring Maggie’s affronted look. “The sooner you get ready, the sooner we can reintroduce you to the world in style. You’re not going to be a broken hearted woman anymore. I’m going to get you back to the pain-in-my-ass Maggie Sawyer you’ve always been if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Throw another bar of soap at me and it just might be,” Maggie grumbled.
In defiance of both Maggie and fate, the next thing to sail through the air in the haggard detective’s direction was a puck of shaving soap followed audaciously by a shaving brush.

OOOOOOOO

September 2016—National City

Alex and Kara both sat side by side on Kara’s sofa, sharing a fluffy fleece blanket between them in the autumn evening. Both pairs of character sock clad feet (Kara’s were purple with little Pinkie Pies racing all over and Alex’s were blue with little dogs on them saying ‘woof’) were propped up comfortably on the coffee table as The Tango Maureen danced across Kara’s big screen TV.

“Why are these movies always about cheating and death?” Alex asked absently, taking a swig of her beer.

Kara shrugged and looked sideways at Alex, “What do you mean?”

Alex gestured at the TV screen with her drink, “These movies.”

Kara’s eyebrows drew together in confusion as she looked at the screen where Anthony Rapp was being led around in a waltz by Tracie Thoms’s Joanne. “Musicals?”

Alex sighed, more annoyed at herself for thinking out loud than she could ever be at Kara for not understanding her chaotic turns of mind, “No, Kara, I mean—”

Alex’s halfhearted explanation cut off as her phone buzzed on the end table beside the sofa. The older brunette reached across Kara and snatched her phone with a speed that would’ve impressed Barry Allen. Alex grinned when she saw the message on her lock-screen.

“Maggie?” Kara asked quietly, already knowing the answer.

“Yeah…she—” Alex stopped to snicker before continuing, “—she really, really hates decaf coffee.
Like doesn’t-understand-why-it-even-exists and would-ban-it-worldwide-if-she-could type of hate. Even the mention of decaf coffee brings this serious scowl to her face which I find adorable, but…”

Alex’s trailed off, seemingly without her realizing it, as her thumbs hastily typed out a reply to whatever Maggie’s message had said. Kara watched Alex in silence for a couple of minutes until Alex looked over at her and raised an eyebrow.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Kara shrugged, shaking her head. “You’ve just been spending a lot of time with Maggie lately is all.”

Alex opened her mouth no doubt to refute Kara’s observation, but instead of words a defeated sigh slipped out between the brunette’s lips and her cheeks colored slightly. What was going on with her and Maggie—Alex wasn’t ready to share it with the world or with Kara even. She didn’t even have words for the way she felt about Maggie let alone what they were to each other now and Maggie—bless her—hadn’t pushed Alex on either of those two points. Still, Alex felt guilty in a way—hiding the source of her random good moods and wide open smiles—from the girl she’d confided everything in since they were teenagers and Kara was definitely more perceptive than anyone gave her credit for being.

But Alex didn’t even know how to breech a topic like this with anyone let alone her little sister.

“Maggie’s my friend, Kara.” Alex reminded her, not unkindly.

“I know, but you’ve had other friends and you’ve never really spent as much time with them as you have been lately with Maggie,” Kara pointed out.

“So?” Alex asked, setting her phone down in her lap before crossing her arms over her chest protectively.

Kara raised her hands in the air palm up to show that she didn’t mean any harm by it.

“So nothing. I’m not judging you, Alex. I’m just commenting on how your dynamic with Maggie seems to be a little different than it’s been with others. I think it’s nice that you’ve found someone
who gets you and will go to your nerdy science fairs with you when no one else will.”

“They’re occupational conventions now,” Alex corrected, rolling her eyes and making a mental note to make sure a Science Fair was in Kara’s near future just for that remark.

“Whatever, they’re still probably boring.” Kara waved it off. “Point is, I’m happy for you.”

“But?” Alex prompted, sensing there was more behind Kara’s words.

“But…I just miss you is all,” Kara admitted with a self-conscious tightening of her shoulders.

Alex’s posture relaxed and she realized what Kara’s reservations were really rooted in: fear. Fear of the loss of her big sister and maybe a little envy that Kara’s best friend was now someone else’s best friend.

“I’m right here, Kara.” Alex comforted. She set her phone down on the coffee table before scooting closer towards her little sister on the sofa, “Come here.”

Alex reached out her arms and enveloped Kara in a tight side hug.

“Alex,” Kara giggled when Alex squeezed her so tight that she began to fall over on her side because she couldn’t put an arm out to catch herself. “Okay, okay, you can let me go now.”

Alex scooted back, but kept her hands on Kara’s shoulders.

“Never. I’ll never let you go. You’ll never lose me, Kara. I promise.” Alex reassured.

“Thank you,” Kara said feeling more at east than she had in weeks. “You know what? Why don’t you invite Maggie to game night this week?”

“She’s probably busy,” Alex shrugged, hoping against hope that Kara would let the topic drop. She and Maggie were new, not new-car-smell new, but new enough that family get togethers could be more of a stressor than a boon. “I don’t even know if Maggie likes board games.”
“Who doesn’t like board games?” Kara asked, horrified for a second as she honestly contemplated the answer to that question.

“Um…a lot of people, Kara.”

Kara shook away the grim reality she didn’t want to acknowledge. “Never mind. Just ask her Alex. I want to meet her and I know that J’onn and Winn and James would want to get to know her too if they could see how happy she makes you.”

So Kara had noticed that, Alex realized, taking a deep breath before the ever present hermit of panic that’d been squatting inside of her chest could throw a fit. Kara could be on point sometimes, but something she could literally miss the forest for the trees. She’d had a crush on James since the moment she’d met him at Catco a few years ago and had only realized it when Alex had pointed it out to her day at Noonan’s. For a reporter, she could be frightfully oblivious sometimes, but Kara was Alex’s little sister and she loved her no matter what. Nothing ever would—ever could change that. Nothing.

“I’ll ask her,” Alex finally relented. “But I can’t promise anything.”

Kara reclaimed the ginormous popcorn bowl from the coffee table and smiled a victorious grin as the song ended and Mark went back to working on his documentary, “Perfect.”

OOOOOOOO

National City—September 2016

The sound of the key turning the deadbolt elicited a presumptive whine from the other side of the door. The single sound turned into a series of happy whines as the loft door opened and Maggie stepped inside of her apartment. Buster danced enthusiastically around Maggie as she turned on the lights in the rooms she moved through, cooing to the dog who she knew wouldn’t let her out of his sight again for some time.

She began to whistle as an unburdened feeling of happiness rose in her. Buster bellowed his own accompaniment to the tune that would’ve made his hound ancestors proud. Maggie scratched his ears with her free hand and continued on towards the kitchen. She could honestly say that she was in one of the best moods she’d been in for a while and it was entirely due to one tall nerdy brunette who’d found a way to bring the sun back into Maggie’s dark, dark world.
Bette had noticed the change in her right away when Maggie had narrated something she was doing in a sing-songy tone of voice within a few weeks of beginning her relationship with Alex.

“Are you high right now?” had been the natural first question that had slipped past Bette’s lips as she’d looked Maggie over with a narrowed gaze. “’Cause I’ve seen you drunk many times before and not even drunk Maggie acts this weird.”

Shay—Bette’s wife—had been more subdued when she’d gone into the kitchen to help with the preparation of the ‘Family Dinner’ they had together at Bette’s home once a every few months or so.

“You seem happy, Maggie,” Shay observed, putting the lid back on the rice cooker after adding to the timer. “It’s a good look on you.”

Maggie had laughed off the attention and changed the subject. When she’d gone to see Tim the next day, his reaction had been the most straightforward and ecstatic of the three.

“Damn, Moms! You must’ve had one hell of a date to be wearing a smile like that everywhere you go! I need to meet this woman. Tell me everything!”

It was true. Maggie’s most recent date with Alex had gone well. They’d been seeing one another for almost six weeks and the joy Alex brought out in the detective without even trying was obvious to everyone who saw her. At first, Maggie had tried to hide it. Especially from Tim. Bu after their drive-in dinner date, Tim had pestered Maggie for details in a barrage of questions that had lasted days both via phone and in person: what’s her name? Is she pretty? How old is she? Can she cook? Does she ride motorcycles? Does she drink as much as you do? Does she get you home at a decent hour? Is she a good kisser? When can I meet her??

Maggie shook her head at the memory and deposited the plastic bags on her arm on the granite countertop.

After an unusual D.O.A. at work that had turned out not to be a crime scene at all, but a historical burial beneath a construction site and completing the tedious paper trail that had transferred the body back into the custody of the city coroner, Maggie was finally free for the day to focus on other things.
Like Alex.

Alex who’d been amusing her with her text messages since early that morning.

Alex: 

Vegan ice cream can’t be a real thing. I refuse to believe it.

Maggie: 

Oh, believe it, Danvers. I just put a whole carton of strawberry in my cart for when you come over tomorrow for dinner.

Grocery shopping on her lunch break had sounded as unappealing as having to go to the all night Bodega at whatever ungodly hour she got off of work, but texting Alex in the interim about all of the vegan alternatives she was buying had definitely offered appropriate entertainment.

Maggie: 

Plant based burger patties: The gourmet burger that won’t give you heart disease.

Alex: 

Yuck! No!

Maggie: 

They’re actually really good. I’m going to make them for you one night and you’re going to have to admit that to my face, Danvers.

Alex: 

Nope. Never going to happen.

Maggie: 

Never say never, Babe. Oh, we should so have a chocolate tofu cheesecake for dessert!

Alex: 

…I hate you right now.

Maggie: 

You adore me too much to hate me for any reason ever. Admit it, Danvers.

Alex: 

You’ve just ruined cheesecake for me!
Maggie: *How about a kiss to make up for it?*

Alex: *Just one kiss?*

Maggie: *Maybe more than one…if you’re good.*

The brunette maneuvered through the kitchen and set the bags she’d bought and stored away in the fridge at work down on the granite countertop. As she was putting away various items, Maggie noticed something out of the corner of her eye. Wedged in the corner between the sink and the coffee maker was a rectangular package wrapped in brown butcher paper that was covered in a slight sheen of dust. The package she’d received the morning of her first date with Alex had sat neglected and forgotten behind the can of Carte Noire she used for her morning coffee.

Why hadn’t she opened it? Why hadn’t she taken it to the forensics lab like she’d told Bette she would?

Maggie finished putting away the last of the groceries and drifted over towards the package. Her name and address stared back up at her, letters flowing with a flowery flamboyancy that smoothed over the angles of the letters and was more elaborate than anything someone would take the time to write now. Cursive though they were—the angles of the lines were sharp—likely made by a fountain pen if Maggie had to guess. The hard angles and yet the smoothness of the letters reminded Maggie of the time the Russian Ballet had come to perform in Gotham eighty three years earlier. Kate had insisted that they attend and so—despite Maggie’s reservations that ballet just wasn’t her thing—they had. The fancy, overpriced programs for the performance had been written in gold ink in two languages: American and a beautiful Russian elegantly scrawled in Cyrillic script. Perhaps, the individual who wrote her address on the package came from Eastern Europe originally or was—at the very least—bilingual?

Maggie debated on leaving the package alone.

She’d received it, but she hadn’t counted that day on dealing with a tangible piece of her past—which this undoubtedly was—and she’d been so blissfully happy in the past few weeks, that she hadn’t had the time or the inclination to dwell on everything she’d lost over the years at all. Opening this package might change that and Maggie honestly didn’t want to do it…but the healthy sense of curiosity that had made Maggie a good student and an even better detective was eating away at her. Now that she’d noticed the forgotten package, it was impossible for Maggie to *unnotice* it.
She inhaled a deep breath, then let it out and repeated the motion until her nerves were a little more settled. While she was feeling bold, Maggie reached out and undid the twine holding the paper closed. The butcher’s knot nearly untied itself and the brown paper began easing open at its own pace slowly almost like a flower blooming in slow motion. Maggie was a patient woman, but not that patient. She smoothed the paper open with her hands until she could see what it concealed clearly.

A book.

An antique book. The cover was made of old leather that was crisscrossed with a pattern that cut into the cover of the leather like chicken wire. It was soft to the touch and browned with age. Carefully, Maggie eased the cover open with a fingertip and was greeted with the same neat scrawl on a title page that was blank save for handwritten introduction:

The Private & Professional Journal of Dr. Victor Vitae

Maggie’s snatched her hand away from the cover of the book as though it’d burned her and took a hasty step back.

What in the hell…?

“This can’t be happening,” Maggie whispered pacing the space between her open kitchen and living room and beginning to freak out in earnest. “This can’t be happening!!”

With shaking fingers she fished her phone out of her back jean pocket. She swiped past Alex’s next text message on her lock-screen and thumbed through her recent calls, picking out Bette’s name and dialing.

The line rang a few times and then went to voicemail.

“Damn you,” Maggie grumbled, ending the call and dialing again.

Bette usually let the phone ring anytime someone called her because she had this theory—that Maggie was now proving—that if anyone actually needed to get ahold of her, they’d try multiple times.

One ring.
Two rings.

“You have five seconds before I hang up on you and climb into my warm bed with my warmer wife in it.”

“Bette, thank god,” Maggie almost cried in relief. She was struggling to breathe normally now, making it hard to get out her words. “What did he look like?”

“Huh?”

Maggie’s nostrils flared as she struggled not to outright scream her fury and fear into the phone. “The mailman who delivered the package to you in the hall when we met in my apartment a while ago, what did he look like?”

“Um…like a normal guy?”

“Bette!” Maggie shouted, beginning to break out in cold sweats. “Think. I need you to fucking think and fucking tell me what the man who you met that day fucking looked like!”

The volume of Maggie’s usually calm voice and the anger behind it was beginning to scare her. She never lost her cool. It was a thing she prided herself on after everything she’d been through, but right now…she was dangerously close to spinning out of control and it was all his fault.

“Uh…he,” Bette’s voice trailed off as she tried to remember, “He was taller than me, blonde, solidly built. Had that unusually handsome look European men have sometimes. If I wasn’t married already I might’ve propositioned him and you know how much it takes me to say that. Why? What’s happened?”

Maggie stayed quiet as she struggled to reconcile Bette’s description with the young toxicologist she’d met in Hugo Strange’s lab. He’d been tall, wisp-like, and—more importantly—had chin length brown locks that he often Brylcreemed back on top of his head. They weren’t the same man. There was no way. Victor Vitae had been in his early thirties when Maggie had met him in Gotham and critically ill the last time she’d seen him in a sanatorium beside Lake Geneva. He’d never apologized for what he’d done to her—what he’d made her—but he had gone to great unwarranted lengths to make sure Maggie knew just how scientifically miraculous she was. He’d hounded her all around the world for a decade until he was too ill and frail to follow her anymore.
If he was dead—and he had to be by now—then who the hell wanted Maggie to have his journal and what in the hell did that mean for her at this point?

“Thanks,” Maggie whispered hollowly.

Bette had started to say something over the line, but whatever it was had been lost in the ‘click’ of the line disconnecting. Frustrated, Maggie tossed her phone down onto the marble topped end table by the wall. She felt faint, honestly like she might keel over and before Maggie knew it, hot tears were burning beneath her eyelids. A painful sob rushed passed her lips before Maggie’s hand could cover her mouth and stop it.

How could she move forward and live her life when it was never safe for her to just relax? What kind of future could she give Alex when her past was always holding her back? Alex deserved so much better and she probably would find that someday…with another woman. Maggie didn’t belong in this time or in this life anymore. There could be no moving forward for her. She had to think of Alex now and Tim and Bette and Shay…

She had to do what was best for her loved ones even if it didn’t seem like it would be the best for her.

Maggie retrieved her phone and clicked open the messaging app where Alex’s most recent text peered up at her:

*Kara literally just snuck up on me in my lab and made me spill hot coffee all down my uniform. I tell you, she may be my little sister, but she’s just lucky she’s cute. Yelling at her honestly feels like kicking a puppy. It’s one of her most effective defense mechanisms and she definitely knows how to use it.*

Maggie chuckled once, wiping her nose on a tissue from her front pocket, but her mood quickly grew somber again as she reconciled herself to what she had to do. She sniffed as her thumbs moved swiftly over the keyboard, typing the words that were breaking her heart.

*I’m so sorry, Alex, but we can’t see each other anymore.*

Chapter End Notes
TBC...leave a comment on your way out if you feel so inclined.

Also, I know Natalie Barney appears often in these chapters but as a lesbian and a human being, I just admire and respect her so much that I can't help myself. there's a great biography on her I would highly recommend called "Wild Heart," By Suzanne Rodriguez. It's a really entertaining read.

Humour me one moment further dear readers, in addition to leaving a comment, I would like to ask that if you enjoy the story and think you know another Sanvers fan who might as well to pass along the knowledge that this story exists. I've spoken to a few readers who, for whatever reason, couldn't find this story on the Sanvers search page when they looked or couldn't find it at all for a bit and I don't know if it's because of the tags or something? I tried updating them, but I don't know that it's helped all that much. Let me know kindly if you have any suggestions that might help.

Thank you, Thank you, Thank you, friends, for reading, commenting, and just existing! Never dreamed I would ever have anyone who liked my writing. All is muchly appreciated. :)}
October 2016—National City

Maggie pushed the now cold cup of coffee off to the side of her desk. The TV in the bullpen above her head mumbled unintelligible words on low volume, but the capital letters on the blue banner across the bottom of the screen were hard to miss:

PRESIDENTAL CANDIDATES DEBATE

Above the words, U.S. President Olivia Marsdin argued mutedly against her opponent on the other side of the split screen—Bruno Mannheim. On the surface Bruno Mannheim was a mouthy, ignorant businessman, but in reality he was the corrupt hereditary head of the international criminal organization known to law enforcement officials as Intergang. Or at least he “allegedly” was the leader of Intergang.

Officers of the Law on both sides of the Atlantic who’d worked on solving the gang’s crimes knew it, but there was never any direct evidence left by the time they went to court to prove an undeniable connection between Mannheim and Intergang. Necessary witnesses had been killed in convenient ‘accidents.’ Undisputable evidence had gone missing at the hands of one corrupt cop or another just before significant court dates. And so it was that Bruno had been acquitted so many times by the present time that the U.S. District Court had thrown out the last case he’d been implicated in because there had barely been enough evidence to prove anything let alone criminal intent on the part of the equally visible and wealthy talking head on everyone’s TV screens.

A lot of politicians no matter what party they belonged to saw Bruno Mannheim as a benign joke. He was loud, brash, ineloquent, racist, misogynistic, and not a man that any self-preserving human being should want having his finger on a button controlling nuclear bombs. But Olivia Marsdin wasn’t fooled. She was a smart woman who took every opportunity she could to warn the common people that he was a threat to their physical and economic safety and Maggie respected the woman even more than she had before for doing so under a barrage of backlash from the conservatives who planned to ride Manheim’s coattails all the way to the White House.

Refocusing her attention, the detective looked back down at the report from one of her junior officers on her desk, struggling to focus on the near-illegible scrawl that passed for handwriting these days. Her smartphone vibrated across faux wood of the desktop by her hand…again. When she opened the lock-screen she saw that she had five missed calls from Alex and four unheard voicemails. She rubbed a tired hand over her face, the ever present ache of guilt burning through
her chest once more until all Maggie could feel was raw numbness.

Poor Alex. She’d been hurt beyond measure and—ironically given her intentions—Maggie had been and was still the underlying cause of all of the younger woman’s pain and anguish.

Maggie couldn’t blame Alex for anything that had happened between the two of them or the fact that the younger woman was still refusing to give up on their relationship without an explanation. Part of Maggie wanted to go to Alex and drop to her knees and beg forgiveness for her stupidity, but the larger part of Maggie that was fueled by the jaded sting of life experience knew that—although heart wrenching for both of them—she had to maintain her resolve and keep her distance. Alex would be better off in the long run for it, really she would. But just because Maggie believed that in her heart of hearts, didn’t mean that she didn’t miss Alex terribly.

In six short weeks, Alex Danvers had become the axis that Maggie’s dim little world turned upon. She’d reveled in their little messages and nightly facetime dates on evenings where they couldn’t see one another in person. In the way Alex’s usually jubilant voice would regale her with something her sister had done to her by accident. One time she’d complained to Maggie about how the buckles of a new prototype of Kevlar vest had been melted together during preliminary testing because her geeky inventor friend, Winn, had made them out of a shipment of durable plastic that had an impurity of too little graphite in it, getting Alex stuck in the vest for a solid twenty four hours before Kara as Supergirl—who’d been out of the city at the time—had been able to come back and cut her out of it.

Maggie smiled bitterly at the photo Alex had sent her of herself moments after the vest had been laser-visioned in two, holding one part of the offending garment victoriously above her head as the sides of her government issued uniform continued to smoke faintly. Kara must’ve taken that photo and the thought of Alex bashfully asking Kara to take it so she could show Maggie how she’d overcome her predicament made the ache in the detective’s chest come back tenfold.

3:24 A.M.

Read the lock-screen on Maggie’s phone. She’d pulled two all-nighters in a row at the station in an effort to make a dent into the overflow of work they’d incurred in response to the rising tide of alien and human homicides across the city. If Maggie was being honest with herself though, she’d taken the shifts as much to get away from her reservations over the ending of her relationship with Alex as she had to get ahead in her work. The change in scenery was a welcome distraction from the static emptiness of her townhouse—the home where she’d been planning to have Alex over for dinner the night of their breakup, the home Alex had been so excited to see.

Regardless of the reasoning, neither Buster nor Bette—who he’d gone to stay with for the time being—appreciated her long hours and her self-neglect, but Maggie had made it clear that the
matter wasn’t up for debate, not even by her adopted-daughter. She’d do what she had to and if she had to work herself into a long awaited grave doing it, then she was willing to do so.

“It’s ironic really,” the familiar voice of Toby Raines floated over from the chair across from her desk which Maggie knew to be empty. “Never thought I’d see you trying to literally work yourself to death.”

And then there were the hallucinations that had begun haunting the exhausted detective consistently about six hours earlier.

Delusions of people she’d known and dearly loved once. So far the apparitions had been limited to Aunt Tilda, Joely Bartlett, Kate Spencer, and now there was Toby Raines, who Maggie’s brain insisted on bringing back to life even though it knew full well that Toby had passed away during the last wave of the “Spanish” Flu pandemic in the hellish winter of 1919.

And yet—despite knowing better—her subconscious had situated Toby in the chair directly in front of her, filing her nails avidly, her subtly heeled feet crossed over the lip of the cheap wooden surface in a nostalgic recreation of a pose Maggie had seen many times before on the real Toby days, weeks, months, and years even before her death. The perfect facsimile of the stubborn, overly critical, yet still hot blonde reporter from the detective’s past shrugged then, her eyes flipping back up at Maggie for a second before dropping back down to her task.

“After all you did to try to keep that Alex girl from getting hurt,” Toby’s once familiar voice tsk-ed. “and now you’re the whole reason she’s probably sitting on the other end of whatever that communication device is you’re avoiding and wondering what she ever did wrong to lose you. All of this evil misery is your fault, Ms. Sherlock Holmes. You’ve really fucked up everything now.”

Maggie screwed her eyes shut. If she couldn’t see a delusion that automatically cancelled it out right? If she just closed her eyes for long enough then this annoyingly accurate rendition of Toby would go away on its own. It had to.

“Hey, hey!”

Maggie opened her eyes and Toby Raines was still there, snapping her fingers so close to the detective’s face that she leaned back, almost falling out of her desk chair awkwardly. Recovering quickly after a lifetime of clumsiness, Maggie got her feet beneath her and stood suddenly, slamming her hands down on the desktop.
“Just go away, okay?!”

Great, now she was shouting at her hallucinations. Good thing the bullpen was empty.

The night patrols were out on duty and she only had to check in with the ones from her unit every hour or so. There were more populated skeleton crews on other floors, but the Science Division—joke that it was to those in the city even though it answered to the Federal government as much as any other—had only been allocated enough funds for two shifts of patrols to go out every night and one shift coordinator to be on duty though optional backup could be called in from other precincts if necessary through dispatch. Tonight, Maggie was that shift coordinator as she had been for the previous night.

Beyond exhausted, Maggie plopped back down into her seat, the wheeled office chair creaking beneath her as she sagged against the cheap plastic. Toby shook her head at Maggie, a look of practiced disgust morphing her attractive features into something less desirable and more familiar to Maggie’s memories of the woman than the near perfect picture of her leaning against her desk.

“That didn’t work on me then and it won’t work on me now. Try again,” Toby rolled her eyes, before something seemingly dawned on her face and she started into one of those rants that made her famous among their ‘Queer Round Table’ as the queerest of them all. “Also…I gotta ask…what happened to the human voice since I bit the dust way back when? I mean, we—or rather you—were on that Bay Area Train car underground last week and the voice overhead that announced the stops was like something I imagined out of the pages of a H.G. Wells novel if those pages could talk. Then everyone else around you was caught up looking at those portable mini-Mutoscope things—you know what I mean I just don’t have the words—the things with the screens where people watch their own films with those bean things in their ears and ignore everything else around them? Anyway, my point is there was a car jammed full of fifty or so people and no one was talking to each other—literally NO ONE. Until that baby started to wail from behind us, I thought the spirit of the *vox humani* was dead and gone for good.”

Suddenly, a look of complete horror took over the spirited blonde’s features as she stared back at Maggie. It would’ve been comical if the woman had really been alive, “Are there even newspaper reporters anymore these days? Jesus, Mags…are there even newspapers around anymore?!!”

Maggie found the answer bubbling up in her throat, but she cleared away the response to the very vocal and—apparently observant—figment of her imagination before it could be uttered out loud. This wasn’t Toby. It looked like her, it talked like her, it complained like her—but this apparition in front of her WAS NOT really Toby. Maggie had to remember that. She shook her head at herself again, she must be losing her mind. Who’d have thought that would’ve been something that happened to her this late in her life? After almost a century and a half of living? She needed to pull herself together.
“You’re not real, you just all but admitted it yourself. You only see what I see, know what I know within reason and my messed up mind fills in all the gaps from there,” Maggie whispered to herself, nostrils flaring in indignation. “I need to you to leave me the hell alone. I need you to recede back into the abyss or wherever you came from.”

Maggie rested her head in her hands, feeling the post-hunger nausea that was beginning to become her constant companion on these overnight shifts rush up into her throat with an acidic vengeance that she couldn’t stop. She barely managed to lean over the corner of her desk to the wastebasket before emptying her stomach of all the coffee she’d consumed in the last few hours plus a few cups of bile into the hollow tin canister below. After the nausea had receded, Maggie still hung over the edge of her desk miserably—momentarily debating if she even wanted to go back to the life she lived—not that there was a choice in that singular moment where time felt like it stopped if only for a minute.

“Gross,” Toby opined, back to filing her nails again. “You know, Mags, I would’ve thought you’d understand the game better by now than you seem to, having walked this godforsaken earth for as long as you have.”

Maggie spit a few times to get the remaining taste of acid and coffee out of her mouth then reached for a tissue from the box on her desk before wiping her mouth.

“What game?” Maggie murmured miserably.

“Why the game of life of course,” Toby explained, peeking up through her lashes at the other woman. “‘The Milton Bradley thing: ‘The Checkered Game of Life.’ Did you never play that at home when you were a kid? Anyhow, you know as well as I do that you can’t hide from the truth, Mags. You can surely try, but it’s always going to find you. Why do you think I’m here haunting you like the much better dressed Ghost of Christmas Past? It’s definitely not because I want to. It’s kismet. Just like it was kismet that I somehow managed to survive nearly three years of reporting on the ‘War to End All Wars’ in Europe just to come home and get taken out by the flu of all goddamned things. You’ve pulled a lot of shit since we’ve known one another, Mags, but whatever you’re doing with this Alex girl right now has somehow taken the cosmic cake.”

Maggie glared back across the desktop at the infuriating arrogant smirk on Toby’s face. If she hadn’t known any better, she’d have thought the other woman was enjoying her pain, but in a sick psychological twist, it was an overpowering combination of Maggie’s own survivor’s guilt and general guilt that was probably behind the self-loathing that had brought the apparition of Toby back to life in the first place.
The detective lowered her head down onto the desk with a thud, “What do I have to do to fix it?”

“What are you asking me for?” Toby asked, raising her eyebrows and appraising Maggie up and down as if she couldn’t understand her line of thinking. “I don’t make the rules.”

Maggie groaned as dual waves of nausea and exhaustion hit her all over again. Lamely, she tried to remember the last time she’d eaten a full meal of any kind and couldn’t.

“Look, I know you’re going to do what you feel like you need to do regardless of anything that comes out of my mouth, but I have to at least try. Since you’re obviously suffering, why don’t you see if you can get one of your other bureaucratic buddies to take your shift for tonight and go home. Get some rest.”

Generally, whenever Maggie set her mind to something she could dig in her heels and see it through to the end, but right now she was sorely tempted to take the advice of her ‘Christmas ghost’. Although, she knew her captain wouldn’t appreciate being dragged into the station before 8 am, if Maggie told her she was physically ill, then the woman would help her out. All she needed to do was ask.

But kismet—being what it was—chose that moment to intervene, making Maggie’s choice for her. The handheld police radio on her desk chirped to life and loud static gave way to relatively clear words.

“Dispatch to 1321: We’ve had a report of shots fired at 1100 Old Harbor Rd. Caller described the suspect as a white-skinned, red-eyed humanoid, ten feet tall or so pursuing a smaller yellow-skinned humanoid into one of the shipping terminals.”

“10-4 Dispatch, we are fifteen minutes out and will respond. Is there anyone available to back us up, over?”

The only response as Maggie listened was static. Then the voice of the police dispatcher warbled to life again.

“Dispatch to 1321: We’ve had a second 911 call. More shots fired. 1100 Old Harbor Rd. Are you 10-8?”
Maggie reached for the radio, sweaty fingers scrabbling to press the right buttons as her caffeinated, undernourished, and adrenaline fueled body tried to leap into action.

“This is Detective Sawyer, Science Division, 1330. I’m on my way.”

Inhaling a deep breath, Maggie stood on unsteady feet, grabbing her police radio and rushing towards the elevator with Toby’s disjointed voice echoing behind her.

“Even I can see that this is going to end badly!”

Luckily, only the disapproving notes of the dead woman’s voice followed Maggie past the doors of the elevator.

Driving a car while being simultaneously physically ill was difficult, but it wasn’t as hard as running when your legs felt like jelly and the rest of you was just one big ache. With the sirens on and a lot of self-interpretation of the traffic laws she was meant to uphold, Maggie had managed to make it to National City Harbor in a little less than half of the time it would’ve usually taken her. The first thing she saw when she pulled up to 1100 Old Harbor Rd was the patrol car belonging two of her division’s uniformed officers parked in front of one of the condemned shipping terminals that had been around since the turn of the century. Both of the front doors of the Ford interceptor were open and the emergency lights were on, but Maggie’s junior patrol officers were nowhere in sight. The radio at her side rumbled a stream of near constant static. Beginning to explore, she pressed the call button and held it with one hand.

“1330 to 1321: What’s your twenty?”

Nothing but consistent static answered back in lieu of a response. One overhead lamp blinked over the wide expanse of shipping containers and the terminal where shipments had once been checked in and emptied before the city had decided to retire this particular berth instead of updating it for modern use. The sounds of the waves crashing against the pier were the only consistent sounds Maggie could hear aside from her own sharp intakes of breath. She peered around a corner, seeing nothing, and reached for the call button on her radio again.

“1330 to Dispatch: I’m on scene at 1100 Old Harbor. Patrol car 1321 spotted, officers M.I.A. Do you have their last 10-20, over?”

“Dispatch to 1330: Last 10-20 on scene. No subsequent voice contact.”
“Great…” the detective groaned.

Maggie took a deep breath and pulled her gun from her belt, holding it in front of her as she continued to scan the area, sweeping over open corners and empty spaces that were clear of any hostiles, then moving onward. She’d only covered a third of the yard when she heard what sounded like a voice yelling words in another language and then something metal hitting metal followed by another loud sound between normal gunfire and an explosion. Explosion was right on the money because one of the rows of shipping containers nearby suddenly shook into life before the top box lit up briefly as it flew through the air and collided with a rusted shipping crane, leaving nothing behind but a smoking heap of glowing metal.

Possible plasma weapon. Maybe laser. Definitely hot enough to melt steel down into its liquid form.

Maggie checked the area around her, but couldn’t immediately see what or who had caused the calamity. Then she heard shouting again and then a blue uniformed body was suddenly soaring through the air at her ass first. Maggie dodged and rolled out of the way, coming back up onto her knees with her gun poised in front of her, but there was no need. The body of one of her own uniformed officers was shish kabob-ed through on a reinforcing bar now imbedded upright in the concrete.

The unseeing eyes of Mike Lane—the junior officer whose report Maggie had ironically been struggling to read through only thirty minutes prior—stared back at the detective, light from the still burning shipping containers reflected in them. Maggie scrambled up to her feet and fought the urge to wretch. There was the sound of another explosion, a flare of fire over the roof of one of the warehouses and shouting, then Maggie was off like a shot in that direction. Feet pounded against the pavement in a hard run as she grasped for the call button of the radio on her side. When she spoke it was only between large gulps of air as she struggled to breathe, talk, and run all at once.

“13—30—to Dispatch—shooter is armed and—dangerous—requesting back up. Repeat—live shooter—armed—and firing—need backup.”

She released the call button and honestly didn’t even hear if dispatch responded to her call before she’d rounded a corner into a version of hell not even a Pulitzer-prize winning novelist could’ve imagined into existence.

“God in heaven…” Maggie breathed out in an automatic whisper.

Every standing structure before her was burning in a haze of orange flame. There were at least two
lumps of something burning so hotly that the fires consuming them were red which—as Maggie got closer—she was able to identify as the melting remains of the once living bodies of humanoid organisms, but of what species she couldn’t tell. Sweat prickled around the hairs standing up on her skin as Maggie skirted around the corpses, the heat searing her soul as much as it did her body as she ventured further into the hellish nightscape than was advisable. The air around her had grown so hot that it wavered like the pieces of a mirage and Maggie found herself cursing that she’d chosen to run into this situation without taking care of her own bodily needs first, because she couldn’t tell what was real or not anymore and that was on her.

All of this was on her…if only she’d gone out with the patrol when it left hours earlier as a sort of senior support officer and asked one of her colleagues to stay on as the shift coordinator. The details could’ve been worked out later with the Captain when she’d come in later. At least then maybe Mike Lane and Angel Rojas—one of the presumed burning bodies that littered the concrete—would’ve still been alive. They’d only been rookies after all, with enough experience to do the job well under normal circumstances, but who couldn’t have possibly been prepared to deal with an aberration of the normal at this level on their own.

If only she’d eaten at least one meal the previous day and caught a few hours of sleep before her second all-nighter, but hose ‘if onlys’ wouldn’t bring her rookies back or absolve her from the guilt of their deaths. And they most certainly wouldn’t get her out of this hell-scape she was wading through. All she could do, was try to take down whatever or whoever it was that had killed her officers and bring them to justice. So Maggie persisted, stepping through smoke and piles of molten metal that popped and spit red ash in her wake. Backlit against the flames, stood a large, lumbering form.

When it turned towards Maggie, she saw a pair of ruby red eyes shining out from a face as grey as the smoke that floated in a haze around them between the fires—making breathing difficult. As her eyes adjusted, Maggie saw what appeared to be a thick mane of black hair and a full cowboy-esque mustache rounded out by motorcycle leathers covering an overly muscled body that was more than human.

Maggie, coughed and sputtered, but raised her gun higher, “Raise your hands and get down on the ground now!”

The man—if Maggie had read his identity based on his clothing and facial hair correct—tilted his head to the side reminiscent of Buster whenever Maggie asked him if he was a good boy or not. Then a grin spread below the Wyatt Earpian mustache as the man lifted his arm, some sort of firearm burning red at the tip being leveled at her.

“Keesy fem,” was all he said in a loud, deep voice before the firearm erupted into a burst of red.

Maggie didn’t have time to think, just dove forward, skirting over burning embers and rolling away
until whatever flames had clung to her were out. Then she was back on her feet, gun still held in one hand as if it were glued to that palm. Something sticky was clinging to her forehead, resting heavily over one eyebrow and causing her hair to clump together on one side, but she didn’t have time to take stock of her injuries before the man—a Czarnian of Maggie had to guess—leapt at her, his free hand grabbing onto her leg and tossing her up into the air as if she weighed nothing. Then she was being flung and the world around her blurred into undecipherable images until her back slammed painfully into some sort of metal surface, then she was falling again, but this time she didn’t reach the pavement.

Strong arms reached beneath her back and knees, bringing her to a levitating halt before gravity could put her out of her misery. The Czarnian growled and raised his firearm again in the direction of Maggie and her unknown rescuer, but before the laser beam could reach them, Maggie was gently deposited on the concrete and one arm raised a red cape that blocked the blast without damage. Then there was a loud sound like a whipping wind and a string of frozen ice engulfed the Czarnian’s weapon arm up to the shoulder. He was only fazed for a moment before he flexed his bulbous muscles and the ice shattered, but Maggie could only see a pair of red boots that stepped in front of her face and the flaring of a scarlet cape before everything went mercifully black.

GOOOOOOO

Gotham City—October 1916

The second half of 1915 went by more quick and dismal than the first. 1916 came and the months filtered by, but Maggie didn’t seem to notice them. She was always dating her rent checks ‘1915’ instead of ’16 and her landlady, Mrs. Schroeder, came down to her place of work at least once a month to have the absentminded brunette write her a corrected check.

“Don’t you know what year it is yet, Fräulein?” the good natured older woman liked to tease her.

It surprised Maggie that the widow ventured downtown at all let alone to Police Headquarters. Anti-German sentiment was at an all-time high because of the war and the Kaiser’s on and off again promises not to bomb U.S. merchant and passenger vessels unless confirmation is received that America was unfairly benefitting the allies—which they were.

Just the day before, Maggie and Bartlett had been called down to a delicatessen in “Little Germany” that had been vandalized and covered in graffiti that read, ‘KRAUTS GO HOME!’ The week before that, a pet store in the Cauldron neighborhood had been broken into and all of the dachshund puppies had been beaten to death by teenagers with baseball bats. Things like that made good people like Mrs. Schroeder install double bolted locks on their front doors and pay other people to run most of their errands for them out in the open.
Though Anti-German hate crimes were on the rise, crime in Gotham was always constant and it was that consistency that Maggie had begun to rely upon after she’d returned to the greater world with a broken heart and a stubborn resolve not to let the hurtful actions of one woman stop Maggie from regaining her equilibrium and go on living for herself. Against her better judgment though, Kate Kane continued to haunt Maggie’s heart and mind almost a year and a month after they’d parted for the last time. It was usually the little things that brought her memory back to Maggie’s attention like walking past Robinson Park to one of the East End’s many outdoor fruit markets to get a bag of chestnuts or winter cherries and seeing a bench that she and Kate had lounged on together or hearing a song playing on the Victrola at Mollie’s that Kate and Maggie had danced to once months earlier before Kate had up and left her.

Kate’s ghost haunted Maggie’s dreams at night too sometimes as well as her waking hours. Maggie would dream of them, Kate always smiling and laughing and looking at her with those heartfelt green eyes that shined down on Maggie like she was everything. Then she’d wake up and realize the space next to her in bed was cold and empty and then she’d remember…and her heart would break all over again. The pain would be followed by a swift wave of bitter resentment and then nothing. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d genuinely smiled and her perpetual down-turn in mood had even managed to piss Bartlett off at in the months after Kate’s departure…like now.

“Your frown’s uglier than a horse’s ass in winter, just in case you were wondering,” Joely snarked loudly at Maggie’s back from the warm safety of their police car.

Maggie ignored him as she paid the Italian street vendor who handed her two paper cups of strong coffee. His expresso stall stayed open year round on the street. The kind little man with the smiling eyes always carted a hot pot of coffee out to the curb to sell even in blizzard weather, bless him, though Joely didn’t deserve blessing. In fact, Maggie debated on the slippery shuffle back to the curb, whether she should spit in his coffee before giving it to him right in plain view of the Model-T her partner was watching her from, but she listened to her better angels in the end and refrained from acting out. It was just one of those days, apparently.

Over the past year, she’d become close friends with Joely Bartlett. She ate weekly Sunday meals at his home with his wife and daughters and even went out to the theater with them on occasion or watched the girls for them when she could. But today, Bartlett seemed like more of an annoying older brother than anything else.

“Thanks, Joe. By the way, you might want to get rid of that fungus growing on your upper lip.”

The middle aged man’s eyes widened as he suddenly became defensive. “Hey! Don’t insult the mustache!”
Maggie snickered, “So that’s what it is, then? I couldn’t tell.”

Bartlett pointed to his face as Maggie handed him a paper cup of coffee through the rolled down window of the Ford. “Do you know how hard it is to keep one of these neat and clean and stylish throughout a day of living?”

Maggie rolled her eyes and slid into the empty driver’s seat of the ambling vehicle. She sipped on her too hot coffee, again not caring whether or not she seared off some of her taste buds. Given how life was treating her right now, what was sacrificing a few more of the things she’d once taken joy in?

“Joe?”

“Yeah?”

“I have three words for you: Shave. It. Off.”

“Snippy today aren’t you? What is it, your time of the month or something?”

Maggie turned and glared at him. The man lived with three women and he had yet to learn when he was walking on thin ice? There may not be much hope for him yet.

“I have a gun,” Maggie sniped back. “And I will shoot you with it if you don’t shut up right now.”

Joe started to speak, to volley another insult at her no doubt, but his words were cut off in a fury of hacking coughs that shook his entire body so hard that the middle aged man had to lean over in the passenger seat until his forehead was resting against the simple wooden dashboard.

“Are you alright?” Maggie asked, more concerned than irritated.

“It’s…just…a…tick…tick…” Joely managed between heaving breaths.

When he sat back in his seat, it was with a tired heaviness that belittled his usually upbeat
demeanor. Warm wetness roused him back to attention as he looked down at his lap.

“Damn…” He whined, looking down at the crumpled paper cup clutched in his hand and the hot brown liquid that was beginning to burn through his serge trousers. “Jesus, that smarts! Ouch!!”

Thinking quickly, Maggie set her own coffee cup down on the metal floor behind the shifter and got out of the car. Sliding around back onto the sidewalk, she pulled Bartlett’s door open as he continued to shout and dragged him by the lapels of his black wool coat into the frigid air. The other Italian vendors took notice of the spectacle and who could blame them? It wasn’t every day you got to see a grown man with a slight middle-aged pudge to his belly dancing from foot to foot in the open street as a young woman in trousers and a black Columbia hat—a sight in itself—fanned him with her hands and shouted at him to stop yelling because he was going to be fine. By the time Bartlett had recovered enough to lean over and catch his breath, he was sweating in the winter air and Maggie was beginning to realize that the eyes of the present population of Woolworth Street were on them. Some small children clad in everything from hand-me down rags to sturdy home sewn outfits were leaning out of the single windows in their crowded tenement buildings to get a look at the two of them. A few boys jeered in Italian at Bartlett’s balding head when he removed his hat to fan some cold air into his face and that started a constant buzz of chatter around them.

The only person who seemed to have forgone the moment’s entertainment was Guido—the expresso vendor—who was standing beside them, holding a fresh paper cup of coffee out to Maggie’s disheveled partner. Bartlett cupped the coffee between two shaking hands and nodded his head in thanks.

“That’s mighty kind of you, sir. Ah, let me…I think I have change in my coat pocket if—”

Bartlett—red-faced from either embarrassment, the cold, or the burning coffee or all three—rummaged around in the pockets of his long jacket, but Guido stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Don’t worry about it,” the older man said in heavily accented English. “I do this as favor—per te—for you. You and you’re friend, you’re good people.”

Both Maggie and Bartlett thanked him and Maggie discretely dropped a few pennies into Guido’s coin jar anyway before they set off in the direction of Old Gotham and GCPD headquarters.

“I’ll make sure Ruth knows not to let you handle anymore hot beverages on your own today,” Maggie commented once they’d reached the small forecourt in front of the station that was being used as a temporary parking lot until the mayor allocated the funds for them to build a proper one
that could fit more than five or six cars at a time.

Bartlett brought his coffee to his lips slowly with one hand and flipped his middle finger up at her with the other, then he struggled out of the passenger side, slamming the door behind him as Maggie gracefully stepped out of the driver’s seat, grinning just to mock him.

“Pardon me, but may I trouble either one of you for assistance?”

They both turned around before mounting the stoop that led up to the station to see a tall, balding man in a coachman’s top hat and assorted livery standing on the walkway in the forecourt where only police personnel were supposed to be allowed.

“I’m sorry, sir, but the proper entrance to the station is on Arnhem Avenue. Only police officers are allowed inside the gated entrance,” Maggie explained to the older man not unkindly.

The thin man’s pale expression didn’t change at the admonishment and he made no move to go where Maggie had gestured either.

“I am the daytime driver of the Kane family. At the behest of my mistress, I’ve spoken with Commissioner Gordon and he told me that if I waited here, I would find who I was sent to retrieve.”

Maggie felt her stomach drop and she took a step back from the man who’s measured English accent did nothing to put her at ease. She glanced behind him to see a silver Rolls-Royce Eagle parked horizontally across two parking spaces.

“Nice car, you’ve got there, friend.” Bartlett commented, noticing it the same time Maggie did. “Who is it you’ve come to collect?”

“One Special Detective Margaret Ellen Sawyer,” He read from a small white paper held in a gloved hand. “She is as my mistress puts it, ‘a stubborn mule of a woman who prefers men’s trousers to women’s suits,’ and has had a past association with my mistress’s sister, Ms. Kate Kane, I believe.”

The driver looked up from his paper to Maggie with the same level, indifferent gaze he’d had before, ignoring Joe who was now chuckling beside the woman aptly dressed in a three piece
tweed suit and tailored trousers.

“You must be, Detective Sawyer, I presume,” the driver greeted.

“Look, sir. I don’t know who sent you, but I’m not going anywhere with you. I’ve got important work to do that means a great deal to the people of this city. I don’t have time to waste on the Kane sisters or their games.”

“I assure you, mademoiselle, this is not a game. I have been sent to bring you to a meeting with my mistress, whether you wish to attend or not.”

“Hey, just a minute, bub. Maggie might be an odd duck of a woman and she may not even have the right to vote yet in this state, but that doesn’t mean she has to come to with you anywhere if she doesn’t want to.”

“You misunderstand me, Mr. Bartlett is it? I am not here to physically force Ms. Sawyer to do anything, however, my mistress knows a great deal about this city’s workings and she had ordered me to make Ms. Sawyer aware that she can make life very difficult for Ms. Sawyer’s loved ones should she choose not to cooperate with us at this time.”

“What loved ones?” Maggie griped. “I don’t have any family. There’s just me left so if you’re angling for someone you can leverage, you’re looking at the wrong girl.”

The driver cleared his throat and looked down at the paper he was holding once more, before his grey eyes flitted back up to meet Maggie’s. “Is a fairly stern Irish woman by the name of Mollie Malloy not an associate of yours? Or the noisy reporter working as the European correspondent for the *Gotham Gazette* by the name of Toby Raines not a close friend of yours?”

Maggie’s silence spoke for her, telling the silver haired Englishman everything he needed to know in an instant.

“I see,” he drawled continuing to hold Maggie’s gaze. “It would benefit you greatly to know that my mistress has the power to either greatly improve or greatly hamper the life you and your associates lead.”

Maggie straightened and placed her hands on her hips, “Are you threatening incriminating acts
with the intent to harm to an officer of the law in the parking lot of a Police Station?"

Rather than be intimidated by Maggie’s demeanor, the man leaned forward, “To the contrary, mademoiselle, I am merely advising you as a friend might. My mistress doesn’t mean you any harm but she does, however, own over sixty percent of the stock of the Gotham Gazette as well as being the owner of numerous stretches of valuable real estate in and about the city, one such place being the block where Mollie’s Bar is located. However, those details will mean very little if you consent to speak with her presently.”

“Why doesn’t she just write to me then or call the station if it’s so important that she see me?” Maggie countered, more curious now than upset.

“But the matter my mistress wishes to discuss with you is…delicate…and regards—as best I know—the nature of your association with her sister, Mistress Kate. An association which she knew you would appreciate being handled with the utmost discretion given the fact that half of your fellow police officers still believe a woman working in their midst to be repugnant. Men like Mr. Cornwell for instance who might be prepared to use any means necessary to see you and your good name ruined and that is not something my mistress wishes for you.”

Maggie thought about that for a second. She’d never actually met Kate’s sister Beth. Kate had talked about her all to Maggie all the time, but that was where their familiarity ended. Had Kate told Beth about her as well? At one time, that knowledge might’ve thrilled Maggie, but it only served to unsettle her now after all Kate had put her through during their short time together. Still, if following this little man back to the Kane Manor for a chat with his mistress would keep the Kanes off of her back for the foreseeable future and keep Mollie and Toby out of trouble, then she was willing to do it, but her Smith & Wesson .22 was coming with her.

“Joe, would you cover with me for the captain until I get back,” Maggie asked. “I assume I won’t be long?”

The Kane’s driver nodded as if to back up her words, but Joe reached out and caught her arm at the elbow, stopping her for a moment.

“Hey, you sure you want to do this? While, I have complete faith in you being able to kick King George’s scrawny ass over there, I need to know you’re in your right mind before I let you go? It’s what friends do.”

Joe shrugged as if embarrassed to bring it up, but Maggie nodded at him.
“Don’t give yourself apoplexy over me, Joe. I’ll be okay.”

The drive to the Kane Manor had taken longer than Maggie had anticipated and almost all of the buildings they’d passed by had been examples in the frivolity of Mark Twain’s aptly named, “Gilded Age.” If anything, Maggie thought, the trip from the poorest city slums near where she worked into the robust countryside where the estates of the elite stretched on and on had epitomized what Oscar Wilde had meant when he said, “America went from barbarism to decadence without any civilization in between.” Though that saying might not be true throughout the country, for Gotham it reflected the nature of the city better than other mirror that had ever been held up to it for scrutiny.

Maggie’s doleful musings drew to a close as the tall iron gates in front of them were opened by men in grey uniforms standing beside the high brick wall that surrounded the entire estate like a fort. The Rolls turned into the long circular driveway that looped in front of a stylish mansion. The five or six story building showcased just enough of the conservative Dutch origins of the county’s original settlers beneath a flashier veneer of Victorian gothic architecture that had been added at the tail end of the last century. A large family crest was carved into the stone hanging above the iron double doors leading into the manor house—two flintlock muskets crossed over a red painted field with the carefully crafted motto below: *pugnare debemus, et sanguinem vincimus*—we fight, we bleed, we win.

The iron doors heavy ironed doors were pulled open from the inside at the same time before Maggie was ushered into a foyer that was twice the size of the detective’s meager apartment. The austere Englishman who’d seemed so unflinching in the face of Maggie’s intimidation tactics now seemed nervous upon their arrival and was doing everything in his power to rush Maggie through the various corridors and servant’s passages that led from one end of the manor to the other until they were back outside again. Maggie paused on the grass of the backyard—wanting to ask why if she was just going to be ushered outside anyway that they’d had to go through the overly large house instead of going around—but before she could, the detective was being waved towards a large building which smelled of horse dung.

The stables. A very large, very well kept stable, lined with three rows of spacious horse stalls, many of them occupied by long legged warmbloods. And at the tail end stood the longest legged and warmest blooded of all—a tall blonde woman whose features Maggie would’ve recognized even if she’d been blind and deaf. For a moment, time stopped for Maggie and it was Kate Kane and not her sister who was standing before her at the stable’s far end. Those laughing green eyes met Maggie’s and the over confident smile that made the brunette’s heart seize in her chest every time she saw it, beamed across the expanse of concrete, straw, and manure…
“If you took a picture, it would last longer. Though I do so tire of posing for those.”

The cool voice broke Maggie from her dreams of Kate and she was suddenly faced with a shadow of the green eyes regarding her coldly, underlined by an unkind frown.

“You must be Detective Maggie Sawyer of the Gotham Police Department.”

The blonde woman with a mirror image of Kate’s every feature but for her raging red hair asked, looking back down towards where her gloved hands were unbuckling the girth of an English saddle from beneath the belly of a flea-bitten gray gelding.

“My sister effused about you to me almost every day I saw her before she left for France, though, God knows why.”

The obvious slight caught Maggie off guard, but she refused to show it. Crossing her arms over her chest, she replied coolly, “So much for the better bred having better manners.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Detective,” the infuriating blonde was speaking again, “but I’ve known my sister our entire lives. I’ve watched her secretly and not-so-secretly bed heiresses to robber barons, noble ladies, and rare beauties from across the world and not even be able to recall their names the following morning. And yet she couldn’t shut up about you over a span of months and—according to her grief fueled description—she didn’t bed you until the night before leaving. So you can understand why I would be surprised that the only woman to leave a lasting impression on my sister’s fickle heart would be someone who doesn’t appear extraordinary at first glance, though perhaps I am hasty in saying that. After all, it’s often the most unassuming rocks which turn out to be harboring the most valuable of jewels.”

Maggie grimaced and rolled her eyes, trying not to see the logic in Beth Kane’s cold appraisal. The seasoned detective had lived anything but an ordinary life and she knew her own worth for herself. She didn’t need the heiress to the Hamilton Firearms Fortune to prop up her ego. More like the other way around.

“So did you bring me out here just to insult me or is there actually a point to rudely pulling me away from fighting against Gotham’s constant darkness?”

At hearing the words, Beth looked back at Maggie with a new scrutiny in her gaze, a curiosity that seemed to be searching for more depth than the blonde had originally assumed the detective to
have. She pulled the now free saddle from the gelding’s back and handed it offhandedly to a waiting stable boy, before blowing out her slightly sweaty bangs from her eyes, “As much fun as that would be, no. I’ve sent for you at my sister’s insistence.”

Maggie stiffened then, her heart skipping a beat at the thought that Kate—the woman whom she’d wasted far too many hours pining over for the past year and a month—would’ve been thinking about her too, “Truly?”

“I had the same reaction when the poor Western Union man delivered the telegram asking me to send for you when her next letter arrived,” Beth admitted, a smirk turning up one side of her mouth as she placed her hands on her hips. “You may or may not be aware that my sister has insisted on insinuating herself into the heart of the slaughter going on across the pond. Since February, she’s been embroiled with the French armies near a fortified town called Verdun. For months, her few letters droned on and on about the terrible conditions, the stench of the dead, etc. and her guilt over how she’d left things with you. Then the telegram came from the Renseignements aux Familles saying that she’d been wounded and—”

Maggie’s chest constricted suddenly and her entire body felt cold, “She’s hurt?”

Beth swallowed, wetting her lips before continuing, carefully choosing her words. “She was… recovering last I heard, at a field hospital near the River Meuse, though I assume the letter she wrote you has more details to that effect.”

A pale hand reached inside of Beth Kane’s riding jacket and pulled out a tattered looking envelope, holding it out to Maggie in the space between them. Maggie looked at it, feeling numb. Should she take it? Kate had left her, feeling used, abandoned, and ashamed without any explanation. All of Maggie’s attempts to contact her had been foiled. The letter she’d sent with the name of Kate’s regiment on it, had come back to her undelivered and so Maggie had resolved herself to her pain and anguish. Did Kate really deserve a chance to explain herself after all she’d put the brunette through over the months they’d been separated?

“I know what you’re thinking and—for once in this entire encounter—I don’t blame you,” Beth said, not unkindly. “Kate broke your heart. You both should’ve known that was par for the course, but that’s beside the point. Whether or not she deserves your forgiveness at this point isn’t something that’s my place to determine, but what I can tell you for sure is that it costs nothing to listen. There are millions of people across the world who would give both of their tits and then some to be able to talk to their loved ones one last time before they were lost to them on the killing fields. You have that chance. Might as well take it.”

Beth pressed the envelope into one of Maggie’s hands and left her standing at the edge of the stables with nothing but uncertainty and the unavoidable stench of manure clouding her senses.
The first thing she was aware of was cold.

There was something resting across parts of her face and neck that was cold. Maggie opened her eyes and took in the overly bright room and the stiff hospital cot she was laying in. A little wiggling of her nose revealed that the cannula delivering oxygen through her nostrils and the plastic tube that led across her body back into the oxygen tank by the wall was the cold feeling she could identify against her skin. Maggie could move if she truly wanted to, but her entire body just felt like one big ache. A machine was beeping steadily out of her line of vision which she guessed was most likely a heart monitor.

“Good to see you’re awake.”

The soft yet somber voice was unfamiliar to Maggie and at first she couldn’t place it, but when she looked down at the foot of the bed, she saw the unmistakable form of Kara Danvers sitting in an uncomfortable looking plastic chair and glaring daggers at her.

“It was you, who saved me. Kara Danvers: Supergirl,” Maggie rasped through a dry throat that felt scratchy, like she hadn’t used it in one hundred years.

She must’ve been intubated at some point when she was unconscious, Maggie surmised. That meant her condition had been serious enough that she’d needed help breathing. She took stock of her body quietly. There was a throbbing in her head that was selective to only certain places. There was a burning ache in the back of her spine where her skull and neck joined which likely meant she had been knocked or blown back into the concrete floor or walls of a warehouse or stack of shipping containers on the terminal. And there was also a stretch of skin running from above one of her eyebrows to her left temple that was throbbing in sync with the beat of Maggie’s heart. Everything else felt normal.

There was a sudden burst of air and Kara Danvers was suddenly leaning over the side of Maggie’s bed right next to her face, trying to look menacing for all she was worth. Though the girl gave the solid impression of being a golden retriever in humanoid form, Maggie had no doubt that she could become as dangerous as a Russian bear dog if that was truly what the other woman wanted.
“How do you know that?”

Maggie smirked, the self-amused expression turning into a grimace as her head throbbed more sharply at the movement.

“I figured it out on my own,” the brunette croaked, staring up into eyes that were an uncertain blue. “I’ve been a detective a long time and the glasses you wear are your only disguise. It wasn’t a hard conclusion to come to.”

Kara seemed to consider that for a moment, lips pursed, before her shoulders relaxed and she took a step back, placing her hands on her hips and looking lost.

“Thanks…” Maggie said, stopping to clear her throat before continuing. “For saving my ass.”

Kara stepped away and paced a couple of languid steps back and forth at the foot of the bed, gesturing with her hands in the air as she spoke.

“As angry as I am with you at the way you treated Alex, I couldn’t leave you to die, even if you are a sorry excuse for a good human woman who—I might add—would be lucky to have someone like my sister for a friend.”

Maggie swallowed again and closed her eyes against the wave of emotion rising in her chest. What she had done was dirty and underhanded. One of the pluses of modern communication technology, was that you could talk from anywhere to anyone regardless of where they were. One of the negatives of modern communication technology, was that you could sever connection with a person without giving them the basic benefits of human decency or say things to them that they deserved to hear in person.

Like telling the woman you love that you can’t see her anymore. The woman she loved? Where did that come from? Maggie cared for Alex, cared for her more than anyone else she’d met in years, but love? Like Kate Kane level love? She’d thought that was something she would only feel once, but now that Maggie was thinking about it, she wasn’t so sure.

Even as Maggie questioned it, she could feel the truth of it at the core of her being. She loved Alex Danvers. She was in love with her. Already.
“Well, like I said, thanks,” Maggie repeated, still reeling.

“Don’t thank me. I may’ve saved your life, detective, but I didn’t do it for you,” Kara snapped, her voice sharp and short. “I did it because Alex would never forgive me if I didn’t intervene when I could’ve saved your life, but I also didn’t tell her you were stupid enough to get in between Lobo and one of his targets. She doesn’t know you’re here either and it’s probably best that it stays like that.”

Maggie swallowed down the cold dip of sadness threatening to burble up into her throat and pushed through the feelings, “I appreciate that. She doesn’t deserve to have to worry after an idiot like me.”

Kara threw her hands up into the air then in complete frustration, “You don’t get it do you?! Whether or not you want her to, Alex will always worry about you because she cares about what happens to you despite how horribly you’ve treated her because that’s who my sister is. She’s decent and loyal and kind. I only wish you felt the same way about her.”

“I do!” Maggie responded, before she could think about any of the words coming out of her mouth. “You think I left her because I don’t care about her? All I do is think about her!”

“I don’t understand,” Kara shook her head, stepping further into Maggie’s personal space. “If you care about Alex so much then why hurt her? You know she’s been holed up in her apartment for days right? When I came over to check on her, she locked me out. She’s never done that before and when I finally got in earlier today, she tried to act like nothing had even happened. Then she broke down crying in my arms. Broke down, Maggie! My older sister is in pain and you’re the one who put her there!”

“Better a broken heart than a broken body,” Maggie grimaced, as the throbbing in her head grew more painful.

But her words had peaked Kara’s interest, “What do you mean?”

Maggie took a deep breath, “Nothing, Danvers. I’m a cop…I just meant…that my job makes me a target and anyone I love becomes one too. I’ve lost people before to acts of retribution from the families of criminals I’ve put away. I couldn’t lose Alex too.”
Kara shook her head indignantly, pushing her glasses back up her nose and regarding Maggie more kindly than she had been seconds beforehand.

“If you really knew Alex then you’d know that she’s the real Supergirl between the two of us. She’s the strongest woman I know with the biggest, most resilient heart of anyone. She doesn’t need coddling. She’d not a damsel in need to protection or rescue. And Alex has the right to be able to choose whose lives she wants to be a part of and who…” Here Kara paused, as if unsure of herself, then continued after sucking in a breath, “Who she loves.”

Maggie met Kara’s gaze with her own surprised one. Had Alex told her that they were essentially dating? They hadn’t really defined what they were during their six weeks spent together and—on Maggie’s part—it wasn’t for lack of trying. She’d struggled to decide on a label for their relationship, something that could be shoved into a neat little box and give her some small peace of mind because then she would know where she stood with the object of her affections. Instead, they’d just enjoyed being together and let everything unfurl organically.


All three things Maggie had worked very hard never to hope for again with another woman given everything she’d lost and yet she’d failed in that too.

“How?” Maggie croaked.

“Alex isn’t exactly subtle about how she feels…about anything. She wears her heart on her sleeve, though she tries to hide it, but she can’t. Now when her eyes light up whenever you name is mentioned or every time she would receive a text from you. She talks about you openly and always with a smile that she can’t hide. I’ve known Alex for a long time, but I’ve never seen her happier than she is when she talks about you, at least until recently. That’s not just a bond of friendship. I know what love looks like. Real love. I learned by watching my parents together and Jeremiah and Eliza and though—I’ve only seen you with Alex a handful of times—it’s clear you have a connection that can’t be stamped out by one stupid text message. My sister is head over heels for you and she doesn’t deserve the crap you’ve put her through.”

“You’re right. She doesn’t,” Maggie nodded, her eyes beginning to sting with tears.

“Well, what are you going to do about it then?”
“Look, Kara, if I could take it back I would—”

“You can’t take it back,” Kara conceded. “But you can go to Alex and explain why you did what you did. Tell her you did it because you didn’t want her to become a target. Alex will understand. Believe me, she has a government job. She knows what it means to have a target on her back and—unlike you—Alex doesn’t back down, but she does forgive. She has the greatest capacity for forgiveness of anyone that I know.”

Maggie pulled the plastic tube down from around her ears and the cannula from her nose. She didn’t need it anymore. She’d survived a lot and she knew from experience that—either because of her condition or in spite of it—she healed a little quicker than most people with less care. With a groan, she pushed herself up into a sitting position in the hospital bed and immediately had to close her eyes against the wave of dizziness that followed the movement.

“Whoa, whoa!” Kara put her hands up as if that would keep Maggie in her place. “What are you doing? You have a major concussion, you need to stay in bed and rest.”

“No,” Maggie said standing, and looking around for her things. “What I need is to find out why one of the most well-known and likely expensive alien Bounty Hunters in the known universe went after my officers and who hired them.”

She found her clothes in a plastic bag beside the door. They reeked of chemical explosives, but they would have to do until she could get back to her own place and change. Kara’s cheeks reddened and she turned around to give Maggie the illusion of privacy, but she was already throwing the hospital gown over her head and beginning to shrug the clothes on. Maggie had spent years surviving, Not living. But now with Alex…she might have a second chance to do just that…for a little while at least. Hopefully, when the time came, Shay would be able to deliver on her side of the bargain and then this sordid overdue journey of hers could end, but until then Maggie had a mission to complete. Find out why Lobo was in National City, find our why Dr. Victor Vitae was suddenly haunting her every waking moment, and apologize to Alex and hope with everything that she had that the other woman would forgive her.

OOOOOOOO

Gotham City—October 1916

Maggie sat on the edge of her bed. The entire ride back home, she’d felt the letter in her pocket as if it were a second passenger in the backseat of the Rolls Royce with her. Now, staring down at the offending object in her hands, Maggie wasn’t sure she had it in herself to open it. Carefully, she ran her finger up and down the spine of the envelope, feeling a few bumps of what looked like dried mud. Was hopefully mud. Did she really want to open herself up again to Kate Kane of all people?
Kate Kane who’d taken her out for afternoon strolls that sometimes ended in picnics in the park. Kate Kane who’d romanced Maggie into bed and then left her there alone with no subsequent explanation.

She’d actually tried to contact Kate once after Toby had made her face the world again, but Kate had already left on a steamer bound for Europe and Maggie had resolved to move on with her life in the interim. She’d thought Kate would have too, but she hadn’t. Now what was Maggie supposed to do? Could her resolved stand up to the letter in her hands and the foolish hope it revived? Could Kate Kane—the forces of Nature she’d fallen in love with—really be at Death’s door? And if she was, would Maggie one day come to regret not reading possibly the last letter Kate had ever written before she’d taken her last breaths?

Maggie sighed. She couldn’t do that to Kate. Despite all the woman had done to break Maggie’s heart and make her miserable, she couldn’t ignore Kate. Maybe she never could’ve.

Decision made, Maggie used a butter knife to slice the envelope open. The letter within was written on stiff yellowed paper that was full on both sides with little inky scribbles. All and all there were six pages numbered in the upper right hand corner with Roman numerals. Swallowing the cold fear settling into her stomach, Maggie slowly began to read.

Oct. 18th 1916

Dearest Maggie,

I hope this letter finds you well, though, I can’t imagine you wanted to hear much from me at this point after our last meeting and I don’t blame you for that. I blame myself. I’ve never been a person who was in tune with the softer feelings that outdated men of our fathers’ and grandfathers’ generations insist are the mark of true womanhood. I’ve always found it easier to avoid emotion at all cost. Beth and I are both like that, but then again so is our father. Overt expression of emotion isn’t something that is desired or accepted for the children of the so called ‘higher classes.’ Most children of robber barons though—I’m fairly certain—manage to live full lives without building military level fortifications around their hearts. But Beth and I couldn’t.

We both learned long ago that the people you entrust your hearts to for protection are the people that can break them into the most pieces. Our mother realized it too—though not soon enough. I wish you could’ve met my mother, Mags. She was so full of life and humor and this perfect, wonderful irreverence for authority that I would like to think I inherited from her. While in her company, one could never feel sad or left out. She had a generous heart, one that couldn’t survive the social expectations and realities of being married to the heir to the Kane family rifle fortune.

When my parents first met and married, I believe that they were happy. The pictures taken of them
after their wedding and on their honeymoon abroad appear more carefree and candid than anything you see someone pose for in a photographer’s studio and yet that happiness—if ever it truly existed—was not meant to last. A year after they were married, my father’s elder brother—Robert—was murdered by a madman who broke into our family estate intending to kill my grandfather, but ended up killing my Uncle Robert instead when he stepped in to protect grandfather.

My father was recalled from his position at Fort McNair in Washington and brought in to fill the void left behind by the death of his business minded older brother. He worked at all hours, barely seeing his wife. Evidently, he saw her enough though because Beth and I were born later on the same year. My mother raised Beth and I mostly on her own in that large house and endured until we were six years old. That April of 1904 she’d been expecting another baby. When she went into labor early, she gave birth prematurely to our baby brother, but he was weak and couldn’t breathe right. He didn’t live long enough for our father to see him and when our father found out that the baby he was coming home to see was dead, he turned his carriage around and went back to Kane Industries to finish up his day of work.

The loss of a long awaited child was too great to endure in a house where our mother didn’t have anything or anyone to help her cope, but laudanum, which her doctor prescribed with so much ease that we could’ve easily requested barrels of the damned liquid from him and he would’ve obliged us. It was too much and my beautiful softhearted mother...took her own life a month later. Her loss changed us—changed me—irreversibly. I never again wanted to live through that kind of heartbreak. I never wanted to give something everything only to have them take it away with them when they eventually left me alone with nothing. As such, my romantic life has followed a pattern of dreaded predictability that I always found regrettable, but if it saved me from pain, I was convinced to follow that pattern until my dying day. Meeting you changed that for me.

You make me smile and laugh, Mags, and you open me up to emotions I didn’t even know that I could feel anymore. I love you, Maggie. I know it doesn’t seem possible after I left you that morning like a coward—an I was one—but when I saw you sleeping peacefully beside me with the morning sun turning your bronze skin gold, I knew that if I stayed there with you then I would be giving you more power and influence than I’ve ever allowed anyone to have over my heart since mother died. And then you would’ve had the power to break me when you eventually left me behind like my mother did. I knew I wouldn’t survive losing you and—ironically—I had convinced myself that if I was the one who made the choice to leave, then at least I could soldier on knowing that it’d been my choice to do so.

But I was wrong, Mags, so very wrong. I’ve been miserable without you. I’ve lived through every day since that last one with you, just surviving from moment to moment, wishing I’d never signed up to come over here in the first place. Wishing that I’d been brave enough to come to terms with how I felt about you and stayed. I must’ve started and discarded this letter a hundred times in the trenches. Paper’s scarce here though so I’ve been using the cast off Maggie letters for my letters to Beth. She’d thoroughly annoyed by now, no doubt realizing she’s second in my thoughts to you by how much I talk about you.

She’ll get over it though. I couldn’t find the courage I needed to finish this letter to you until now when the severity of my current circumstances outweighed my cowardice. If you’re reading this letter then you’ve likely heard from Beth—who I hope delivered this letter in person like I asked her to—that I am in a bad way, Mags. Since September, we’ve been trying to regain the ground we lost to the Germans over the spring and summer, but we haven’t managed much of it. Even as the hospital nurse writes this for me, I can hear the boom-boom of the shells our side is firing at the German lines in preparation for another push forward. The last one wasn’t worth the space we regained.
Going over the top of the trenches between the forts into barbed wire, mud, and bullets is the most harrowing of experiences a human being can go through. I wasn’t expecting the ice and the mud and the constant slipping and sliding in the blood and guts of those that fell before you. We’ve been camped out here just north of the banks of the Meuse since February and I’ve seen a lot in that time, but nothing prepares you to advance on an enemy with automatic guns and what feels like an endless supply of bullets. Both sides chat up their soldiers saying that they’re integral to defending their home nations, but then they belittle those words by throwing those bodies into the shit storm between the lines like so much cannon fodder.

In our last attack, I only made it 2/3rds of the way across when the first bullet grazed my shoulder, but I kept going because hesitation in the field only hastens your death and I had no plans of dying before I could get back to Gotham and you. After that, it’s hard to say what happened. One minute I was slipping and sliding in mud, the next I was being thrown into the air like a ragdoll. When I came to, I was in a shell hole with another woman soldier. From what I could tell, she’d probably been a sharpshooter of some kind given the Springfield rifle clutched to her chest, but she wasn’t firing at the enemy, Mags.

She was dead. Her eyes were frozen over and glossy and—for all I knew—she was probably caught up in the explosion and fell into the hole like me. Only half of her was there with me. Her torso remained with bloody guts training out across the mud from below the waist like tangled coils of pink, purple, and red rope. The smell was overbearing: guts, shit, and blood and all of it mixing up in my head as a fire burned in my hip and shoulder. I likely spent hours going in and out of consciousness after that because I can only recall bits and pieces. I remember that everything hurt. I remember the sounds of gun fire and shells exploding that was deafened by the ringing in my ears.

I also remember the stretcher bearers struggling to carry me through the mud and the fighting. They’re the real heroes of this war, Mags, if it could be said there were any. They go out to retrieve the wounded sometimes as many as a hundred times in night, following the cries of the injured and dying, sometimes becoming the dying or injured themselves. I heard a story of one British bearer who was carrying a wounded man on his shoulders when he was shot through both calves, but somehow—if but for the grace of his Christian God—he kept going until he made it back to the British lines. You hear stories like that of courage in the face of certain death and hope that you’ll act that way when your time comes, but I know I didn’t.

I was taken by ambulance to a field hospital near Elix, which is where I am dictating this letter to you now. I wanted to write it in my own hand, but I don’t have the energy right now to even hold a pen. A piece of shrapnel struck in between my hip and groin—let us hope that scars really are thought by women to be sexy—and another smaller piece that went straight through my right shoulder. They bearers gave me morphine for the ambulance ride, but I’d worn off by the time we’d forded the river. When we arrived at the hospital, one of the doctors said he could remove the shrapnel, but that they’d run out of morphine and couldn’t give me anything for the pain. He said it would take all of five minutes so I told him to get on with it, but, Mags, I could kill that bloody doctor. Five minutes feels like an eternity when all of you is burning up with an unstoppable inferno of pain. I think I must’ve passed out by the time he’d sewn up my hip because the first thing I remember after that is waking up in a bed in the large tent, having the mud and dirt sponged off of my face and neck by a nurse.

Doctor says I could pull through, but that’s if the wounds don’t want to infect and I don’t develop blood poisoning or enteric fever within the next few weeks. I hope that if I do die, I will at least be able to take some comfort in knowing that you’ve received this letter and that you know how much I love you. If I could take back what I did, I would in a heartbeat, Mags. If I pull through, I swear to you that I will spend the rest of my life showing you just how much you mean to me. The past is
dead. With great hope, we can move forward.

Love Always,

Your Kate

A near silent sob reverberated through Maggie’s chest as the letter fell from her grip and onto the hardwood floor of the sitting room. God in heaven. What was she supposed to do with this information?? Kate really did love her and—what’s worse—she was over three thousand miles away and dying. Alone. In the middle of war torn France. Alone. She had to go there. She had to be there. Without thinking much more about it, she raced down to the second floor landing where Mrs. Schroeder had a communal telephone installed for the residents in the building to share. She picked up the bell shaped ear piece and had to bend down to be able to talk into the brass mouth piece connected to the box in the wall.

“Operator, what number are you trying to reach, please?”

“Get me the Kane residence,” Maggie huffed, trying to catch her breath.

There was quiet over the line before the voice of the switch operator came back with a sarcastic lilt, “Do you mean Kane Manor?”

“Do you know another?” Maggie snapped back. Customer service in Gotham had a very human cynicism to it and—under other circumstances—Maggie might’ve had a little fun with that, but she wasn’t in the mood right now.

“Hold please.”

Maggie waited and after a few deep breaths the unbearable silence was broken by a series of rings. One. Two. Three. Four. Then Five.

“Come on, come on,” Maggie grumbled, resisting the urge to punch the phone box and likely break it.
“Kane Family Residence, the butler speaking,” came a smooth British voice once the other line was picked up.

Maggie swallowed down her trepidation at her next words, “My name is Detective Maggie Sawyer. I’m calling to speak with Beth Kane.”

There was quiet and then a hesitant breath was released, “I wasn’t sure you were going to phone us to be perfectly frank, but Ms. Kane bet me fifty of your American dollars that you would. Kindly hold the line.”

Maggie’s head hit the wall as she face planted into the cheap wallpaper. The Kanes were going to be the death of her. She dealt with robbers, rapists, and murderers pulling guns on her on a daily basis and yet she was sure it would be this pair of devil-may-care millionaire twins that were going to do her in eventually.

“Have you called to tell me that you’re ready for a trip to war-torn Europe?” Beth Kane’s smooth voice purred over the line, “Or to break my sister’s heart all over again? And while she might be dying no less?”

Maggie squeezed her eyes shut, trying not to give in to the urge to take the bait and yell at this woman so loud she wouldn’t even need a phone to hear her from Kane County.

“The first one,” Maggie said through gritted teeth.

“Good. I’ll send James over to grab you. Be ready.”

“Wait,” Maggie protested. “Do you already have spots on an ocean liner or something?”

“Oh no, darling. How quaint you are!” Beth laughed out loud at her as though Maggie were a slapstick comic doing a skit on the vaudeville stage. “No, my dear, you’re so pedestrian. I love it. I’m a Kane. We own our own shipping line and it’s helped us make a literal killing off of this war so far. There’s nothing more profitable right now than selling weapons to the British and the French. We’ll all be rich as Croesus when everyone tires of fighting each other across the pond.”

Maggie bit her lip. She’d spent enough time around independently wealthy people to respect that they had their odd quirks like anyone else, but joking about the profiting from the deaths of the
millions of dead on both sides at this point was in poor taste. And it also didn’t bode well for Maggie spending a week crossing the Atlantic with the same woman who seemed to value money more than human life. Maybe she was selling Beth Kane short, but from what Maggie had seen of the woman so far, she wasn’t far off the mark.

“All joking aside,” Beth’s confident voice cut back across the line. “As I speak, I am sending James out to grab you. Be ready.”

Then there was the inevitable sound of the other line clicking off and Maggie was left alone with her growing sense of dread.

OOOOOOOO

October 2016—National City

Thump. Thump.

Alex’s fists hammered into the 250 lb. bag hanging from the ceiling in one of the DEO’s anterior rooms.

Thump.

She’d actually gone into work today, only to be told by J’onn that she was taking her bad mood out on the technicians and she needed to find a way to cool off or take another sick day. That was how she’d ended up in one of the DEO’s training rooms, beating all of her anger, grief, and self-pity into a sand bag.

Thump. Thump. Thump

And now—though punching something was helping—Alex found herself alone with her thoughts and her feelings and she wasn’t handling either of them well.

Wham.
Her boot connected solidly with the bag, the force shaking down her leg and getting lost in all of the energy she was releasing out into the space around her.

Fucking feelings. Fucking Maggie—no, not fucking, Maggie. Fuck Alex’s heart for caring and fuck her brain for thinking that she could ever have a life for herself or someone to love outside of her immediate family. Fuck her for having hope. Fuck her for wanting more. And fuck her for trusting another person with her heart when life experience had taught her that it wasn’t a good idea.

Thump. Thump. Thump. WHAM!

The ending roundhouse kick set the punching bag free of its ceiling chains and flying into one of the metal walls, where it actually dented the steel upon impact and crashed to the concrete floor. Alex bent over, trying to catch her breath and writing off the sudden burst of strength as a side effect of the whirlwind of emotions assaulting her right now and the adrenaline response it’d provoked.

“Agent Danvers.”

The quiet greeting came from the door to the room where J’onn was standing a few steps inside, standing at attention with another man in Army dress green hanging a few steps behind him. Alex pushed herself back up to her full height and swallowed the scream of raw fury she’d been ready to release—if only to spare herself the pain of continuing to internalize what she was feeling.

“Sir?” Alex questioned levelly, walking over to her director with her hands clasped behind her back and her shoulders straight as if she hadn’t been in a state of complete chaos seconds before.

“Agent Danvers,” J’onn repeated formally, turning slightly to acknowledge the man behind him. “Meet Lieutenant General Eiling. He’s our new liaison officer from the Pentagon.”

Alex’s arm twitched as she restrained the natural reaction to reach out her hand to shake one that clearly wasn’t being offered. Instead, she nodded curtly at the grim looking man who was actually a few inches taller than J’onn. His sideburns were dark at the top, but feathered in silver down towards his ears. His eyes were sharp and unkind. His face was long and maudlin without the support of alcohol and a long, handlebar mustache his the expression of his mouth, adding to the
stern demeanor he cast.

“Director Henshaw speaks very highly of you, Agent Danvers,” the general said with a nod. “I hear you’ve given a great deal in defense of our cause and your nation thanks you. There is—however—still more we require you to do. Director Henshaw, if you please.”

“Of course,” J’onn nodded, making his way somberly towards the door. “I will be in the control room if you need me.”

His eyes flicked to Alex briefly in a reassuring manner and then the automatic door opened and shut behind him, leaving Alex alone with a man whose presence was making her feel increasingly uneasy.

“I’ll get straight to the point, Agent,” Eiling continued as if J’onn had never been there. “I’m here because we’re spearheading a top secret program and we want you to head it.”

“We?”

“Yes. It seems that you made quite the impression on the President when she was here in the Spring. In particular, your work on protein singleness.”

“Synthesis,” Alex volunteered with a smile.

“That’s what I said,” the general grumbled, eyeing Alex with less respect than before the correction. “The details will be revealed to you and made available on a need to know basis to Director Henshaw. Do you accept this mission, soldier?”

Alex’s shoulders tensed as General Eiling stared at her like he already knew her answer and was displeased by it. Maybe he did, but that didn’t change Alex’s resolve.

“I need more details before I can make a decision.”

The general’s eyes narrowed, “Further information is contingent on your acceptance of the position.”
His eyes scrutinized Alex moving from her face down her body, pausing noticeably on her chest before continuing until his gaze snapped back up to meet Alex’s own.

“You know, despite your superior officer’s obvious attachment to you, I wouldn’t still be here if it weren’t for the President’s insistence that you’re the one she wants handling this work. So, what’s it going to be? Are you going to disappoint the leader of the free world or are you going to do your duty in service of your people and your nation and do your damn job?”

The general’s voice was as rough and malicious as his eyes. The way he looked at Alex made her skin crawl and though—she’d never suffer bullies—she did have to admit that she was curious. President Marsdin’s first visit to National City had been a rousing success. As part of the visit, the president had taken a tour of the main DEO facility. At the time Alex and a few of the DEO’s other biologists had been doing a study on developing regenerative medical therapies that would increase the effectiveness of the metabolism of ultraviolet radiation by synthesizing a protein that attached itself during the chemical reaction that happened when sunlight was absorbed into a Kryptonian’s skin and converted into usable energy. She was appropriately proud of herself for coming up with the blueprint for a passable treatment that could help Kara recover quicker after blowing out her powers or being exposed to Kryptonite. Even the president seemed proud of her innovation and seemed to enjoy how Alex excitedly explained how it worked. Still, Alex hadn’t been aware she’d made such an impression on the other woman.

Alex was more than honored and a bit thrilled to take on any sort of work for the president who’d won the hearts and minds of most of the country—including hers & Kara’s—four years ago now, but if it meant working on a regular basis with General Eiling then that dampened Alex’s enthusiasm somewhat.

“If I accept this proposal, will I be working with you as my liaison officer to the White House?” Alex asked, managing to keep the disdain out of her voice.

The general shook his head, “No, you’ll be reporting directly to the President herself. With any luck, this will be the last time you and I will be required to meet to person.”

Alex checked her reaction to the rude remark by keeping her expression neutral, “Then you can tell Madame President that I heartily accept her offer.”

The general nodded his head tiredly as if he’d known all along that the inevitable conclusion would always be the one Alex chose. He removed the green cap from his head and walked over to one of the weight benches against the wall, dropping the briefcase he’d been holding down onto the seat and popping it open. Letting her curiosity get the better of her, Alex stepped closer and was
surprised when a thick tan folder tied together with twine was tossed at her. Alex caught it easily, but she didn’t even bother to suppress the annoyed glare she tossed at the general.

“You should know that you’re not the first person to work on this project. The work you’re undertaking has been begun and added to by other scientists little by little over the past fifty years or so. Some of the most brilliant minds in the world have poured over these same documents and have been unable to come up with the answer to the one simple question: can we live forever.”

Alex’s eyes snapped up from the folder and met Eiling’s grim gaze. Had she heard him correctly? Had he just said what she thought he’d said?

“We need you to prove,” here the general paused and reached into the breast pocket of his uniform jacket, bringing up a thick pair of glasses so he could read the words off of the notecard he’d fished out of his pocket. “We need you to prove that, ‘chronological aging from degenerative senescence can be arrested, rendered immutable, or abated down to a predictable rate. To be clear, we do not expect you to eliminate mortality by any other means, but to eliminate mortality by the study and replication of telomerase in a crusade to prolong human life by whatever medium possible.’ Jesus. I’m so grateful I’m not some damn egghead. You got all that?”

Alex bit the inside of her cheek to keep the defensive words she’d been ready to utter that being an ‘egghead’ was preferable to being a rude, ignorant, chimpanzee—though that would be an insult to the Chimpanzee. Instead, she just nodded and gripped the folder with the glaring red words ‘CLASSIFIED’ stamped across the cover.

“Great,” Eiling deadpanied, tucking his glasses back into his pocket and discarding the paper he’d been reading from on the training room floor. “We’ll be in touch.”

Alex bit back the urge this time to ask more questions because, although she’d been literally read the mission statement of her new case study—she’d been given no explicit directives or real perimeters for her research or experiments—only a vague direction in which to wander. And Alex definitely had a healthy sense of adventure, but her scientific brain railed against doing anything without basic rules or expectations. Both the scholarly and badass sides of Alex could agree though, that the sooner General Eiling left, the better.

General Eiling—much to his credit—felt the same way and marched out of the room without any prompting, marching through the automatic door and out of Alex’s physical sphere. Alone with her thoughts, Alex focused on the intimidating folder in her hands and walked over to one of the weight benches, sat astride the bench comfortably, and lay the folder in front of her. The ancient twine came untied easily enough and beneath the cover were all of the usual things Alex would’ve expected to find there: research packets on the artificial synthesis of telomerase—an enzyme that increased the life of telomeres at the end of chromosomes—decades long studies on the longevities
of different cell lines, and human development studies.

But then there were things Alex hadn’t been expecting like a massive yellowing transcript that had been three hole punched and tied bound together with string through the holes. At first glance, Alex was hoping it might be personal care notes or progress notes of a biologist like her, but it was more informal than that. The subject lines peered up ambitiously at Alex in standard old typewriter type:

*The Private & Professional Journal of Dr. Victor Vitae*

*Active Years: 1915—1921*

*Transcribed on April 23rd, 1963 by Dr. Donald Hoover Fite*

Alex cocked her head to the side and thumbed the dog eared corners as she flipped the page—finding a paragraph the top that was dated in a different way than the others denoting that this ‘Dr. Life’—if that really was his name then Alex was going to find unlimited humor in it—thought the paragraph to be of great importance.

*4th Day of the 1st Month of the Year 1915*

*On this day, I have decided, for the sake of posterity, to document my journey to find the Fountain of Youth, the Elixir of Life, the goddamned Holy Grail of biology: eternal youth and immortality for the human race…*

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Sorry, this update took so long, but life seriously happened and I have no other excuse. The chapter title comes from an Edgar Allan Poe poem which is pretty good if you ever want to check it out.

Hope you guys enjoyed the update. Leave a comment on your way out if you're so inclined. Thank you for reading and take care. :)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://example.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!