

Standup and Be Counted

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Summary: After Franklin Stern buys the Daily Planet, he has Perry fire Lois because she completely missed the story of Lex Luthor. But his real reason is to send Lois undercover with Clark to investigate Intergang.

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Prologue

“That’s pretty much it, Mr. Stern,” Perry said. “I don’t think I have anything else for this meeting.”

Perry made as if to stand, but Franklin Stern motioned for him to remain seated. “What about the rumors about that new criminal organization? The one that’s moving in on the operations and territory of the late, unlamented Lex Luthor?”

Perry’s eyebrows flickered but didn’t rise. He shouldn’t have been surprised that the Planet’s new owner would know everything important. “I assume you’re referring to the organization the DA’s office is calling Intergang, sir.”

“I am.”

“We don’t have anything we can print. Of course, the Metro PD doesn’t have any solid leads on them either, assuming they exist and that they’re really trying to move into Luthor’s old slot in the criminal food chain. And the DA’s office either doesn’t have anything concrete on them or they’re not even hinting at it, at least not to us.”

“Hmm.” Stern leaned back and frowned in thought. “Perhaps we should mount an investigation. Perhaps even an undercover investigation, one which didn’t look a bit like an undercover operation. Were I the one choosing the participants, I’d select the most highly trusted people in my employ.”

Perry nodded. “That’s a good idea. I’ll start work on it this afternoon.”

“Thank you, Perry. Oh, there is one more thing.”

Perry didn’t give any outward sign of his growing impatience to get back to his office – his newly refurbished and decorated office, with new photos of Elvis and two autographed posters of the King from his most recent comeback tour. “Yes, sir, what is that?”

Stern rose and clasped his hands behind his back as he paced. “There is one employee situation which must be addressed. You have a reporter on board with an excellent track record, but who completely missed the Luthor situation because she was personally involved.”

Missed Luthor? Personally involved? She?

Uh-oh.

Lois. Stern had to be talking about Lois.

And this didn’t sound good.

“Ms. Lane has contributed materially to the past success of the Daily Planet,” Stern continued, “but she has, of late, suffered a decline in the quality of her work. You know better than I that a reporter is only as valuable as his or her most recent story, and recently Ms. Lane has not met her own high journalistic standards,

not to mention those of the Daily Planet. I’m afraid that I must insist that we cut ties with her.”

Perry was stunned. Fire Lois? Unthinkable! He had to talk Stern out of it.

“Mr. Stern, Lois has had some personal problems lately, but I really believe—”

“Perry.” Stern stopped pacing and faced the editor. “I understand the relationship you share with her. I know from personal experience that mentors and students are often closer than they might be were their circumstances different, and I know you’ve poured your heart and soul into this young woman. But sometimes things don’t work out as we would prefer. Sometimes we just have to cut our losses and move on. Sometimes surgeons perform necessary operations and the patient still doesn’t make it.”

What? What did doctors have to do with this? “Mr. Stern, I’m not sure I can—”

“Perry, please.” Stern stepped close and gently put his hand on Perry’s shoulder. “I’m not suggesting that you have her clean out her desk under cover of darkness. We’ll grant her the standard two weeks of severance pay, plus her remaining vacation time, plus a week of pay for every half-year she’s been here. That should give her enough of a cushion to find another job.”

Perry’s eyes flashed. “You know she won’t be able to work for any other paper east of the Rocky Mountains! Once word gets out that the Planet fired her for—”

“We’re not firing her. We’re – we’re downsizing our staff, due to the recent financial strain placed on us by the Luthor debacle.”

Perry sighed and decided to play the small hole card he still held. “If Lois leaves, I’m not sure I’ll be able to keep Clark Kent on board.”

Stern nodded and turned away, but Perry caught a glint of something in his eyes that looked like – like pleasure? But Stern wasn’t a mean man. A hard, tough businessman, yes, but totally honest and as compassionate as he could afford to be. So why would the thought of Clark’s possible departure please him?

The owner shook his head and sighed. “I would hope that we would be able to retain Mr. Kent’s services despite our severing ties with Ms. Lane,” said Stern, “but I would understand both his feelings and his reaction were he to leave despite our desire to keep him on board. In fact, it would not surprise me if the two of them teamed up independently and took on this Intergang investigation entirely on their own, without any prompting from anyone connected with the Daily Planet, if for no other reason than to spite me.”

Stern turned, tilted his head to one side, and stared at Perry with a half-smile on his face, as if he were trying to say something without saying it. But what could—

Then the smoldering candle in the editor’s mind flickered, caught, and flared. Stern was giving Perry the public reasons why Clark and Lois wouldn’t be working for the Planet while they went undercover to investigate Intergang. Stern was cagey, cunning, and daring, and the plan had a good chance of working – if the bad guys really believed the cover story.

Otherwise the Planet might be running two very sad obituaries very soon.

Perry nodded. “I understand, Mr. Stern. I’ll take care of the Lane matter first thing Monday morning, unless you want it done before the weekend.”

Stern waved dismissively. “Monday morning will be soon enough. I’ll contact Audra Baker in Human Resources to draw up the severance package. And I’ll make sure that Ms. Lane’s employee record contains a positive recommendation.”

“Thank you, sir. Will there be anything else?”

“I don’t think – well, one thing, actually. Please make the same terms available to Mr. Kent should he choose to offer his resignation.”

“You know that he’s only been here about a year, right?”

“Of course I do. But I won’t have it said that Franklin Stern is a miser.”

Perry nodded again. “Will do, Mr. Stern. Thank you for your time.”

The owner turned back to his desk. “Until our next meeting, Mr. White.”

Perry pulled the door shut behind him. Now all he had to do was survive Lois’ termination interview.

He pursed his lips and blew out a breath through his nose. He’d rather be under automatic weapons fire in a rice paddy than face an angry Lois Lane. He just hoped Kent would quickly figure out what was happening and play along.

Then all Clark would have to do would be to protect Lois from herself.

It would be a piece of cake for all concerned. No sweat, no muss, no bother, no harm, no foul.

And flying monkeys would distribute tomorrow morning’s edition by coming down everyone’s chimney, just like Santa.

Maybe Audra from Human Resources could fix up a severance package for him, too.

Chapter One

On Monday morning following Perry’s meeting with Franklin Stern, Clark and Jimmy were discussing the finer points of saving temporary files on a floppy disk versus saving them on the local hard drive when Perry stepped out of the elevator. Nothing about that would have caught Clark’s notice – after all, everyone knew he’d been in yet another meeting with Mr. Stern, the new owner – except that Perry’s step faltered for a moment when he looked at Lois.

Lois, who was sitting at her desk and flipping through her rotary phone directory, didn’t see the editor until he stood beside her and touched her shoulder. Clark didn’t intend to eavesdrop, but his overwhelming need to protect her pulled him in.

Lois looked up at Perry and smiled. “Come on in my office, honey,” he mumbled. As Lois stood, Perry looked at Clark and sighed. “You too, Kent,” he said clearly. “This affects both of you.”

Clark met Lois’ quick glance with one which he hoped she would interpret as support, then he stood and followed her to Perry’s door. The editor rounded his desk and sank heavily into his chair without looking at either of his employees, then he said, “Close the door, please, Clark.”

The editor shook his head, looking older than he had since the Planet’s offices had been refurbished. “This is one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do in all of my time at the Daily Planet.” He lifted his head and looked at each of them in turn. “You know I was in a meeting with Franklin Stern last Friday afternoon.”

Clark could hear Lois’ heart speed up a little, though she gave no outward sign of distress. “Yes,” Clark said, “we knew that.”

“He’s concerned about costs, of course. And he’s concerned about job performance.”

“Our job performance, Perry?” asked Lois.

Perry closed his eyes for a long moment, then shook his head again. “No. Your performance in particular.”

“Mine?” she squeaked.

“Yes. Mr. Stern would not listen to my explanations or my pleadings in this case. Nor would he allow me to make an executive decision for the good of the paper. He says that’s his prerogative, and I can’t argue with him on it.” His face sank into the deepest hangdog expression Clark had ever seen. “There’s just no easy way to say this, Lois, but you’ve been laid off from the Daily Planet.”

Clark was shocked. Lay off the Planet’s star investigative reporter? The woman who’d broken a car theft ring the week Clark came to the city, the woman who’d spearheaded the investigation into EPRAD and the shuttle sabotage, the woman

who’d pushed the paper’s circulation higher than it ever had been? Lois was being laid off?

He looked at her and didn’t like what he saw. Lois’ face was bone-white, her breathing was shallow, and Clark didn’t like the way her pupils had shrunk to pinpoints. He gently put his hand on hers and she snatched it as if it were a lifeline lifting her from a flood.

“Perry,” he said, “is Mr. Stern crazy? Lois has brought in more stories and more readers than any three other reporters put together! He can’t just drop her like – like a – like I don’t know what!”

“I’m sorry, Clark, but he can and he has. Now, Lois, honey, you need to go down to the Human Resources office and let them set you up on your severance package. I have to admit that it’s the most generous package I’ve ever seen. I hope you’ll go with her, Clark, and see her home, and I don’t want you to come back until tomorrow morning.”

Clark had recovered enough to generate some real anger. “Now just wait a minute, Perry! This is crazy! Stern can’t fire Lois! She’s too valuable to the paper!”

“She’s not being fired for cause, son. The official reason is that she’s being laid off due to the paper’s current financial situation. Her employment record will indicate she’s done everything we’ve asked her to do and more.”

“This is still wrong! Worse than that, it’s stupid! Stern doesn’t understand—”

“I can’t help it, Clark! I tried and I can’t—”

“I’ll go talk to him! Maybe I can—”

“No! That’s my job and you—”

“It’s because of Luthor,” Lois whispered.

The two men stopped and looked at Lois. Her eyes were damp and her lower lip trembled, but she held her head up and looked straight at Perry. “It’s Luthor, isn’t it?”

“Honey—”

“It is, isn’t it? I know, I missed it, it was right there under my nose, and I missed that one so badly I might as well have fallen off the building with him.” She stopped and dabbed at her eyes with her free hand. “I can’t say I was expecting this, but at the same time I’m really not surprised. Mr. Stern can’t have reporters on staff who can’t see what’s – what’s right in front of their faces.”

Clark put his hand on her forearm and gave it a soft squeeze. “He fooled a lot of people, Lois. Don’t beat yourself up over this.”

“He didn’t fool you, Clark.” She looked directly into his eyes. “You had him nailed from the very beginning.” She sighed. “I wish I’d listened to you.”

“Lois, we can fight this! I’ll go see Stern—”

“No, Clark!” she sniffed. “You keep your job. I’ll make out somehow, even if I have to move.” She turned to Perry and said, “Would you call the HR department and let them know I’m on my way?”

“Sure, honey. And I’m sorry, I’m really sorry. I tried to argue him out of this one, but I just don’t have the juice I used to have.”

She stood and smoothed her skirt. “That’s okay, Perry, I understand. I hope you don’t mind if I list you as a reference on my résumé, do you?”

“Of course not! And I’ll put together a letter of recommendation, too.”

“Thanks, Chief.” She turned to her former partner. “You don’t have to come with me, Clark. I know where HR is, and I’m okay to drive.” She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, and before he could react she’d moved out of reach. “I’ll see you soon, I promise.”

Lois walked through the door and straight to the elevators without looking around. Clark watched her go, astounded at the sudden turn of events. There were no odds which would have caused him to bet on something like this happening.

He stood slowly and turned to Perry. “I don’t know what you

told Stern about me, but I'm not going to work for a company that treats its best reporter like that. If you want me to type up a letter of resignation, I will. Otherwise you can consider this my notice, effective immediately."

Perry sighed yet again and nodded. "Both Mr. Stern and I expected you to quit, so I'm not surprised. I just wish you were staying."

"Well I'm not, so don't try to—"

"Wouldn't dream of trying to convince you do stay. I guess Eduardo and Jimmy can work on the Intergang angle."

"I'm sure they'll do a great – wait, what Intergang angle?"

"Oh, just some vague rumors of a criminal organization moving in to fill the power vacuum Luthor left when he died. But that's not your concern now, Clark, so I guess you'll be running along. Oh, because Mr. Stern anticipated this, you have a packet in HR too."

Clark frowned. Giving Lois the bad news about her termination was unusual for Perry, but his comments to Clark were totally out of character. He was acting like someone else, someone completely different from the intense and focused man Clark knew he was.

He looked closer at the editor and saw a sense of urgency in his face which was at odds with his body language. Something was very odd, thought Clark, and it had to do with what he'd been saying a moment ago when—

He stopped and blinked. This Intergang, this new player on the criminal scene, was dangerous. Had to be, or Perry wouldn't have even mentioned the group to someone who'd just quit. There was something else going on, something sneaky and underhanded that only he knew about, something he was trying to tell Clark—

Sneaky.

Underhanded.

Devious.

Undercover?

Him and Lois? Undercover to investigate Intergang? Was that what was going on?

It was a stretch, but that had to be it. Perry wanted Clark and Lois to go undercover to investigate Intergang. It was the only explanation he could think of that made any sense, except that Perry wouldn't leave them out on a limb like that, exposed to the criminals they were looking into.

Perry wouldn't.

But Franklin Stern might.

It was the final piece of the puzzle. Franklin Stern wanted them undercover. And firing Lois was the only way to convince anyone outside the organization that she was no longer associated with the paper, which also meant that there was a real threat to the Planet's security. He had to suspect that Intergang had a spy in the office somewhere. If Perry couldn't give Lois the assignment outright, that meant that he was hoping Clark would watch over her as she dug out the truth independently.

At least, he hoped that would be it.

It was a nutty scheme, the kind of thing that worked in movies and romantic fantasy stories but usually backfired disastrously in real life. It meant that this was probably the most dangerous assignment Lois had ever received. It also meant that it wouldn't arouse Intergang's suspicions if Lois took another job or if she didn't finish out the assignment for any reason.

That, of course, assumed that she really had received it.

And just then he thought of a way to prove it.

He slapped the top of the desk with an open hand as hard as he dared, then leaned over the desk and yelled, "If you're firing Lois you might as well fire me! Because if you don't I'm quitting right now!"

Perry fell back into his chair, but Clark leaned closer and turned his head, then whispered, "Lois and I will check out Intergang and get back to you. Right?"

Perry's shoulders relaxed and he stood. "You want to quit? Fine! Go ahead and quit! And then you find a bucket of water, stick your foot in it, and pull it out! That's the hole you'll leave when you're gone and that's how much we'll miss you!"

Perry leaned close to Clark with a really angry face, then he hissed through his teeth and said, "Keep her safe, Kent, or I'll take care of you myself."

Clark gave him a microscopic nod and spun to the door. As he stomped across the news floor, he noticed every eye on him, but he made no eye contact with anyone as he threw open the stairwell door and slammed it behind him. He paused and listened as Perry leaned out of his office and bellowed, "Hey! This is a newspaper, not performance art! You people get back to work if you want to keep your own jobs!"

He smiled sideways. Perry could have been a great stage actor had he not chosen to fight for truth and justice in his own way.

Now all he had to do was convince Lois to cooperate with this crazy plan.

And hope he'd understood what Perry was trying to tell him without telling him.

Stunned. Stupefied. Confused, perplexed, baffled. Bewitched, bothered, bewildered.

The litany of adjectives helped Lois keep her balance as Audra Baker from Human Resources walked her through the exit process. She signed a number of forms agreeing not to sue the company in return for a fifty-percent increase in her severance pay, forms directing these funds to her savings or checking account via direct deposit, a form finalizing her latest work-related expenses – an amount which looked heavily padded to Lois – and a form allowing the company to collect her personal belongings from her desk and have them ready for her to pick up around mid-day tomorrow.

Audra smiled softly and handed Lois one last form. "This is the last one, Ms. Lane. This allows us to continue your insurance for three months at your current rates, and then it will convert to the COBRA extension at your option. Per Federal law, your COBRA benefits can run for up to nineteen months after that time. Please sign here."

Lois reflected that Audra's voice and manner reminded her of a funeral director she and Clark had interviewed a few months earlier. The man's smile had creeped her out, and his soft voice had felt like sandpaper on her ears. Maybe Audra moonlighted as a mortician. She even dressed like one. Maybe her middle name was Morticia and her real last name was Addams.

The thought of never being able to work with Clark again struck her like a thunderbolt. It was the aspect of leaving the Daily Planet which filled her with the most pain. She didn't want to leave the paper where she'd established herself as a force for right and for truth. She didn't want to leave the people she'd grown to depend on for support and appreciation. She truly didn't want to leave the best newspaper editor in the country. Those thoughts shoved disappointment and sadness through her emotional processor. But she could do all that and more if she had to.

The one thing that took her breath away and drove a stake through her heart was the prospect of not seeing Clark every day.

It would be torture not to have him leaning over her shoulder to tell her that the word 'process' was spelled with only one 'c' or that commas always set off any kind of personal address or that 'aluminium' was the British spelling. She felt as if she might fall into the void in her heart. She'd never again hear Clark argue with her about risking her safety in pursuit of evidence. There was no thrill, legal or illegal, which would make up for the times she'd never again experience on stakeouts with him. And not even nightly visits from Superman would warm her soul like cold pizza and a Mel Gibson video at Clark's apartment.

She suddenly realized that Audra the Addams Family escapee

was patiently waiting for her pen, as if she suspected that Lois might steal it now that all the forms were signed. “Here. Here’s your pen. Take it.”

Audra’s soft voice slithered into her ears. “I know how hard this can be, Ms. Lane. Is there someone you want to call?”

“You asked me that when I came in here. The answer is still no.”

“I know, but it’s been a few minutes since then, and I wondered if you’d changed your mind. That’s all.”

Lois stood. “I’ll be back tomorrow to pick up my stuff. My personal stuff, I mean.”

“Of course.” Audra straightened the papers Lois had signed and stood, still smiling like a greeter at a funeral home. “If I’m not here for some reason, my assistant can help you.”

“You mean Wednesday?”

Audra tilted her head in confusion. “No, Deidre is here every day.”

“Fine. I’m going now.”

She turned and nearly ran into Clark’s solid chest.

The urge to fling herself into that solid mass of muscle and heart was almost overwhelming, but she forced herself to step around him. “I told you I didn’t need you to take me home!” she snapped.

“That’s not why I’m here.”

She turned and gritted her teeth at him. “Then why? You waiting for me to cry on your shoulder or something?”

“I quit.”

Her jaw fell open and her eyes bulged. “Wh-what? You – you quit?”

“Yes. I told Perry—”

She slapped him on the chest with one hand, ignoring the resulting sting. She’d forgotten for the moment that he was Mr. Hardbody and she refused to give him the satisfaction of reminding him that she knew. “You idiot! You’re throwing away your career for nothing! That won’t change Stern’s mind! Go!” She pointed at the door. “Go back and tell Perry you were just upset and – and you don’t really want to quit!” She stepped behind him and pushed.

He gave ground and turned so quickly that she stumbled into his arms. “It was wrong, Lois, it was so very wrong. I won’t work for a company that treats its best reporter like this.”

She relaxed into his body for a long moment, then slowly pushed herself upright. “So you – you’re standing on principle? You’re not just trying to make me feel better?”

A hint of amusement crept onto his face. “I’m trying to do both, actually.”

She nodded once. “Okay.” Then, in a stronger voice, she repeated, “Okay. I’ll wait for you to get your paperwork finished and we’ll go make a plan together. That sound good to you?”

“It does, Lois. It really does.”

They drove to Clark’s apartment, for no reason except both agreed that his couch was more comfortable to sit on. One quick pick-up at Sharkey’s Pizza later they were at opposite ends of said couch, munching on pepperoni and sausage and drinking Shasta root beer, which Lois hadn’t seen in Metropolis for years. She decided that learning where he bought it would have to come later.

She took a look around the apartment and said, “You’ve done some remodeling. The bedroom has a door now. Bathroom too.”

He swallowed and nodded. “I got tired of the open plan. I wanted my parents to feel like they could have some privacy when they came to visit. Saves money on hotels, and while I can afford it, I don’t want to spend it if I don’t have to. Floyd actually thinks it’s a better place now, but I wouldn’t let him raise the rent.”

She grinned. “Better for your lady guests, too, isn’t it?”

He sighed. “You know I don’t do that kind of entertaining.”

“I’m sorry. Sometimes you’re just an easy target.” She

dropped the edge crust on her plate and wiped her hands on her napkin. “All right, now we start planning. Do you think we should still try to work as a team or – wait, how will your employment record read?”

“Do what?”

“My record says that I was let go for financial reasons. If yours reads that you just up and quit, it might make it harder for us to get hired together.”

“Uh. We actually need to talk about that.”

“Really? We need to discuss working together? Wait! Do you mean – are you trying to tell me you – you don’t want us to work together?”

“No! Not at all, Lois! This is something else altogether.”

“I know. ‘It’s an entirely different kind of flying.’”

She could see his concern for her mental stability as plain as the mole on Cat Grant’s shoulder. “Uh – Lois? Are you okay?”

She jumped up and walked around the coffee table to the other side of the room. “Sorry, sorry, it’s a line from the movie ‘Airplane’ and I don’t know why it popped out just then.” She turned and walked back to the couch, but this time she sat in the middle next to Clark. “Look, I’m feeling very – very blindsided right now and I don’t know if I’m making any sense but I just don’t want to face the future without you, okay? You told me you loved me and you took it back but right now I really wish you hadn’t because I was going to tell you how I felt about you but you said you would have said anything to keep me away from Luthor and you were right – and now you see where my bull-headedness has gotten me and you’re in it up to your neck, you big dumb farm boy, and—”

“Hey, slow down! Take a breath, okay?”

She stared into his eyes and made an impulsive decision, one she knew she might regret very soon. “No. I’m not slowing down. Not this time.”

“You’re not? Then what are – oomph!”

She was pleased that he couldn’t talk while his lips were entangled with hers. Maybe she wouldn’t regret it after all.

With deep reluctance and much internal conflict, Clark gently pushed her away. “Wait – Lois, wait! Please. There’s something I have to tell you.”

She pulled back slowly and gazed into his eyes. “What do you – oh. You mean – I thought you – then you don’t—”

She gasped and paled. He had to keep her from bolting. “Stop! Right now. I have to tell you why we don’t have jobs any more.”

“What? But I thought—”

“Lois, honey, just listen! Perry had to fire you because Mr. Stern wants you to go undercover to look for evidence on a new criminal organization called Intergang. It was all he could do to give me enough hints and nudges and winks before I got it. We’re supposed to look like we’re totally cut off from the Planet and its resources so no one will suspect that we really didn’t get fired.”

She relaxed slightly and her face blanked. “Oh.” She sat up and put her hands in her lap. “I thought you – for a minute I thought I’d done something really stupid by – by kissing you like that.” She tilted her head to one side and frowned. “You lied to me that day in the park, didn’t you? The day you told me you’d say anything to keep me from marrying Lex and that you only loved me as a friend. That – that was a lie – wasn’t it?”

He opened his mouth – and nothing came out.

If he admitted that he’d lied to her that day, he’d also have to admit to deceiving her about his ‘other job’ as Superman. There was no way he could sustain a close relationship with her without telling her the secret. And he was tired of trying.

On the other hand—

If he tried to continue the deceit, he risked losing her totally. She might move away, even leave the city, and be out from under his direct protection. He couldn’t risk her being Superman’s

girlfriend. That simply wouldn't work.

And when she eventually found out the truth behind his two lies – his other identity and his passion for her – whether tonight or tomorrow or weeks from now, she might never trust him again. She might reject him for not trusting her enough to be honest with her. That was as big a risk as not telling her.

He had to make a choice – keep lying to her or tell her everything.

And he couldn't wait any longer.

Lois was scared.

She was scared of tomorrow, where she would work, where she would live, where she would sleep that night and nights in the near future, and she was scared of what Clark was about to say. She was scared that he was about to tell her that he didn't love her and that she'd destroyed their friendship. She was afraid that he'd tell her he did love her and that she wouldn't be able to be the woman he deserved. She was afraid that she'd lose everything and end up living on the street, pushing a rusty dinged-up shopping cart with all of her meager possessions piled up in it.

He pulled back from her and his mouth moved, but nothing came out. He was trying to say something – but what? What was he trying to tell her?

She had to know.

Almost on its own, her hand reached out and covered his. “Clark? Whatever it is you're trying to say, I can take it. Please. Tell me.”

His mouth opened soundlessly once again. Then he sighed and seemed to shrink in on himself. He licked his lips and took a breath.

“Lois – I – I am—”

Chapter Two

“No!”

She was startled until she realized that she was the one who'd shouted. She sat back and pulled her hands away. “No,” she repeated. “I – I've changed my mind. Don't tell me anything. Don't say anything! Not one thing!”

He blinked and tilted his head. “But I really think you need to know—”

“No!” She jumped up from the couch and put her hands over her ears. “Don't tell me anything! Don't say anything! And whatever you do, don't tell me you love me!”

This time Clark was the one who looked scared. “What? Really? You don't want me to tell you that I'm—”

“No, I said! I mean it!”

His voice was so low that she read his lips as much as she heard his words. “Even if it's the truth?”

She lowered her hands and sat down again, this time out of easy reach. “Don't you understand? I don't want you to tell me what you think I want to hear! I want you to say what you're going to say when my belly isn't all tied up in knots. I want to hear it the first time when I'm not terrified of – of everything! I want you to say it when there's no pressure on you to make me feel better. I want you to say it when – when I know, beyond any shadow of any doubt, that it's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

He leaned back against the couch and studied her. She could feel his gaze pressing on her eyes, her mouth, her shoulders, all over her body, penetrating her defenses. It was as if Superman were sitting beside her, looking right through her and seeing exactly who and what she was.

But she couldn't allow that, not now, not yet. If Clark loved her, she wanted him to love her as a whole person, not a broken-down out-of-work has-been who couldn't investigate the contents of her refrigerator. She wanted him to love her for who she was, the whole, complete, total package. If she even entertained the

thought that he'd love her out of pity – even the slightest, tiniest, most minuscule bit of pity – she wouldn't be able to take it.

It would be like her loving Superman because of his powers and not for the wonderful person he was. He wouldn't want a woman to love him for that reason. And Lois couldn't allow Clark to love her because she needed him so desperately to keep herself from disintegrating.

But she couldn't have Superman. She could never have had Superman. They weren't right for each other, and it had nothing to do with the two of them having been born on different planets. It had nothing to do with her mistreatment of him that night when she'd asked Clark to send him to her. Nor did it have anything to do with his abrupt and somewhat rude behavior that night, behavior that Lois thought might have been at least partially justified by her own actions and attitudes.

It was simply because he wasn't Clark. As wonderful and brave and giving and unselfish as Superman was, he wasn't Clark Kent.

She loved Clark. She desperately wanted him to love her. But she wouldn't accept his love if it were based on pity, and there was no way to be certain of his love unless and until she regained her position as Metropolis' resident investigative queen. Unless she once again ruled the hive at the Daily Planet, and by extension all of the journalism culture in the city, she would never have the confidence in his love that she had to have.

So she waited for him to respond.

It didn't take much longer. He nodded again, slowly, and said, “All right, Lois, we'll do this your way. I won't say anything to you unless you ask me.”

“Good.” She nodded sharply. “That's good. Um – wait. Do you mean you won't say anything to me at all, or you won't talk about – what we're not talking about right now?”

He grinned at her indefinite precision. “About whatever it is we're not discussing at the moment. And since we're off that subject, are you still hungry? That wasn't much of a pizza.”

“Huh? Oh – yeah, I guess I am. Um – do you mind if we eat something here? I'll pay for take-out if you'll clean up.”

He laughed. It was a soft, free, relaxed, honest laugh, and she suddenly felt better than she had for weeks. “I have a better idea. How about I whip up some soup for us? I can do a vegetable medley, or something with chicken or turkey, or a potato soup like my mom makes. Just the thing to counterbalance that pizza. Any preferences?”

She smiled back. “You pick. You know what ingredients you have here, and I know whatever you make will be delicious. And I'll clean up after.”

He stood. “Thank you for your confidence. I'll have to check to make sure, but I think we can have an excellent chicken soup in just a few minutes. How about toast and jam on the side?”

“Sounds rather English to me.”

He shrugged from the kitchen door. “Maybe so, but I like it. What do you think?”

She smiled again. “I'll try almost anything once.”

Lois set down her bowl and muffled a soft belch. “That was wonderful, Clark. You're such a great cook.”

He was sure he wasn't supposed to hear the burp, so he didn't acknowledge it. “All in a night's work.”

He stood and began clearing the dishes. “Hey,” she said, “that should be my job.”

“No, it's mine because it's my place. When we go over to your place you can serve and clean up.”

“But I said I would!”

He stopped and gave her the warmest smile he dared share with her. “I know. But I want to do this, okay? You can have the KP duty next time.”

As he carried the empty dishes to the sink, she called out,

“You know, I’ve always wondered what KP duty was.”

“Military term. It stands for ‘Kitchen Police.’”

“The military has police to guard their kitchens?”

He chuckled. “No, no. It means the person who cleans up the kitchen. In the Army, if your sergeant tells you to ‘police’ an area, it means that you clean it white-glove test clean. It has nothing to do with law enforcement.”

“Oh. I never knew that.”

“Well, you can never say that again about that particular factoid.”

She sighed. “I guess not.”

He returned from the kitchen and sat on the couch again. “Are you feeling better now?”

She nodded. “Lots. And I was thinking while we were eating.”

She was thinking! That was a good sign. “What were you thinking about?”

“We’re supposed to go undercover without anyone knowing we’re undercover, right?” He nodded. “And the best place to go undercover is a club of some kind that the mob has its claws in, right?” Clark nodded again, but with less enthusiasm. “Then what we need to do is get jobs at some club where Intergang already has some of its people working. That way we can look around and listen and not get shot for trespassing.”

He frowned and bit his lip. This sounded like their attempted infiltration of the Metro Club, when Lois had nearly gotten herself killed for listening in on the gang’s meetings. Clark still believed that he’d saved her from danger by outing her as a reporter and tossing her in that dumpster.

Maybe her thinking wasn’t such a good sign after all.

Lois frowned back at him. “You don’t like my idea, do you?”

He sat up straight. “It’s not that. I’m just trying to anticipate some of the hurdles and danger zones. You do know that we’d be out there on our own, our backsides swinging in the breeze without any backup, don’t you?”

She nodded. “Yes, I know. And I don’t want to put you in danger, Clark. If you have a better idea, I’d love to hear it.”

It didn’t get past him that she’d said that she didn’t want to put him in danger. “At the moment, no, I don’t. Do you have a plan to get hired at one of these clubs?”

“I plan to call my college tennis partner’s father in the morning. Remember him? He’s the guy who found out who burgled your apartment a few months ago. Anyway, Louie isn’t a hood, but he knows guys who know guys, and if anyone can point us in the right direction without shooting at us first, it’ll be him.”

“Okay. How much do you plan to tell him?”

“I want to stick with the straight cover story with everyone except Perry. I was laid off for financial reasons, you decided to resign to support me, and we’re out of work and need jobs. It’s a lot simpler than trying to establish new identities.”

“Sounds good.” He looked at his watch. “It’s getting late, Lois. Do you mind if I walk you home?”

Now Lois was biting her lower lip. “Uh – would it be too much of an imposition if I slept on your couch tonight? I – when I told you I felt better, it was the truth, but that doesn’t mean I feel good. I promise not to bother you in the morning and I can sleep in just about anything, like one of your old sweatshirts and some sweat pants, unless you don’t have any clean ones, and if that’s the case I guess I could go home tonight but I really don’t want to be alone and I’d rather—”

“Lois!” Clark laughed. “It’s okay. I’ll take the couch and you can have the bed. You pretty much know where everything is anyway.”

“Oh, Clark, I don’t want to run you out of your own bed—”

“Not a problem. In fact, I insist.”

Her voice quavered for a moment. “Thank you. I – it’s just that I don’t want to be alone right now.”

He smiled softly. “You know you’re always welcome here.”

“Well – okay. But tomorrow night we switch.”

Tomorrow night?

Had she said what he thought she’d said?

He managed to hide his shock at her announcement. At least, he thought he did until she jumped up and almost ran into the bedroom. “Give me fifteen minutes, okay? Then you can come in and get whatever you need. I have a spare toothbrush in my purse so I’m okay there.” The door was almost shut when she softly said, “Thank you, Clark. You’re a wonderful friend and I’m pretty sure I don’t deserve you, not one little bit.”

The latch clicked shut before he could respond.

What was she doing?

Was she crazy?

Why did she think that sleeping in Clark’s bed was a good idea? Where had that thought come from?

And who had said anything about tomorrow night?

She almost burst out in tears, but instead she laughed softly at herself. She was crazy and more than a little bit desperate and afraid to be alone. She knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that if she asked Clark to lie down next to her and hold her until she went to sleep, he’d do it. And she knew that he’d stay there all night, likely not sleeping himself, so that she could get some rest.

She also knew, without a shadow of doubt, that unless she invited him into the bed with her, he’d remain on the couch all night, whether he slept or not.

It was also probable that if she did invite him to lie down next to her and hold her that she’d never want him to let her go.

She would have bet real money that she’d lie awake for hours, but the savor of Clark’s scent and the soft texture of his well-worn sleeveless KU sweatshirt against her skin and the knowledge that he was just outside the bedroom door sent her drifting off to the land of Nod within moments.

Clark was cooking breakfast when Lois came stumbling out of the bedroom. Her hair was scrunched up on one side, her eyes were at half-mast, her sweatpants were inside out, the sweatshirt was pulled over to reveal one creamy shoulder, and she waved jerkily at the encroaching sunlight as if she were a vampire, yet to him she was more beautiful than any Miss Universe ever crowned.

He wished he could tell her that.

Instead, he poured a large glass of orange juice and put it on the table close to where she was heading and waited for her to find the chair. “Good morning, sunshine,” he intoned.

“Mrrgrmphiixppppplth,” she muttered.

“How do you want your eggs this morning? We have over easy, scrambled or poached.”

She folded her arms on the table and dropped her head down on them. “Astound me.”

“Drink your OJ and speak intelligibly.”

Her head rose and she pushed her hair back from her face. “Fresh-squeezed, no doubt.”

“Of course. Say, did I ever tell you about Lana?”

She took a long drag from her juice before responding. “Lana who?”

“Lana Lang, my high school girlfriend.”

Her head tilted to one side and her mouth drifted open.

“You’re bringing her up now?”

“Only because of the orange juice.”

Her mouth worked and her head bobbed up and down, then she said, “Too early. Don’t get the connection.”

“You asked if the orange juice was fresh-squeezed?”

“Yeah. And?”

“Lana had to have fresh-squeezed orange juice.”

“Still don’t get it.”

“It’s because she’d sit for long periods of time and stare at the carton if it said ‘Concentrate’ on the package.”

Lois glared at him as best she could through her morning confusion. “Please tell me she’s a blonde.”

“A natural one. We had to watch her when all the kids went swimming, too.”

Lois tried to focus but failed. “Okay, I give up. Why?”

“We were afraid someone would accidentally drown her by putting a scratch-n-sniff at the bottom of the pool.”

She made a grunting noise and one side of her mouth twitched. “I’ll give you that one.”

He brought her a plate with eggs and two strips of crisp bacon and scrambled eggs. “Hey!” she protested. “I didn’t ask for scrambled.”

“No, you asked to be astounded. Try them, you’ll like them.”

She took a tentative nibble and tilted her head to one side. “Not bad, not bad at all.”

His face fell slightly. “I’m sorry. I can make something different for you if you want.”

“Nah, they’re fine. I’m sure your eggs are better than anyone else’s in Metropolis no matter how you cook them.”

He smiled. “Eat before they get cold. Do you want something else to drink? I also have toast and jelly if you want it.”

“What do you have if I don’t want it?”

“What? Oh, I see, it’s a play on the conditional prepositional phrase in my previous statement.”

She pointed her index finger at him. “Don’t get grammatically technical with me so early in the day.”

“It’s almost nine. It’s not exactly early for a farm boy.”

“Maybe not, but I’ve always been a night person who’s gotten used to getting up early out of necessity. You know, I almost hurt myself getting out of bed when I woke up this morning. It was twenty to nine and I just knew Perry was going to fire me for being late and – and then I remembered and almost didn’t get up at all but I had to – to make a pit stop and then I smelled you cooking and I remembered everything and thank you for breakfast.”

She put her loaded fork down on her plate. “We don’t have jobs.” She sat back and took a deep breath. “I thought I’d wake up frantic the first day after I didn’t have a job, but I’m not. I’ll have to think about why that is later, though.” She took another slurp of juice. “Right now I’m going to consume this wonderful breakfast.”

“I can make you more if you want it.”

She gave him a clear-eyed look and smiled softly. “Thank you. I think I’m so calm because you’re here with me.” She reached out and grasped his hand. “I don’t think I could do this without you.”

“You’re welcome, Lois. But don’t forget that we can call Perry if things get really desperate.”

“No. I’ve done more undercover work than you have. We have to treat this as if we really don’t have jobs any more. That’s the only way we can get through this and the only way we can convince anyone else that we’re almost in despair for something to do that pays the bills. I refuse to do anything illegal that will hurt anyone, Clark, but I’m willing to do some things that you might not want me to do. And you have to think that way too.” She grinned again and released his hand. “Finish your breakfast. I’m doing the dishes today.”

He smiled back and nodded. “Deal.”

Scrambled eggs had never tasted this good to him. Maybe this arrangement would work out after all.

Louie frowned at Lois. “I know youse can sing, Lo, but what does the big mook do?” Louie turned to Clark and said, “Tell me you can play piano.”

“Sorry, no.”

“Guitar?”

“Again, no.”

“Dance?”

“I can waltz or rumba or foxtrot—”

“Nah! People don’t pay to see guys dance unless they got their

shirts off and then it’s only the women. Hey, you ever do anything exotic?”

Clark frowned. “Exotic?”

Lois rolled her eyes as if she knew he didn’t get it. “Nothing where we take our clothes off, Louie. I’m not that desperate.”

Louie waved his unlit cigar at her. “Hey, you never know, doll. Kimberly – hey, your boyfriend know Kimberly?”

“I know how Lois knows her, sir,” replied Clark.

“Sir?” chuckled Louie. “You call me ‘sir?’ I ain’t got no officer’s bars, I work for a living!”

“I got it. My father was a sergeant in the Army.”

Louie stopped and nodded briefly. “Okay. Okay, I’ll give you that one. But we still don’t got no job for the two of youse. Lemme call Kimberly, okay? Maybe she got somethin’.”

He stood and waddled to his office. Clark leaned close to Lois and said, “I assume Kimberly is your former tennis partner?”

“Yes. And I’m sure she’s not involved in making porn, despite what you may have thought you heard him say.”

Clark lifted his hands in all innocence. “Hey, the big mook ain’t sayin’ nothin’.”

Louie spoke from behind them. “You two ever do any standup?”

Lois jumped and spun around. “Gaaaah! Don’t do that!”

“Hey, Lois, calm down. I wasn’t tryin’ ta scare ya.”

“I thought you were calling Kim!”

Louie shrugged. “Forgot for a minute she’s coming home this week. She’s prob’ly on her way now.” He tapped her on the shoulder. “You two work pretty good together. You ever do any standup?”

Clark glanced at Lois, then said, “Not on purpose.”

Louie smiled. “Hey, not bad. You two think on your feet, don’t you?”

“We have to, Louie,” Lois said. “That ability has saved us more than once.”

“Yeah, well, it just might save you now. I think you two should go home and work up some classic stuff and let me see it.”

She frowned. “Classic stuff?”

“Yeah, like some old Burns and Allen routines, or Jack Benny and what’s-her-name, his wife. Young folks might like that.”

“That’s pretty old material. Not exactly cutting-edge stuff.”

“Maybe, but them kids ain’t never heard that kinda stuff. And it’s clean. You won’t hafta play to drunks and skanks.”

Clark reached out and touched her elbow. “That might be the best idea we’re going to have, Lois.”

She frowned and crossed her arms. “I’m not sure I like it, but I think you’re right. Okay, Louie, we’ll give it a shot. When do you want to see us again?”

“How about tomorrow afternoon at two? I got an opening, and Kimberly will be here. I want her input on this, too. If she thinks it’s a good idea, I’ll see if I can set up a gig somewhere.”

Clark stood and smiled. “Thanks, Louie. We really appreciate it.”

“Hey, it might be just some open mic somewhere. No salary on the first gig. Rookies gotta pay their dues.”

“We understand. Lois, are you ready to put a standup comedy routine together?”

She sighed. “Looks like we don’t have a whole lot of choices.” She stood and gathered Clark with a wave of her hand. “Come on. Let’s go find something we can be funny with.”

“You mean, ‘with which we can be funny,’ don’t you?”

Louie pushed the door open with one hand. “You don’t get to correct my grammar now, Farm Boy.”

The last thing Louie heard him say was, “As you wish.” Through the window, he saw Lois shake her head as if she were disgusted with him. But she also wore a thin smile.

Maybe they can learn it, he thought. Looked like they already the teamwork part down.

Chapter Three

The pool hall had only been open for half an hour when Kimberly opened the front door and strode in as if she owned the place. She did have a quarter-interest in the business, but Louie never reminded her of it or asked her to participate in managing it. A billiards joint just wasn't the place for his little girl, at least not according to her father, and she probably wouldn't have come in had her dad not told her that Lois Lane would audition for him today. She'd had to convince him that her legal practice wouldn't suffer much if she took an occasional long lunch.

"Hi, Dad," she called out. "Had breakfast yet?"

"Yeah. 'Bout eleven, I think. Had a nice yogurt with carrot juice on the side."

"Very funny. How much beer did you drink?"

He lifted his hand as if testifying in court. "On my honor, honey, I had yogurt and carrot juice. My doctor told me last year that I had to reduce my cholesterol and lose a few pounds or I'd have heart disease or diabetes or something worse in another five years." He smiled lopsidedly. "I gotta hang around for my girl, ain't I?"

She smiled and poked him in the shoulder with an index finger. "You'd better! Now, when is Lois coming by? I hope she's off work later this afternoon. She and I haven't had lunch together for ages!"

"She'll be here soon. She and her partner are comin' by to try out a routine on me. They're lookin' for standup work."

Kimberly frowned at her father. "I thought you were kidding about Lois losing her job."

Louie shrugged. "Nah. Wouldn't kid about that. Had somethin' to do with Lex Luthor takin' a swan dive to the street from his penthouse a few weeks ago, but they didn't give me no details and I didn't ask."

"Poor Lois." She shook her head. "Do you think you can get them something?"

He shrugged again. "Open mic night for sure, but after that it depends on how they come across to the audience. An' I don't want you lyin' to them about how funny they are. Worst thing you can do to someone like that is make them think they're better than they really are."

"I won't do that, Dad. I don't know her partner, but I do remember Lois having a really nasty bite to some of her jokes. She can be funny if she wants to be."

"I hope so, for their sake." He glanced at his watch. "They better get here quick. I ain't got all day."

As if to satisfy Louie's impatience, the pool hall's front door flew open to admit a smiling Lois Lane, followed by a sighing Clark Kent. "Hi, Louie!" she called. Then she saw the other young woman in the room and stopped in her tracks. "Kim! Is that really you?"

"Lois! It's been too long!"

They all but sprinted toward each other and spun each other around, laughing and alternately embracing and holding each other at arms' length. Clark edged around them and stood near Louie. Both men stared at the two twenty-something professional women who had suddenly reverted to squealing, chattering teenagers. Clark grinned at Louie and said, "Now there's a side of Lois I never thought I'd see."

Louie shrugged. "Those two used to do this when they'd been apart for a weekend. I watched 'em act like this for three years while they was in college together. No surprise to me they're doin' it now."

Clark crossed his arms and smiled at the women, and Louie wondered if he was more than the coworker and friend Lois assured him he was.

He looked up at the taller man. "What kind of stuff youse guys plannin' to do?"

Clark frowned slightly. "Well, since this is the first time we've done anything like this, we decided to modify an old Burns and Allen routine to see if we work well together. Besides, we know that routine works, even if it's a little dated, so if we fall flat we'll know it's not the material."

"What routine did ya pick?"

"It's called 'Oh My Operation.' We compressed it for just two people and took out the dead baby jokes."

Louie blinked. "The – the what? Dead baby jokes? You kiddin' me, right?"

Clark shook his head. "Nope. Apparently infant death was so common in those vaudeville and Depression days that people chose to laugh at it instead of crying about it."

"That why you got that clipboard?"

Clark nodded. "It's the only prop we need. I'm going to do George's part, the guy in the hospital bed, and Lois will be nurse Gracie." He looked down at the older man. "I want you to be encouraging but honest, Louie. If we have potential but we're not ready for a long-term paying gig, tell us. And if we stink on ice, you tell us that. Capice?"

Louie goggled. He never would have thought that the upright and seemingly uptight Clark Kent would use Italian slang on him. He blinked a couple of times and said, "Sure, Kent, sure. I'll be as honest as the day is long."

"Uh-huh. And the Tooth Fairy still makes house calls."

Louie snorted a laugh. "Not bad. Hey, maybe youse guys got potential after all." He clapped his hands twice and raised his voice. "All right, you two girls, we need to get going on this tryout. Lois, you and the big mook show us what you got, okay?"

Lois gave Kim a quick grin and grabbed a chair. "Clark, we'll use this for the bed."

Clark looked at it and raised his eyebrows. "I think it's a little short for me."

Lois' deadpan glare at Clark seemed to give Kim the giggles, but Lois didn't waver. She pointed at the chair. "Sit. Now."

"Yes, ma'am!"

They began the routine with Gracie's comment that the chart said the patient was dead. Clark asserted that he was most definitely not dead. Lois smiled and told him that the doctor knew best. She mimed offering him two newspapers. When he mentioned that they were identical, she explained that she'd felt sorry for the out-of-work man who was selling them but who had only three copies left. When Clark asked why Lois hadn't bought all three, she replied that she couldn't because that would have put him out of work again.

Louie smiled at the old but familiar jokes. They weren't bad, but something just wasn't working and he didn't know just what it was.

When Lois turned and strutted out of the "room" at the end of the sketch, both Kim and Louie applauded. "That was good, guys," said Kim. "I think you've got potential." She turned to her father. "What do you think, Dad?"

Her father's expression reminded her of the day she'd told him she wanted to play tennis to pay for part of her college. It was somewhere between constipation and a horse stepping on his foot.

"I dunno," he muttered. "The timing's pretty good for almost no rehearsal, and youse guys got some chemistry, but the whole thing just don't quite work. And I dunno what the problem is."

Clark stood. "Okay. Can you give us some specific pointers?"

Kim listened to her father speak as she watched Lois move slightly in front of Clark and cross her arms. "It ain't just one thing, guys. It's like you memorized a play in a foreign language. You know what to say and do, and you know when to say it and do it, but it don't come natural to you."

"Dad—"

"Hang on, honey. Look, I know youse guys need to make

some grocery money, but this act ain't gonna get you nowheres." He sighed. "I sure wish you played piano, Kent."

Kim nudged her father's shoulder. "Dad! Listen, they—"

"I can't learn to play piano in a week, Louie," Clark said. "Standup comedy is our only real option."

"It ain't working right now, Kent. It ain't awful, but it just don't work. Sorry, but you said to tell you the truth."

"Switch them!" hissed Kim.

The other three stopped in their tracks and stared at her. After a long moment, Louie said, "Do what?"

"Have them switch roles, Dad! Look at them right now."

Louie did, then shrugged. Clark and Lois just frowned at her as if puzzled by a door in the hall where one hadn't been the day before. Kim could tell none of them were getting it.

"Look at their body language, how they're standing, how Lois is just a little bit in front of Clark!" she insisted. "What does that mean?"

Her father shrugged. "Means she don't want him to be in front of her?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Kim. "Think about all those famous comedy teams. Lewis and Martin, Abbot and Costello, the Smothers Brothers, even Burns and Allen. The straight man was the one in charge on stage, fed the other member the setup lines, and the clueless one delivered the knockout. It looked like the funny guy was in charge but the straight man was the one who was really controlling the team." She stood and gestured to Lois and Clark. "You two do that routine again, except you switch roles. Clark, you be the nurse. Lois, you be the patient. Try it again."

Louie stood beside her. "Hey, youse guys game? Kim may have somethin' here. It can't hurt to try it that way."

Clark and Lois looked at each other, then Lois spoke. "We'll give it a shot, Louie. You sure you want us to do the same routine?"

Clark said, "We don't have anything else memorized yet, Lois. It's not like we have much choice."

"Yeah, yeah," Louie insisted, "same thing. Gives us somethin' to compare it to."

Kim sat next to her father and wiggled. "Great idea, Dad. I bet this is really funny."

He sighed. "I sure hope so. And don't blame all this on me. If this works, you're takin' some responsibility."

She put her hand on her father's arm and squeezed. "Gladly."

"Okay, kids, from the top."

Clark and Lois repeated the routine, beginning with Lois in the chair and Clark reading from the clipboard, and this time it not only flowed more smoothly, it was downright funny. Two older men came in to play pool as Lois and Clark began the bit, but ended up standing behind Louie, listening intently and smiling and elbowing each other. Twice they had to stop and wait for their small audience to finish laughing, just like the old Vaudeville comics did. And not once during the routine did Lois or Clark break the fourth wall.

When Clark flounced off with the clipboard after looking for the doctor's umbrella, Kim applauded wildly and Louie added a few well-spaced claps of his own. "That was much better, guys!" Kim gushed.

The two older men nudged Louie and nodded. One leaned down and asked, "You gonna hire them, Lou?"

"What? This is a rehearsal, not a tryout! I'm just lendin' my voluminous expertise to this up-and-coming duo."

Kim laughed. "The word is 'expertise,' Dad, as you well know. And they did a great job!" She stood and reached out to hug Lois. "Partner, if you can do that with other material, you can knock them dead on open mic night!"

Clark stepped around the two women and asked, "So, Louie, are you going to give us a helping hand? Or do you want to sign a contract to manage us now while the money's good?"

Louie laughed and slapped his knee. "That's rich, Kent! While the money's good, yeah! Tell you what, let's wait until someone actually offers you a payin' gig, okay?"

"So when will that happen?"

Louie snorted. Kim locked eyes with Lois and smiled, drawing a smirk in return. Louie crossed his arms and said, "How about we start with Open Mic Night at the Improv, Friday night at eight? That gives you the rest of today and two more full days to smooth out any wrinkles in your routine."

Clark unlocked his apartment door and stepped back to allow Lois to precede him. She skipped down the steps and spun on her toes with her arms outstretched. "Oh, Clark, that was wonderful. You were so funny and I can't believe the applause we got or that people wanted us to do an encore! This feels great! Almost like winning a Kerth!"

He smiled and nodded. "Yeah, it was fun, wasn't it?" He shut the front door and locked it. "Hey, are you hungry? I can throw something together pretty quickly."

She hugged him briefly and jumped back. "Oh, no, I don't want you to cut yourself on the soup!"

They shared a chuckle. "Okay," Clark said, "I'll see if I can find some sandwich fixings."

"Sounds great to me. Want to watch some TV?"

"Sure. Anything but the news, though. We should savor our triumph."

Lois flopped down on the couch. "Triumph? I don't know if I'd go quite that far with it."

Kitchen clatter accompanied his reply. "Oh, I don't know. We got an invitation to come back to the Improv next week, and there was that guy who wanted to talk to us about a weekend at the Stokes club next month. And the rep from Jackson's seemed to enjoy it."

She kicked off her shoes and leaned back. "Yeah, it could be the start of something big. As long as we remember our real purpose."

He leaned out of the kitchen and shook his head, then spoke as if almost joking. "Of course. We're out to make people laugh and earn a living."

"Uh-huh. That earning a living part – I think we need to talk about that."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." She shifted uncomfortably and looked away from him. "My apartment lease is up at the end of next month and I need to tell Mr. Tracewski if I'm going to renew it but I really can't afford it if I'm not drawing a regular salary even though I have some savings but I don't want to run through all of it too fast and I was wondering if I could move in here with you?"

She didn't dare look at him, even though she knew he was staring at her because he wasn't making kitchen noises any more. Had she moved too fast? Had she crossed a line in their friendship over which she couldn't retreat?

From the kitchen entrance, he asked, "Are we talking trading the couch for the bed every night?"

She exhaled in relief. "Yes. We'd keep the same schedule we've been on, unless you just really, really want to have the bed every night, and that's okay with me because this couch really is comfortable and I can put my furniture in storage except for my dresser which should fit right next to—"

"Lois."

He'd moved so quietly that she hadn't noticed that he'd knelt down in front of her until he'd spoken. She lifted her head and cleared her throat. "Yes, Clark?"

"You can move in and stay as long as you want or need to. No pressure, no conditions, no expectations. Okay?"

Her smile sneaked out despite her efforts to restrain it. "Okay. Oh, I do have one condition."

He almost frowned as if he were concerned with what she might say. “What’s that?”

“I just – I need to make sure – I have to be sure of something.”

He took her hands in his. “Anything. Just tell me what it is.”

She looked deep into his eyes and sighed. “Please – please don’t use my hairbrush.”

He blinked. “Wh-what?”

“My hairbrush. You left a little gel on it day before yesterday.”

She held her innocent expression as long as she could, which lasted all of two seconds before he snorted and sat down hard on the floor. Her laughter burst out as she fell over sideways on the couch, and they both laughed and chortled and chuckled and giggled until she was all but exhausted.

Clark finally propped his head up on his arm with his elbow on the floor. “Hey, you still want that soup?”

One last burst of guffaws came out of her chest, then she shook her head. “Not unless you want it too. I’m as tired now as if I’d just come off a stakeout.”

He stood in one fluid motion and offered her his hand. “I’m pretty tired too. I did, however, notice that we were a little short of ingredients for some of the dishes I like to make. Do you mind if I go get them tonight?”

Of course she minded. She wanted him all to herself, even if there was a bedroom door between her resting place and his. “Of course not. Just – just stay out of trouble, okay?”

He smiled and nodded. “I promise. Are you going to take a shower tonight?”

Her yawn and her nod fought for supremacy. The yawn won. “Wow! I was, but I’ve changed my mind. I’ll take one in the morning, or whenever I wake up, whichever comes first.”

“No problem. If I wake up before you, I’ll try to get a quick one in before brunch.”

She put her palms on his chest and lifted herself on her toes to kiss his cheek. “Don’t be long. You know I have a hard time sleeping when you’re not in the apartment.”

“I won’t be long. Good night, Lois.”

She lowered her heels to the floor and accepted his return peck on her forehead. “Good night, Clark.” She ruffed his hair with one hand and gently pushed toward the door with the other. “Get that shopping done.”

He smiled wider and all but skipped out the door. She hugged herself, content for the moment that they were making progress on all sorts of fronts.

She picked up a napkin to wipe Clark’s hair gel from her hand. But her hand was dry.

She used regular hair spray, so she knew the gel wasn’t hers. It had to be Clark’s. How could he have left gel on her brush if he didn’t put it in his hair?

Superman’s patrol was shorter than usual, but he still managed to apprehend two muggers and three armed robbers at a liquor store. As he landed outside the small all-night grocery store to buy the food items he’d mentioned to Lois, he mused that it would be easier for him if she knew the secret.

Maybe. At this point, he didn’t know what she’d do or say from one minute to the next.

The Korean woman and man behind the counter stiffened as he walked in. “Superman!” the man cried out. “What – why are you here?”

Brilliant. He was absolutely brilliant. Not only had he forgotten to change into his Clark clothes, there was no money in his super-suit. Lois was distracting him without even being around him.

“I’m sorry. I thought I heard something, but I suppose I misinterpreted it. Please, go on with your business.”

“Wait!” He paused instead of turning to leave. The woman who’d called out seemed even more terrified now than when he’d

entered. “Su-Superman, would you like a – a snack? Some nice North Troy apples? Fresh today! Please, no charge.”

He tilted his head and frowned, then nodded at the counter. The woman lifted her right hand slightly, the hand that was not between herself and her husband, and extended two fingers. Superman looked through the counter to see two young men, one white and one black, each holding a pistol with one hand and holding one ankle of either the man or woman with the other.

He nodded. “Thank you. I think I will take a couple of those apples. They do look good.”

“Of course,” the woman said. “Let me get a bag for you. I will pick out my two best apples for you. I promise you that you will like them.”

She stepped away from her husband and tugged once, and the thug holding her leg apparently decided to let her go. She picked up the bag from the counter and stepped briskly to the apple rack as Superman talked and meandered toward the cash register.

“You know, there’s nothing on my home world like New Troy apples. They’re rich and juicy and have just the right amount of tangy sweetness to them.” He looked through the counter again and saw that both thugs had their weapons pointed at the counter, and him, instead of at either of the shop’s owners. “I wish I could export them back to Krypton. Whoever had that concession would make a ton of money.” He leaned over the counter and snatched both pistols away before either man could react. “Don’t you think so, fellas?”

The black robber fainted. The white robber wet himself, curled into a fetal position, and started crying.

The Korean man behind the counter jumped away from them and ran to the pay phone on the wall near the water fountain. “Hello!” he shouted into it. “Hello! You are nine-one-one? Come to my store and arrest two men! Yes! They tried to rob me! Superman took their guns and they are too scared to move! Come get them quick! What? Yes, my address! I give you!”

The woman tapped Superman on the arm and handed him a paper bag full of apples. “I know that you do not do this for reward, Mr. Superman, but you must take this. It is our small thanks for saving us from those foolish boys.”

He took the bag, fully intending to quietly return it to them. “Thank you. I’ll wait here until the police come for them.”

She bowed to him and smiled. “Thank you again. My husband is very excitable. He was a small boy in Korea during the war there forty years ago, and he hates guns and people who carry them. He does not even like to see police officers carrying weapons. He says he has heard too many guns fired and seen too many people die from them.”

“I understand. But why do you stay open all night? You must know that this is the time when bandits most often rob hard-working people such as yourselves.”

She sighed. “It is to make money. We live simply, we work hard, and we have many good customers. Many of them work late shifts or at night. Some even walk or ride for blocks out of their way to shop with us. Much of our money goes back to South Korea to support our families who live in the south. We cannot send money to our people in North Korea. The government there will take it.”

“I’m sorry about that. I wish there was something I could do to change all that. But I’m glad I could help you tonight.”

As he spoke with her, he considered changing outside – once the police had taken away the robbers, of course – and getting the story as Clark. He could call it in to the night editor and let someone in rewrite—

No. He couldn’t do that.

He wasn’t working for the Daily Planet now. He wasn’t writing news stories. There was no one to call, no one to rewrite his story, no one to edit it.

He’d understood intellectually that he wasn’t a reporter now.

He and Lois had just finished a comedy routine which they hoped would turn into a paying job. He'd known that there were no more checks to be signed by Franklin Stern and handed to him by Jack or Jimmy.

But he hadn't grasped it emotionally before this moment. It hadn't really hit him that he wasn't a reporter any more until he realized that he couldn't call in his story, that there was no one to whom he could call it in and have it published. And the rupture it left in his heart was surprisingly wide and deep.

He'd begun this risky assignment with the intention of supporting and comforting Lois as long as he could and as long as she'd let him. Now he wondered how long he could take not being a reporter. It was already eating at his gut.

It had to be killing her.

He might as well keep the apples. Who knew when he might get another paycheck from anybody?

Chapter Four

Lois awoke to the memory of a wonderful dream. She didn't retain much of it, but she did recall that Clark was in it and they'd been having fun. And whatever they'd been doing had made her wriggle with pleasure.

Clark dreams were so very sweet. She hoped there were more of them in her future.

The sweet scent of Clark preparing breakfast, something she'd definitely gotten used to over the past few days, put a smile on her lips and a spring in her step. She made her morning bathroom run, then quickly dressed and walked out of the bedroom. The fresh apples in the bowl on the table widened her smile.

Clark stuck his head around the edge of the kitchen wall and said, "Good morning. Or in your case, good afternoon."

She rubbed her face with one hand to stifle a yawn. "Yeah, well, I would have gotten up earlier if my partner had shown up last night when he said he would."

Instead of more banter, she got only a curt "Sorry."

His tone startled her. She was even more startled when he turned his head away from her and stepped back into the kitchen. Something was very wrong.

She walked to the kitchen entry. "Clark? Are you all right?"

Without turning his head, he said, "Sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

She waited for a long moment, pondering her next move. She wasn't used to dealing with a morose Clark Kent, and she wasn't sure how to proceed.

Had she said or done something to hurt him? She didn't think so, since the last time they'd seen each other he'd been smiling.

Had he gotten some bad news? That was possible, but the TV was off and she hadn't heard the phone ring.

So. It almost surely wasn't her fault, but she needed to do something to help him.

Lois slowly walked to Clark's massive back and put her hands under his arms and around his chest, then looped them over his shoulders and pressed her cheek against his spine. "Clark? Something's happened, something not good. Please tell me what's going on. I want to help."

Moving only his arms, he turned off the stove and moved the pan of what Lois thought was French toast to one side. Then he sighed deeply. "It's – it's nothing."

She squeezed a little harder. "It isn't nothing. Something's wrong, something has upset you. I want to help." She waited for a long breath, then whispered, "Is it – is it me? Have I done something to upset you?"

He turned so quickly that she might have fallen had he not wrapped his muscular and supple arms around her shoulders. "No! You haven't done anything, Lois. Not you. Never you."

The little catch in his voice convinced her that she wasn't at fault, but there was still something very wrong. She stood on tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "Then what? Tell me, please."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then opened his mouth and the phone rang.

He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. "That better not be Jimmy."

She didn't relax her grip. "Doesn't matter. Let the machine get it."

"But – it might be important."

She shook her head once. "Let the machine get it." He moved as if to disengage from her, but she held him fast. "I mean it, Clark. Whoever that is, whatever he or she is going to say, this is more important."

He stared at her as if he'd discovered a new and beautiful form of life growing in his refrigerator. The phone stopped ringing and the answering machine clicked on, and that's when Lois learned that Clark kept the volume down on his machine. That meant he didn't use it to screen his calls. It also meant that all those times she'd called him and he hadn't answered, he hadn't been ignoring her. He wasn't using the machine to filter his contact with her. He really hadn't been home.

Of course, that made her wonder where he'd been all those times she'd called and he hadn't been here.

But like the lack of gel in his hair, that item would wait for a later time. She still needed to find out what was bothering him.

"We'll check the message after we talk, Clark. Okay?"

He pulled her close to him as if he were grasping a lifeline. One hand stroked her hair while the other pressed into the small of her back. She felt as if she were moving into the space she'd been born to occupy. And if he wanted to stay like that for a long time, she wouldn't mind.

He almost surprised her when he did finally speak.

"When I was out last night, I walked up on a convenience store where Superman had just stopped an armed robbery and captured the thieves. No one was hurt, there was no property damage, nothing bad happened at all. I started to talk to one of the responding officers when I realized that I – I couldn't write up the story and send it in." His arms tightened and pressed her even closer to him. "It just – I suddenly realized that I wasn't a reporter now. I was just – just a guy walking around the streets late at night."

She understood. She knew. And she felt his pain.

Her arms tightened around him. "I know, Clark, I know. I've felt the same way."

He sniffed. "I never quite realized how much I – it hurts more than I thought it would. I miss it. Not being part of the news team at the Planet, I mean." He took another deep breath and let it out. "I always thought that – that losing you – losing your friendship – would be the worst thing that could happen to me. I never thought I'd feel almost that bad if I lost the Planet."

She did know. She did understand.

Not going to the office every day. No bad guys to catch. No corruption to expose. No social inequities to correct. No tragedies to be prevented by stopping the bad guys. No dangerous hidden truths waiting to be exposed. Oh, yes, she knew.

Clark gently pushed her away and looked down again. This time he was stricken. "Oh, Lois, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to remind you of what you've lost, too."

She forced a smile. "We haven't lost it all, Clark. We're working the ultimate undercover assignment right now. We're best friends. We trust each other. We still have each other. And we're going to come out of this on the other side stronger and better."

He gave her a tiny grin – tiny but real. "You sound so confident."

"I am confident. You know why?" She waited as he shook his head once. "Because we're stronger together than either of us is when we're apart. If there's an Intergang out there, they haven't got a chance. We're still the hottest team in town." She kissed his cheek again. "Now, how about you finish breakfast while I check

the messages?”

His grin grew by half. “That’s a tricky machine. Sure you don’t want me to do it?”

She leaned back and tweaked his nose with one finger. “Only if you want me to finish cooking breakfast.”

He nodded sagely. “I see your point. Why don’t you check the messages?”

“Good choice. I’ll set the table, too.”

She reluctantly slid from his grasp and walked to the machine. The message counter indicated two calls, which piqued her curiosity.

“Hey, youse guys, this is Louie. Kim and I caught your routine tonight and we both think you nailed it. Gimme a call when you can tomorrow and we’ll talk. I know some guys who know some guys who could use some good family-friendly entertainments.”

“You hear that?” she called out.

“Yep. I made a mental note.”

“B-flat?”

“No. A-sharp, of course.”

“Of course.”

The second call made her laugh.

“Hey, CK, this is Jimmy. I tried to call Lois at her place but her number’s disconnected and there’s no other listing for her yet. I need to get some things to her from the Planet. Perry found some of her stuff hidden away in the storage room. Call me with her new number when you can. The Chief says this isn’t time-sensitive but he wants her to have it before the scavengers find it. Bye for now!”

She looked up to see Clark leaning around the kitchen wall. “Your phone’s disconnected?”

“Well – yes.”

“You didn’t renew your lease?”

“You told me I could stay as long as I wanted! Believe me, it’s a big money-saver not paying for two apartments. And I’m pretty sure your rent is cheaper.”

She could see the smile he was trying to hide. “And my couch is more comfy.”

“I wouldn’t know. You won’t let me try it.”

He inhaled as if there was another teasing remark on his tongue, but instead he said, “Breakfast is ready.”

“Wups! I’ll get the dishes. Are we having milk or coffee?”

“There’s no coffee made, but I have some orange juice in the fridge.”

“That will do. I’m hungry.”

Jimmy didn’t understand anything anymore.

First Lois got fired. Yeah, sure, Perry said that Stern had laid her off to save money, but that made no sense. Even if she had been doing Cat’s old job, people would read anything that carried her byline. Lois was a great writer and a great reporter and people would buy a copy of the Planet just to read her stories no matter what they were about.

Then Clark quit. That one he kind of understood, seeing as how CK was so crazy about Lois that he’d run through a brick wall to get her coffee the way she liked it. But he still missed his friend, the big handsome guy with all the headlines but who still treated Jimmy like a regular person and not a personal servant. Jimmy liked Lois, too, but she tended to treat him like an extra pair of legs who didn’t need to eat or sleep when she needed something done that she didn’t think she should do or didn’t have time to do herself. But she also treated him like a real person. At least, sometimes she did.

Cat was back in the newsroom, at least for a while. Perry had said that when Clark left, it created a job opening, and Mr. Stern had offered Cat a more serious reporting position on a six-month probationary basis. She was, at that moment, covering the opening of the new convention center downtown, one of the few high-

dollar projects in the city which hadn’t had Luthor’s name and fingerprints slapped all over it. Jimmy didn’t think Cat could ever replace Lois at the Daily Planet, but he had to admit that she’d been totally professional in the few days she’d been back.

And she still dressed hot. Not as hot as before, but still hot. That was always a plus.

The Chief – well, that was a different story. Before Lois and CK had left, there had been times when Jimmy and Perry would discuss real-life things, personal things, not-work things, and Jimmy got the impression that Perry thought of him as a surrogate son who Perry wanted to succeed as a photographer and reporter. Other times, Jimmy got the impression that his boss thought of him as a personal slave who Perry wanted to work to death as quickly as he could.

But ever since CK and Lois had left, Perry had acted differently. He’d give Jimmy an assignment without looking at his eyes. The morning meetings were dull now. Cat wasn’t dressing as provocatively as before, even though no one would ever call her plain or straight-laced. Without Lois there to antagonize her, Cat rarely flashed her claws, even at the other women on the floor. And even when Perry yelled at Ralph, Jimmy could tell that his heart wasn’t in it.

The office dynamics were all different, too. The building was upgraded and redone, the computer systems were top-notch – that part he liked – the reporter’s desks were arranged differently, the chief’s office was bigger and cleaner, but without Clark and Lois around, there was a sense of missing energy. Most of the other reporters still did their jobs well, but none of them had that sixth sense that Lois had about where to dig for better dirt on people, and no one else had the touch with others that CK had for getting information from interview subjects when they wouldn’t so much as meet with anyone else.

And now Jimmy was in charge of a box of Lois’ stuff.

This didn’t make sense either. There were things in here that were Lois’, sure, but there was a small lockbox that he’d never seen before, one that was too new and clean for Lois to have owned for long, given the way she treated inanimate objects or people she didn’t like. There was a notebook with some odd markings on the first few pages, and the notes on the later pages didn’t make sense to him. They were incomplete sentences which didn’t fill out the entire line, and only some of them began with capital letters. Not only that, it didn’t look like Lois’ usual chicken-scratching.

And Perry’s instructions had been weird. “Give this box to either Lois or Clark. No one else. And don’t tell anyone but them that you have it.” Totally strange, as if he’d fallen through a wormhole into a parallel universe and found himself working for his father’s spy agency.

Jimmy sighed and folded the top shut. He’d follow instructions whether he understood them or not. And he’d think about that offer to work at the photography studio. It seemed that the Daily Planet had lost a big part of her spirit since the day Luthor had turned himself into sidewalk pizza.

Jimmy didn’t want to work for a company that didn’t have a good spirit.

After their breakfast-at-lunch-time, Lois sat down with her partner and helped him sift through more of the classic material they’d decided to use. The attorney Louie had consulted assured them that if they gave full credit for their routines to the original authors and/or performers and paid whatever public performance fees might be legally required, then they could use whatever sketches they wanted.

Today they’d picked out a couple of old Jack Benny routines, but Lois wasn’t sure about them. Part of the Benny charm was his slightly bumbling and hesitant delivery, and neither she nor Clark felt comfortable trying to copy it. So they decided to put Benny on

the shelf for the time being and look at some other classic duos, deciding at last to try a Lewis and Martin routine about Jerry trying to sell Dean a song which Dean turned down, but less than a minute later he heard it on the “radio” sung by Frank Sinatra. Lois thought it held promise as long as Clark didn’t actually try to sing. Assuming, of course, that they could afford to pay a singer performance rights for a fragment of a song played back during the bit.

They also decided to make a try for a solo bit for Clark as a punch-drunk fighter who tries to sing in a night club. Lois thought that Clark’s lack of vocal talent would fit in well with the premise, and she could come on right after and “rescue” him from the angry “fans” who hated his vocalizations. It would also give Clark a chance to wear a tux and show off his shoulders a bit, and she was surprised at how much she had to argue for the bit to get him to agree to try it.

Clark excused himself to start some laundry, so she took the opportunity to call Louie back.

“Lois! Glad you called. Me and Kim been waiting for youse guys to wake up. Lissen, I got a guy on the hook in Gotham who’s willing to give you two full weeks next month. He’s a good talent scout and he knows comics, been doin’ this for over forty years and worked with his uncle back before TV got so big. You want I should talk to him for you?”

“Is he going to pay us in real money?”

“I asked him that very question, and he made some noises about how nobody knows you as comics and you ain’t got no history in the business. I told him that anybody on the Coast who reads newspapers knows your names from the Planet and they’ll come out of curiosity and stay to laugh and come back a second time and bring lots of friends. I think I can get you a really good deal here.”

“You aren’t going to lean on him, are you?”

“Course not! I don’t do that kind of stuff. I know some guys who know some guys, but I never even threatened nobody.”

“Really? Then how did you find that kid Jack who broke into Clark’s apartment?”

“Him? Nah! No rough stuff at all, babe. I just asked questions till I got the answers I needed. Kinda like you used to do.”

She hesitated, surprised by her reaction to the phrase “used to do.” She was reminded anew how Clark had described his feelings from the night before.

She didn’t like the feeling any more than Clark did.

“Hey, Lo, you still there?”

“Uh. Yeah, sorry, I’m here. Look, you go ahead and talk to this guy, but don’t commit to anything until Clark and I have a chance to hear his terms. And make sure he knows we’re both going to be fully dressed at all times.”

“Ha-ha-ha! No problem. Hey, Kim says that Clark should think about wearing a tux onstage. Every guy looks classy in a tux, and the ladies really like him now. Anything you can do to make people come look at you is a good thing. Up to a point, of course.”

“That’s a funny thing, but Clark and I were talking about that very same item a few minutes ago. Thanks for the help, Louie. And tell Kim I owe her lunch for the tux tip.”

She glanced at Clark, who was walking through the living room with an empty laundry hamper, and saw him raise a questioning eyebrow. “No prob,” Louie said. “Hey, I gotta go. I’ll get back to you tomorrow or the next day about the Gotham thing.”

“We’ll be here. Bye.”

Clark put the hamper inside the bedroom. “Good news, I take it?”

“Yes, actually. Louie may have a gig for us in Gotham next month. Two weeks at a real club with a real salary.”

His eyebrows lifted again. “Sounds promising. Do you want to look at more material or do you need a break?”

“I need to go to the Planet. Jimmy has that box of stuff I left there.”

“I thought you got it all the other day.”

“So did I, but I guess I missed something.” She stood and picked up her purse. “You want me to pick up anything while I’m out?”

“No, that’s okay. I need to go down to Mr. Okoya’s market and do some shopping. You have your key with you?”

She smiled. “On my key ring.”

“Then I’ll see you when we both get back.”

“Okay.” Lois put her hand on the doorknob and stopped, then turned and smiled at Clark. “That was nice.”

He gave her a cautious smile. “What was?”

“I don’t know, really. That little exchange just felt very – domestic.”

“Yeah, it did.” He nodded slowly. “Is that a good thing?”

Her smile widened. “Yeah. Yeah, I think it’s a very good thing.” She opened the door and breezed out. “See you later.”

As she started the Jeep and checked traffic, she thought about how safe she felt in Clark’s apartment. It was as if that very nice place in that somewhat run-down building in that lower-class neighborhood were an oasis from the pain and shame and harshness of her real life. To Lois, Clark’s place was an island retreat where she could rest and relax and be herself, and where she knew that Clark would never judge her or condemn her. Oh, he’d argue with her about her actions and attitudes, and they’d clash over which routines to look at next, but while he would often take a position opposing hers, he’d never oppose her personally. He might say, This is bad, but he’d never tell her, You are bad. It was the difference between being wanted for what she could do and being loved for who she was.

Maybe she should have let him tell her that he loved her.

Lois walked out of the elevator to the oddly unfamiliar familiarity of the news floor. She stopped at the top of the interior balcony and bitterly remembered Lex Luthor standing there above everyone else on the floor. Luthor’s words when she and Clark had gone snooping at the White Orchid Ball came back to her.

“I must confess a certain pleasure in knowing that everyone in the city has to look up in order to see me.”

No one was looking up to him now.

She shook herself out of her momentary funk and strode down the ramp to her right, looking for Jimmy. He didn’t appear, but Cat Grant did, suddenly popping out of the supply room with two fresh notebooks, a box of number two pencils, and the most modest dress Lois had ever seen on her aside from the time she was trying to entrap Arthur Chou.

Cat lifted her eyes and spotted Lois. Both women snapped to a halt about five feet from each other, each staring at the other in shock.

Cat broke out of the trance first and lifted her hand. “Lois! It’s good to see you again. What brings you back to this pressure cooker?”

Lois took Cat’s hand and shook it gently. “Jimmy has one last box of my stuff I have to pick up. Have you seen him?”

Cat frowned and glanced around the room, then shook her head. “No, not for almost an hour. I think Perry has him doing something down in the photography lab.”

“Okay. Maybe I can find him myself. Thanks.”

She turned to leave the area, but Cat called out. “Lois! Wait – wait a minute.”

Lois turned, frowning slightly. “Yes?”

Cat stepped very close and lowered her voice. “Look, I want you to know that I had nothing to do with – with what happened to you. I didn’t even know you were gone until Perry called me and asked me if I wanted to come back.”

Lois gave her a wan smile. “I know. You weren’t even in town

when Stern cut me loose. And I don't blame you a bit for hanging on to a job here. It's a great place to work."

"Thanks. It is a good place. And you helped make it one."

Lois' lips parted in surprise. "Do what?"

"I mean it! I always looked up to you. I saw how hard you worked, how many chances you took, how many headlines you brought in. I always wanted to do that, but every time I talked to Perry about it, he told me that he already had one Lois Lane and there wasn't room for another one." Cat reached out with one hand and grasped Lois' elbow. "But I'm going to do my best to keep up the good work you were doing. I'm not the same person you are, probably not as good a person or as good a reporter, but I'm going to bust my butt to make my time here worthy of mention."

A tear threatened to well up in Lois' eye, so she looked down and nodded. "I'm sure you will. And thank you, Cat."

Cat smiled wide, almost as wide as she once had, and released Lois' arm. "We'll have to have lunch one day soon. My treat! Call me later this week and we'll set it up."

"I'll try, but Clark and I will probably be working on our routines and we—"

"What? What routines? Are you an acrobat now?"

"No. Clark and I – we're working on standup comedy."

Lois could see Cat's jaws working hard to stay together and her lips being crushed between her teeth. It was a monumental effort for her not to laugh out loud. Finally Cat licked her lips and said, "Standup comedy?"

"Hey, that severance package won't last forever. I think we have a good shot at making a living at it."

Cat's smile softened from mocking to thoughtful contemplation. "Yeah. Yeah! You know, I think you're right! You two had gotten to the point of finishing each other's sentences, you always worked well together, and Clark does what you tell him, so yeah, you two have a lot of potential in that area." She stepped back and tilted her head. "You know, I think I can do something with that. With your permission, of course."

Lois frowned again. "What are you talking about now?"

Cat put her arm through Lois' and began walking her toward Perry's office. "I think I can give you a boost in your new career and get some stories out of it at the same time. Let's talk to the Chief."

"Huh?" Lois barely avoided knocking down a girl so young she had to be a new intern. "Wait a minute – I have to talk to Clark —"

"Of course you do, honey, but he'll see right away what a good deal this is! Just think: Lane and Kent, The Hottest Comedy Team In Town! You two will knock 'em dead! And I'll get the credit for introducing you to the readers of the Daily Planet! I'll tell people, 'Yeah, I knew Lane and Kent way back before they got so famous!' It's a guaranteed invite to all the best parties!"

Bewildered by the sudden shift, Lois stopped while Cat, who was still laughing and talking, flung open Perry's office door. Some free publicity would be nice, and getting a strong audience for their shows wouldn't hurt the club owners' opinions of them either.

As long as we're not the ones who get knocked dead, she thought.

Lois tried to speak, but Cat overrode her with enthusiasm and energy to the point where Lois stopped trying to interject her thoughts. Besides, what she was hearing was very interesting.

"—and the Planet could give them a big boost at the same time we bring in more readers who want to know about The Hottest Comedy Team In Town! What do you think?"

"Cat, honey," Perry drawled, "that's a very good idea. Why don't you write the first review for them?"

Cat bounced in her chair. "As soon as I see them perform, Chief. I'll talk them up like nobody since Elvis!"

Lois laughed with Perry, then said, "I don't think we're anywhere near his level right now, Cat, and probably not for a long time, if ever. We're still feeling our way."

"What kind of material are you working on now?" Cat bubbled.

"Well, we've got a baseball routine we've put together, plus that Nichols and May sketch about the funeral home—"

"Funeral home!" Cat burst out. "You're going to do a funny funeral?"

Lois grinned as Perry chuckled. "I think Perry knows the routine I'm talking about. I think you'll like it, too. We're being respectful. Our manager thinks we need to stay family-friendly, and so do Clark and I." She looked at her watch. "Oops! I've got to meet Clark for rehearsal in twenty minutes and I don't want to be late."

Perry stood with the two women. "Break a leg, Lois. Oh, don't forget that last box of your stuff. Have you seen Jimmy yet?"

"Not yet. I'll find him before I head for the bus stop."

"Perry, could I take Lois back to wherever she and Clark are meeting? It'll save time and bus fare."

Lois grimaced. "Are you still driving that pregnant roller skate?"

Cat tossed her hair over her shoulder. "I'll have you know that strong men weep when they see me driving my red Porsche 911. And I've never had a wreck in it."

"So you're still accident-free?"

An impish smile spread over Cat's face. "I never said no accidents, just no car wrecks. Meet you outside the lobby?"

"As soon as I find Jimmy."

The door closed behind Cat before Perry could say anything. "Doggone it," he muttered, "I'm going to have as much trouble with her as I had with you. Just a different kind of trouble."

Lois chuckled. "Maybe that would be a good thing."

"Aw, she's not as good as you were. I mean, as you are."

She shrugged. "Too bad Mr. Stern doesn't see it that way."

"Sure wish I could give you one more assignment, Lois. I think you could 'cover' it very well."

Lois heard the emphasis on the word "cover" and nodded. Then she caught his eye and slowly replied, "I 'under' stand."

"Good. Now you and Clark be sure to look over that notebook. I think you could get some real use out of it."

She almost asked "what notebook?" before she saw the twinkle in his eye. "Thanks, Perry. Clark and I appreciate any help we can get."

"Hey, the best thing you two can do now is be funny. Oh, wait, there's Jimmy now. You'd better catch him before he gets pulled away again."

"Will do. Thanks again."

"Stay safe, Lois. Clark too."

Chapter Five

Lois watched Clark's face as Cat zipped away in her fire-engine red Porsche. When they'd first met, she'd thought that he was open-mouthed because he was instantly in lust over her. Now Lois knew that he was just trying to recover after taking a full dose of Catharine Grant to the male ego.

She tapped him on the elbow. "Come on, farm boy. Let's go inside and sort through this stuff."

He blinked and took a deep breath. "You know, she's just as hard to take now as she was a year ago."

Lois laughed as they stepped through his front door. "I'm glad that's all it is. Here, you look at this stuff while I make sure I have all my pencils." She rummaged through the remainder of the box. "Weird. This just looks like random office supplies."

He frowned at the notebook in his hand. "What is this?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, but Perry made very sure I knew it was specifically from him. We're supposed to study it closely."

“Huh. The lockbox has a key inside and – that’s funny.”

“What is?”

“There’s foam padding inside and I think – yep, a false bottom. The notebook goes in there like they were made for each other.”

“Really? What’s so special about the notebook?”

He flipped it open and turned the pages slowly. “That’s funny too,” he said. “It looks like gibberish. It’s – no. Wait a minute! Of course!” He snapped it shut and beamed at Lois. “This is brilliant!”

“Of course it is. But what is it?”

“I’ve been thinking of how to communicate with Perry on our investigation without tipping off the bad guys.”

“So have I. But what does that have to do—”

He held the notebook in front of her. “This is it!”

She frowned. “What, we fill out a notebook and mail it to him?”

“No!” He opened it to the first page. “Look here. If we have any solid info on a club or someone working in the club, we say something about a script page and line number. Perry has a copy of this in his office, so when he hears a page and line he checks his copy and *voilà!* We’ve called in part of the story!”

“So how do we work that into the act? We can’t just stop and say, ‘Okay, now we’re on page seven, line fourteen.’ Even a stupid crook would get it after a while.”

“We’ll make it part of our shtick!”

“Do what?”

“Come on, Lois! You remember how Abbot and Costello would sometimes go off-script and one of them would ask the other what page he was on? We’ll do the same thing, except we’ll put it in different parts of the show every night. If we act like we’d planned to use it, no one will figure out that it’s a code.”

She frowned, thinking. It actually wasn’t a bad idea. No crook would suspect that it was a code, especially if they only used it once each night. And if the code popped up in the natural flow of the routine, it wouldn’t jar the listeners. Besides, they’d already established that she was the straight man (or woman, in this case) and Clark was the clown. She was the Martin to his Lewis, except his humor wasn’t based on him being stupid.

It would work. As long as they didn’t make Clark look stupid. He’d do it for the sake of the partnership, but it would hurt her to let other people think he was anything less than brilliant.

“I think you’re right, partner,” she allowed. “I think it’ll work. Can you give me an example of how we’d slip that stuff in?”

Joe DeLucca watched his newest attraction from the wings. He’d been unsure about hiring Lane and Kent, but Louie had talked him into taking a flyer on them, and Joe was glad he had. The club’s audience was laughing out loud because Lane and Kent were really funny, and not the drunk-laughing-at-potty-humor kind of funny. He’d seen just about everything at the clubs he’d worked, from stoners trying to copy George Carlin and failing miserably to mumbling old men trying to do George Burns routines to terrible singers trying to be The Voice Who Brought Back Vaudeville!

Except for a few well-established big-name acts, none of them had held an audience like these two. And most of them ran off customers.

Not this pair. They were smooth and funny and clean and sharp and they made everyone smile. For example, Joe usually hated knock-knock jokes, but he loved the one they were doing at the moment.

“Do you like knock-knock jokes, Clark?”

“Tell me who doesn’t like knock-knock jokes, Lois.”

“Spiteful old fuddie-duddies.”

“Oh.” He turned to the audience. “Any spiteful old fuddie-duddies here tonight?”

A chorus of “noes” mixed with hearty chuckles came back to him. “Great!” he said. “Lois has a great knock-knock joke. It’ll knock-knock your socks off.”

She opened her mouth and held it there for a moment as a chorus of laughing “boos” competed with the groans. Lois shook her head. “The things I put up with from you.”

“It’s only because we’re so funny together.”

A deadpan expression crept over her face. “Yes. That’s exactly right. That’s the reason right there.” Then she waved her hands as if resetting the system. “Okay, Clark, for this bit, you be the Vulcan and I’ll be the captain.”

“Wait a minute! Why do you get to be the captain?”

“Because someone has to be the Vulcan and you’re more logical than I am.”

“Really? Are you sure it isn’t because you want to be on top?”

“Clark!”

“Of the chain of command, of course.”

“I’m not mollified.”

“That’s not one of the dwarfs.”

“What?”

“You’re actually supposed to say, ‘I’m not happy,’ then I say, ‘Then which one of the dwarfs are you?’ and then I duck and – ow! Hey! You’re not supposed to hit me now!”

“It’s in the script.”

“Yeah, on page six! Go reread line nine!”

Joe smiled. They always went “off-script” in a scripted way and made the customers laugh even harder. And the better his customers felt, the more they ate and drank and stayed and ate and drank more. These two were good for business.

“Okay, Clark, we’re back on script. You be the Vulcan.”

“Just don’t hit me again, Lois. That starship has sailed.”

“Oh, all right! Are you ready?”

He straightened and put his hands behind his back. In a flat, toneless voice, he said, “I am prepared to be humorous.”

“I sure hope so. Knock-knock.”

“I do not understand.”

“Just say ‘who’s there,’ Vulcan Clark.”

“But I already know your identity.”

“Yes, but it’s for the joke.”

“This is a joke?”

“*You better believe it, buster.*”

“Perhaps we should begin once again.”

“Okay, folks, Vulcan knock-knock joke, take two.”

“Lois, you don’t have to do the clapper board thing. We’re not filming.”

“Who’s telling this joke?”

“At the moment, no one is.”

Lois paused as the audience roared again. “Fine! Get back in character so we can do the routine we rehearsed. And don’t adlib this time! Ready?”

“I am once again prepared to be humorous.”

“Knock-knock.”

Clark stared at her with a quizzical expression.

“Knock-knock, Vulcan Clark.”

“This is highly illogical.”

“Knock. Knock.”

His head tilted to one side and he lifted one eyebrow.

“You’re supposed to ask me who’s there!”

“I fail to divine the purpose of this exercise.”

“KNOCK. KNOCK.”

“Very well. Who is there?”

“Orange.”

“The Terran fruit or the pigment?”

Lois gritted her teeth and growled. “It doesn’t matter! Either one.”

“Then I choose Earth’s pithy citrus.”

“Argghh! You make such a lousy Vulcan!”

“And you are discovering this just now?”

“You – I – they – You know what? NEVER MIND!”

She spun and stomped off-stage, brushing right past Joe as the audience went wild, whistling and clapping and calling for more. He watched Clark grin sheepishly and lift one hand palm-out for their trademark “virtual high-five.” Most of the men in the audience responded, then clapped even harder. Clark slid his hands in his pockets and ambled off-stage behind Lois. The next act, a pianist and dancer team, scrambled onstage behind him.

Clark stopped just behind Joe, where he embraced a laughing Lois. “That was great, Clark!” she gushed. “You were wonderful!”

He bent his head and kissed her on the cheek. “You’re pretty good yourself, Lois. For a moment I thought you really were mad at me.”

“For a moment I was. Then I got off-stage and walked by Joe and remembered that he owes us a big fat check.”

They turned to face him in unison. Lois’ eyes made him think of a lioness he’d seen in a zoo once – relaxed and ready to pounce. In contrast, Clark’s almost goofy smile seemed to say “What she said” more effectively – and convincingly – than any words he could have spoken.

“Not to worry, kids,” he replied. “I gave Louie the check this afternoon, along with a request to bring you two back in a couple of months. That sound good to you?”

Even Lois’s smile looked predatory. “Sure, as long as you agree to the higher salary we’re going to command by then.”

Joe held her gaze for a long moment, then smiled and shook his head. “Wow. No wonder you two got such good stories for your newspaper.”

He was almost shocked at the wall that slammed down over both of their faces. “We don’t work for the Planet now,” Clark growled. “That’s why we’re doing this.”

Joe lifted his hands in surrender. “And you’re doing it very well, too. I’ll talk to Louie about your new and improved appearance fee.”

Lois nodded and her face relaxed a bit. “Thanks, Joe. We’ve got to meet some people tonight, so we’ll be back to clean out our dressing room about ten tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll tell the doorman. You two have a good night.”

When they turned and left, Joe let out a long breath. Those two were still scary and intense. He was glad they’d never learned about his Intergang connection when they were still investigating. They would’ve buried him so far under the jail an archaeologist couldn’t have found him.

Perry picked up his phone and punched Cat Grant’s extension, something he wasn’t used to doing. But for this conversation he needed to talk to her without summoning her with his usual bellow, even given the lateness of the hour.

Cat was at his door within seconds. “Everything okay, Perry?”

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his desk. “Close the door and sit down, Cat. I need to talk to you.”

Her faced went white as she complied. “I’m getting fired, aren’t I?”

“What? No! Nobody’s getting fired today, especially not you. Why would you think that?”

She lifted her hands, palms up, and said, “You call me on my desk phone instead of yelling for me or sending Jimmy. You ask me to close the door and sit down. You very calmly tell me that you need to talk to me. If you’re not firing me, you’ve got to be chewing me out about something.” She folded her arms and flumped backward in the chair. “What have I done wrong this time?”

Perry ran his hands down his face. “I have got to learn how to do this kind of thing better. Look, Cat, I brought you in here because I need you for a very special assignment, one you can’t tell anyone about. And I mean no one! This is hush-hush, eyes-

only, highly classified top secret spy-level security I’m talking about. Are you in or out?”

Cat’s jaw dropped. This was obviously the last thing she’d expected to hear from her boss. “Wow. I didn’t see that coming.” She shifted in the chair, leaned forward, and lowered her voice. “I’m all in, whatever it is. What exactly are we talking about here?”

Perry nodded. “I need for you to cover Clark and Lois during their Metropolis and Gotham shows.”

Perry waited for a reaction, but all Cat did was say, “Perry? I’m already doing that.”

“I know. But you aren’t bringing me back the code phrase.”

He almost laughed as her expression flickered between belief and call-the-men-in-their-clean-white-coats. “What’s the code phrase?” she whispered.

One side of his mouth twitched up in an almost smile. “It’s a page number and line number combination.”

Cat nodded slowly. “You mean like page six line nine?”

“Exactly. I need for you to tell me what that reference is in every one of their routines. And if they don’t mention a page-line combination, I need to know that too.”

“Uh-huh.” She paused and took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “Can you tell me what it means?”

“Sure. They have a notebook with a series of messages with page-line references. They use one during a sketch, you tell me what it is, I look it up in my copy of the notebook, and I know what they’ve learned about that particular club and any Intergang links they have.”

She frowned. “But you’d only do that if they – were – undercover—” Cat’s hands grabbed the armrests of her chair and squeezed. “You dirty stinking rat.” Her voice sounded soft and level but her eyes flashed lightning. “You brilliant, slimy, inventive, cheating rat. Lois was never fired. She went undercover with Clark for this investigation.” She lurched to her feet and leaned over the desk. “And you brought me back as a distraction to prove that she’d really been fired, didn’t you?”

“Sit down, Cat.”

“I don’t believe you, Perry! I’ve never been used so badly—”

“I said sit down!”

His outburst had the desired effect. Perry had always known that Cat’s self-control was good, but he’d never seen anyone’s body language so at odds with her facial expression. As she gradually sat back down, her body told him that she was chastened by her boss’ outburst.

Her face, however, promised pain and suffering.

“Now listen to me. I didn’t hire you back, Mr. Stern did. But if he’d asked me, I would have approved without delay. You’re a good reporter and I’m grateful to have you, but only if you’re really working for me. And to answer your accusation, I absolutely did not hire you as window dressing. You’re here for six months, and then you get a review and probably a chance to stay on permanent. That has nothing to do with what may or may not happen with Lois Lane. I’m telling you about this thing with the code phrase because I know you’re discreet, you can keep secrets, and you understand life-and-death situations. Now are you done yelling or do you want to further endanger your job status?”

She glared at him for a few seconds, then blew a sharp breath out through her nose. “I’m done. And – and I’m sorry if I jumped to an unsupportable conclusion.”

He waved her apology aside. “I admit it wasn’t very complimentary, but you did get it pretty fast. And I will also say that you’re my first choice for this job.”

She fidgeted a bit as if embarrassed, then nodded. “Thank you. When do I start this new assignment?”

“Tomorrow night. They’ll be at a Superman Foundation thank-you dinner for their biggest contributors. Jimmy has your ticket.”

She nodded. “Page six, line nine.”

“Huh?”

She stood. “That was the reference they used in their last routine at Joey DeLuca’s club. And you’re welcome.”

She strode out the door and shut it harder than necessary without slamming it. Perry shook his head, wondering if he could survive having two skilled, high-powered, intense, take-no-prisoners women working for him.

Assuming, of course, Lois did come back.

The thought that she might not return haunted him for the rest of the day and put a damper on dinner with Alice that night.

Lois nodded to the crowd as the applause following their introduction died down. “Hey! Thanks, everyone. Look, I know you guys wanted to see Lane and Kent perform tonight, but—” Clark quietly walked onstage behind her, wearing a baseball cap and carrying a bat with a fielder’s glove hung at one end of it “—I guess my partner decided not to show up on time. He does that on occasion, you know. Why, sometimes he just—”

“I’m right behind you, Lois.”

She jumped and turned halfway around to look at him. “Oh! Clark, you’ve got to stop scaring me like that!”

He grinned and leered at the audience as he walked to stage center. “Because it’s not good for you, being in your delicate condition, right?”

She slapped him on the shoulder as the audience snickered. “No! You’ve got to stop spreading those rumors about me being pregnant! Someone’s going to believe them and tell my mother and if she shows up at our doorstep trying to be the Mother of All Grandmothers you’re going to take care of her by yourself! Got that?”

Clark’s mouth fell open and his eyes bugged out behind his glasses. “Your mother? Me? Take care of her? Alone?” He turned to the audience and put his hands out, pleading, “Please don’t tell Lois’ mother that Lois is pregnant! One Lane woman at a time is all I can handle!”

Lois crossed her arms and glared at him. “What do you mean, one Lane woman at a time? Are you talking about my sister?”

Clark slowly turned his face to her and took a deep breath. “Lois, you remember all those times in the past when someone asked you a question and there was no answer you could give that wouldn’t just get you in worse trouble?”

She dropped her hands and clenched her fists. “What do you mean, all those times?”

As the audience laughed and applauded, he took a step back and spluttered, “I mean just like what I said and now I’m really sorry I said anything at all!”

“Fine. Just remember how much trouble you’re in when we get home.”

He turned to the audience. “As if she’ll let me forget.”

“Heard that!”

He paused as the audience laughed, then offered, “That’s because you’ve always had very good hearing.”

“That’s right, and don’t you forget it. Hey, why the bat and glove?”

“What? Oh. I almost forgot about them. I brought them to remind me to tell you about my new part-time job.”

“Part-time job? Clark, you don’t have time for a part-time job.”

“Well, this is as much a hobby as is it anything else, unless I get really good at it.”

“Really. Tell me about your new hobby.”

“Okay. You’re familiar with minor-league baseball?”

“I know that there is such a thing.”

“Well, they have all kinds of levels of baseball leagues. There’s rookie league, Class D, Class C, Class B, Class A, Double-A, and Triple-A, and then the major leagues. A level for every player according to his ability and experience.”

“Huh. Sounds kinda Marxist to me.”

They waited as the slow chuckle hopped around the audience, and those who got the joke quickly explained it to those who didn’t. Clark spun his free hand in a “hurry-up” motion and said, “Come on, folks, we don’t have all night.”

Lois crossed her arms and fixed him with a gimlet eye. “Let’s get back on track, okay? You said ‘every player according to his ability and experience’ and I said ‘sounds kinda Marxist to me.’ Take it from there.”

“Lois, please, don’t embarrass me here!”

She shook an index finger at him. “The routine, remember?”

“Fine,” he sighed, “I got it.” He took a deep breath and plastered a startled expression in his face. “It’s not Marxist, Lois! It’s baseball. And what do you know about baseball, anyway?”

“I know more than you think I do.”

“Oh, really? Why don’t you explain baseball to me? We’ll see how much you really know.”

She cut her eyes to the audience and gave them an evil grin along with a perfect eyebrow wiggle. They leaned forward, anticipating yet another Lane putdown for Kent.

“Baseball works like this. This is a game played by two teams, one out and the other in. The one that’s in sends players out one at a time to see if they can get in before they get out. If they get out before they get in, they come in, but it doesn’t count. If they get in before they get out, it does count. “

“Wait a minute—”

“When the ones out get three outs from the ones in before they get in without being out, the team that’s out comes in and the team that’s in goes out to get those going in out before they get in without being out.”

“Lois, I don’t think you—”

“When both teams have been in and out nine times, the game is over. The team with the most in without being out before coming in wins, unless the ones in are equal. In that case, the last ones in go out to get the ones in out before they get in without being out. Then the game will end when each team has the same number of ins out but one team has more in without being out before coming in.”

“Uh, that’s certainly—”

“Come on, Clark, is that baseball or isn’t it?”

He shook his head and waited for the audience’s laughter to die down. “Well, it sure looks like you know—” he pulled off his glasses and looked at them before slipping them back on “—the ins and outs of baseball.”

He lifted both hands and wiggled the fingers of his free hand as if asking for the audience’s response. They groaned loudly, and a scattering of boos cascaded onto the stage.

Clark lowered his hands and ducked his head in obvious disappointment. As usual, a number of women near the stage began throwing balled-up pieces of paper or motel keycards onstage. Some shouted, “Read mine first, Clark!” or “No, mine!” until Lois stepped in front of him and crossed her arms.

“Ladies, you know the rules. Any and all dates for Clark Kent have to be scheduled through my office. We’ll gather up all these invitations and get back to you as soon as we can.”

“Yeah?” yelled one tipsy redhead. “When is that gonna be?”

“Right after the second,” Lois replied.

“The second what?”

“The second lunar eclipse of next week.”

The redhead looked puzzled for a long moment while the other women around her laughed. Then she smiled and waved her hand at Lois. “Never mind. Bachelorette party girls gone a little wild, I guess.”

“Oh, I don’t mind at all. And believe me, I understand.” Lois waited until the cascade of paper wads and plastic ceased, then she turned to Clark and said, “Hey, honey, you never said why you had the bat and glove.”

He perked up immediately. “Oh, right! My new part-time job. See, there’s a new baseball league starting up, and Metropolis has a team.”

“Really? Which class is this team?”

“It’s a Class Q league. It’s for older guys who think they can still play ball.”

“But you played in college, Clark. And you did very well.”

“That was then, Lois, this is now. I want to prove that I’ve still got it.”

She smiled brightly and hugged his arm. “Oh, Clark, you’ll always have it with me.”

The audience gave them a communal “Awww!” and began applauding. Then Clark smiled brightly and wiggled his eyebrows at them, and the applause blended with their laughter.

Lois pretended to be oblivious to his antics. “So, what position are you going to play?”

“Right field. It’s important, you know. You gotta know how to catch. You gotta know how to throw. It’s so important somebody wrote a song about it. I’ll sing it if you want me to.”

Horrified, she blurted, “No!” The audience, having heard of Clark’s lack of vocal talent, added their objections to hers. “I mean, why don’t you save it until we get home? It’ll mean more to me that way.”

“Okay, if that’s how you want it. So, what do you think about my new part-time job?”

“You didn’t tell me the name of the team you’re going to play for.”

“Oh. I guess I forgot.”

“What do you mean, you forgot? Didn’t you study the script for tonight?”

The audience broke up again. “Yes, I studied the script! We’re on page four, line seventeen!”

Lois made a face. “Line seventeen, you say?”

“That’s what I said! And the name of the team is the Metropolis Quagmires. You know, Class Q, the Quagmires? It all fits together somehow.”

They both waited while the audience grew silent. Clark slowly turned to face them and pleaded, “You’re supposed to laugh here! I wrote that line myself!”

“Clark, honey, settle down. It’s okay. Anyway, that sounds great. And it seems like a great time to tell you about my new part-time job.”

“Wait. You have a part-time job too?”

“Yep. Say, have you met the manager for your team?”

“Not yet.”

“Has anyone told you who’s going to manage the club?”

“No, but I’m sure he’ll be great. I have every confidence in him.”

Lois’s sly grin spread over her face and she sang, “I know something you don’t know!”

“I’m sure you do, dear, but this is baseball.”

“I’ve already proven how much I know about baseball!”

“You have, and I’m still impressed. But knowing what you know about baseball is different from running a team.”

“Oh, I don’t think it will be all that different.”

“But it really—” A horrified look emerged on Clark’s face.

“Oh – no. No, no, no! Tell me it isn’t true! Tell me that’s not what you know that I don’t know!”

People began giggling. “No, it isn’t.”

“Whew! I’m so relieved.”

More low laughter. “Because now we both know it.”

His shoulders sagged and he leaned on the end of the bat.

“Lois, please, tell me that you aren’t – that they didn’t – that you don’t—”

She grinned and hopped in place once. “Oh, yes! I’m the new manager of the Quagmires!”

The audience roared, the women especially. Lois stepped

forward and lifted one hand, palm forward, and yelled, “Virtual high five, ladies!” Nearly every woman in the building responded, including two of the stage crew.

Clark, meanwhile, had covered his face with his free hand. He waited for the tumult to die down, and when it finally did, he hefted the bat to his shoulder and picked up the glove. “Lois? Honey? Could you come over here for just a minute, please?”

“Now, Clark, you can’t talk to me like that when we’re in the dugout. You’ll have to address me as ‘Skipper’ or ‘Skip’ just like a real ballplayer.”

He gazed at her, defeated. “You aren’t going to cry when we lose, are you? Because there’s no crying in baseball.”

She crossed her arms. “You never know. A woman’s tears are a powerful weapon. Maybe I’ll be nice to you guys and just cry at the other team.”

“Yeah, that would throw them off their game. Say, have you met the rest of the players on our team?”

“Yes, I have. And except for right field, where you’re competing to be the starter, the lineup is already pretty much set.”

“Great! You know, I haven’t had a chance to meet the other guys yet. Can you tell me their names?”

“Sure. You want their real names or their nicknames?”

“These guys have nicknames already?”

“Of course, Clark! All the great ballplayers of the past had really good nicknames. Babe Ruth was the Sultan of Swat, or the Bambino, Lou Gehrig was the Iron Horse, there was Big Chief Bender, there was Ducky Medwick with the Cardinals, Walter Johnson was called The Big Train, and you remember hearing about Dizzy and Daffy Dean, don’t you?”

“Sure I do. And there were lots more. But you say these guys all have great names like that?”

“They sure do.”

“Great! Okay, can you give me the starting lineup?”

“Sure. Who’s on first, What’s on second, I Don’t Know is on third—”

“That’s what I want to find out.”

“What do you want to find out?”

“The names of the players.”

“That’s what I’m telling you, Clark. Who’s on first, What’s on second, I Don’t Know is on third—”

“Hang on a minute! You’re gonna be the manager?”

“Yes.”

“So you know the player’s names?”

“Sure I do.”

“Then tell me who’s on first.”

“Yes.”

“I mean the fellow’s name.”

“Who.”

“The guy on first.”

“Who.”

“The first baseman!”

“Who.”

“The guy playing first base!”

“Who is on first!”

“I’m asking YOU who’s on first!”

“That’s the man’s name.”

“That’s whose name?”

“Yes.”

“So go ahead and tell me.”

“That’s it.”

“That’s who?”

“That’s right.”

They paused for a breath and to let the audience laugh, and they extended the pause when a young woman leaped out of the second row and sprinted to the back of the auditorium where the restrooms were located, one hand over her mouth and the other over her stomach. Clark pointed at her and said to Lois, “See what

you've done?"

"What did I do?"

"You upset a paying customer!"

"She's just upset because you don't know the names of your teammates!"

"I'm trying to find that out now!"

"I tried to tell you but you won't listen!"

"All I want to know is who's playing first!"

"That's right!"

They paused again while a group of businessmen who'd apparently had their fair share of libation – and several others' fair shares – recovered from their whooping belly laughs. Clark finally stepped closer to stage front and said to her, "Look, you got a first baseman, right?"

Lois followed him. "Of course we do."

"Who's playing first?"

"That's right."

"Yikes." Clark took a breath and tried again. "When you pay the first baseman's salary, who gets the money?"

"Yep. Every dime of it."

"All I'm trying to do is find out the name of the guy playing first base."

"Who."

"The guy that gets the money!"

"That's him."

"Who gets the money?"

"Every nickel of it. Sometimes his wife comes to the office and collects it."

"Whose wife?"

"Yes."

Clark's mouth hung open and he took a deep breath to collect himself. "This is who?"

"Of course it is! What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing's wrong with it! Look, when the first baseman signed his contract, how did he sign it?"

"With a pen. Using a pencil isn't legal."

The tipsy businessmen bellowed out again, but they weren't alone, so Clark had to wait for the audience to settle down. "No, what I mean is, how does he sign his name?"

"Who."

"The guy."

"Who."

"The first baseman."

"Who."

"How does he sign his name?"

"Who."

"The guy playing first base!"

"Who."

"How does he sign it?"

"That's how he signs it."

"Who?"

Lois grinned and poked Clark on the shoulder. "Exactly!"

He turned and walked in a small circle on the stage, then came back to stand beside his partner. "Lois, please, just tell me what the first baseman's name is."

"No, What is on second."

"I didn't ask you who's on second!"

"Who's not on second, Who's on first."

"One base at a time, okay? One base at a time!"

"Then don't try to change the infield lineup!"

"I'm not changing anything! I just want to know who's on first!"

"That's right."

"Okay!"

She mimed wiping her forehead. "I'm glad that's settled."

"Me too, because – because – aw, nuts!"

This time the entire audience cracked up. It was a full twenty

seconds before it was quiet enough to continue the routine.

Clark made a fist with his free hand and bit his knuckle. "I know I'm going to regret this, but – Lois, please, tell me what's the guy's name on first base?"

"No, Clark! What's on second!"

"I'm not asking you who's on second!"

"Who's on first!"

"I don't know!"

Lois waved one hand between them. "No, no, that's the third baseman's name. We're not talking about him."

"Wait a minute! How did I get on third base?"

"You mentioned his name."

"I did?"

"You did."

"Okay, if I mentioned the third baseman, who did I say is playing third?"

"No! Who's on first!"

Clark scrunched up his face in concentration and blurted, "What's on first?"

"What's on second."

"I don't know."

"He's on third."

He turned to the audience. "Here I go again, back on third base, all the way around the infield." He waited for the laughter to die down a bit, then said, "Would you stay on third for just a minute and don't get off?"

"Fine! What do you want to know?"

"Here's what I want to know. Who is playing third base?"

"Why do you keep trying to put Who on third, Clark?"

"What am I putting on third?"

"What is on second!"

"You don't know who's on second?"

"Who is on first!"

"I don't know!" Clark lifted his free hand as he and Lois said together, "Third base!"

Clark shook his head while the laughter died down again. "Let's try another position. Ah – the outfield! That should be safe enough, right?" He cut his eyes to the audience as they chuckled. "I wrote that line too, you know." He turned back to his partner. "Okay, let's go once more. You got a left fielder?"

"Of course we do."

"And the left fielder's name?"

"Why."

"Oh, I just thought I'd ask."

"And I just thought I'd tell you."

"So tell me."

"Why."

"Because I want to know who's playing left field!"

"Who's playing first, Clark!"

"I don't – stay out of the infield!" The young woman who had fled to the back returned to her seat in the second row and Clark waved his hand at her. "Hi. Welcome back. Do you want us to go back a page or two and catch you up?"

She turned bright red and buried her face in her hands. Clark waited for the laughter to die down again. "I guess not. Okay. I'm just asking Lois – the manager of the team who is supposed to know the names of the players! – what's the guy's name in left field."

Instead of proceeding with the routine, Lois crossed her arms and glared at him. "Are you through flirting now?"

"Lois, honey, save it for later, okay?"

"You bet I will. And what's on second!"

Clark didn't miss a beat. "I don't want to know who's on second!"

"Who's on first!"

"I don't know!"

"Third base!" they chorused, and many in the audience joined

them.

Laughter filled the room and scattered applause appeared. Clark lifted his hand and made a “not yet” motion. “Hang on, we’re almost done. Okay, Lois, tell me the left fielder’s name.”

“Why.”

“Because.”

“Oh, no, he’s in center field.”

He wiped his face with his hand. Lois smiled and turned to the audience. “Isn’t he cute when he’s frustrated?”

One slightly drunk woman sitting near the redhead from earlier yelled “I can fix that!” over the audience’s chuckles.

Lois smiled wider and shook her head. “Sweetheart, you couldn’t fix that with a left-handed monkey wrench.”

The other people in the drunk woman’s party pointed at her and made comments which were inaudible on stage, so Lois turned back to Clark and nodded slightly to tell him to go on with the bit.

Clark took a deep breath and asked, “I assume you have a starting pitcher on this team?”

“Of course.”

“And his name?”

“Tomorrow.”

“You don’t want to tell me today?”

“I’m telling you now!”

“So go ahead.”

“Tomorrow.”

“What time?”

“What time what?”

“What time tomorrow are you going to tell me who’s pitching?”

“Now listen, Clark, Who is not pitching. Who—”

“You say ‘Who’s on first’ and I’ll call your mother! Now I want to know what’s the pitcher’s name!”

“What’s on second!”

“I don’t know!”

Instead of saying the next line, they both turned to the audience and pointed. Nearly everyone in the room called out, “Third base!”

Lois laughed with them, then said, “Just remember, you guys don’t get paid for this, just the two of us.” The audience cracked up again.

When the latest round of laughter settled, Clark asked, “You got a catcher on this team, right?”

“Sure we do.”

“His name?”

“Today.”

“Today?”

“Today.”

“And Tomorrow’s pitching?”

“Now you’ve got it, Clark!”

“Terrific. All we got is a couple of days on the team.”

“Would it help if I told you the name of the relief pitcher?”

“Probably not, but go ahead.”

“Yesterday.”

“Yesterday?”

“Yesterday.”

“That’s three days. In another minute we’ll have the whole week.”

Lois patted his shoulder and crooned, “Poor baby.”

“Hey, I’m not that poor! I can play catcher, too!”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that.”

“Okay. I get behind the plate to do some fancy catching. Tomorrow’s pitching on my team, and a heavy hitter from the other team gets up to bat. The heavy hitter bunts the ball, and me, being a good catcher, I’m gonna throw the guy out at first. So I pick up the ball and I throw it to who?”

“Now that’s the first thing you’ve gotten right tonight.”

“How’d I do that? I don’t even know what I’m talking about!”

“Well, that’s all you have to do.”

“Just throw the ball to first base?”

“Yes!”

“And who’s got it?”

“Naturally.”

Clark’s eyes widened and his mouth opened in comprehension. “So if I throw the ball to first base, somebody has to catch it. Now who has it?”

“Naturally.”

“Naturally?”

“Yes, naturally.”

“So I pick up the ball and throw it to Naturally?”

“No! You throw it to Who!”

“Naturally.”

“That’s better.”

“But that’s what I said!”

“No, you didn’t say it right.”

“I throw the ball to Naturally.”

“No, Clark! You throw it to Who!”

“I throw it to who?”

“Naturally.”

“That’s what I said!”

“No-no-no! Look, I’ll show you. You ask me.”

“I throw the ball to who?”

“Naturally.”

“Now you ask me.”

“Fine! You throw the ball to Who.”

“Naturally.”

“That’s it!”

Clark all but jumped up and down twice. “Same as you! Same as YOU! I throw the ball to Who. Whoever it is drops the ball and the guy runs to second. Who picks up the ball and throws it to What. What throws it to I Don’t Know. I Don’t Know throws it back to Tomorrow. Triple play the wrong way around the horn. Another guy gets up and hits a long fly ball to Because. Why? I don’t know! He’s on third and I don’t give a hoot!”

“What did you say?”

“I said, I don’t give a hoot!”

“Oh, that’s our shortstop.”

Clark screeched “Aargh! I give up!” and stalked offstage.

Lois waited for the laughter and the applause to run its course, then she turned to the audience and smiled. “Thank you! Thank you for coming, for laughing, and for putting up with us. We’ll be here for the rest of the week! From both myself and Clark, good night! And be safe out there!”

She stepped back, waved, then followed Clark off the stage.

Chapter Six

The Western-themed restaurant was raucous but not deafening as The Hottest Comedy Team in Town finished a late dinner with their manager and his daughter. Louie and Kim lifted their glass Coke bottles high and tapped both Clark’s and Lois’ bottles.

“Here’s to the best comedy team I ever managed,” laughed Louie.

Kim took a swallow and gave him a piercing look. “And how many comedy teams have you managed, Dad?”

“Just these two, but that don’t matter none. Youse guys is still the best ever.”

Lois playfully bumped Clark’s shoulder with hers. “Thanks, Louie. That means a lot to us. Hey, did you know Cat Grant was in the audience tonight?”

“Who?”

“No, Who’s on first!”

Clark grinned and shook his head. “Routine’s over, Lois. Louie, Cat is a reporter for the Planet. She was with the paper a while back, got laid off before we left, then came back to fill the hole Lois left.”

“Yeah? How’s she doin’ with that job?”

Clark grinned. “She’s still rattling around and bouncing off the walls, scrambling to be as much like Lois as she can be.”

“Hey!” Lois interjected. “She’s not all bad.”

“On, really?” asked Kim. “I thought she was in the market for Clark.”

“No, no, she’s just – well – a little intimidated. She went after Clark because – oh, let’s talk about something else, okay?”

Louie put his drink down and leaned forward. “Okay, I got somethin’. But I got a feelin’ youse ain’t gonna like it.”

Lois frowned back. “What’s wrong? Did the Styles Club in Gotham cancel?”

“Naw, nothin’ like that. It’s still on, twelve nights starting next Tuesday at eight. And I’m still workin’ on that ten-minute radio spot next month. Bookin’ dates here in Metropolis and in Gotham ain’t the problem. Unfortunately – the problem is the two of you.”

Clark leaned his forearms on the table and matched Lois’ frown. Louie thought about changing the subject he’d intended to bring up, but decided it needed to be discussed. “Look, you two, I hit some roadblocks in bookin’ you guys out o’ town. You need more exposure south and west, but I’m hearin’ back from venue management in them places that the material you’re doing and your target audience ain’t compatible with you two livin’ together like you are.”

“Okay,” drawled Clark, “so we fix it. Lois can get another apartment.”

“Naw, that ain’t what I meant. See, the folks I been tryin’ to book you with want real family stuff on stage, same stuff you been doin’, an’ they been frownin’ at me when they find out you two’s livin’ together and actin’ like you’re together but you ain’t married. I really think it would help me get you in a lotta new places if you was hitched.”

Louie had heard the word “nonplussed” before, but he’d never seen anyone who fit the definition until now. Both Clark and Lois sat still with their mouths open, not moving except for Clark, who was blinking almost spasmodically. Neither of them seemed to be breathing.

Kim reached over and tapped Lois’ shoulder. “Hey, Lois, honey, you okay? Don’t forget to inhale.”

Lois shook herself and took in a deep breath. “Yeah. Um – you, uh – this is—”

“What Lois is trying to say,” Clark broke in, “is that we haven’t talked about – um, marriage. Just so you two know, we have the same address but we don’t sleep together.”

Louie waved his hands and shook his head. “What you two do or don’t do when you’re alone ain’t none o’ my business. I’m just tellin’ ya, as befittin’ my title as your manager, what the deal is on these small-town places outside Metropolis and Gotham City. Youse guys could make some part-time type dough if you stayed in town, but making enough to live on?” He lifted his shoulders in a shrug. “Ain’t gonna happen. You’re good, but there ain’t enough venues around here or enough demand for comics in general to pay your rent and buy groceries and such. Not to mention that as long as you keep doin’ these older routines, ya gotta pay for performance rights just like you was playing someone else’s music for money.”

Lois sat up straight. “So you’re saying that you can’t book us out of town unless we get married? How stupid is that?”

Louie leaned back in his chair and lifted his hands in a bigger shrug. “Hey, I ain’t criticizin’ nobody. I’m just tellin’ youse what they told me. Husband and wife comedy teams – yeah, they want ‘em. Livin’ t’gether, even if it’s like youse guys what don’t sleep in the same bed, they don’t want.” His gaze moved down until he found his dinner. “If I wasn’t the manager, I wouldn’t say nothin’. But I am – and I get twelve percent of your net. I wanna make some dough outta this gig, too.”

Lois narrowed his eyes at him. “We’ll talk it over and let you

know what we decide, Louie. Anything else on your mind?”

None of them spoke for a long moment, then Kim asked about Lois’ fish. Clark rolled his eyes and began complaining about how skinny her goldfish were before they moved her aquarium and how hungry the little guys still were even after eating the piranha Lois had brought home. She slapped him on the upper arm again and laughed. Clark and Kim followed suit and the sharp mood was broken.

But Louie knew that it was only a matter of time before the subject came up again. He could only hope they could work out their marital status in favor of the job before they went broke.

Clark unlocked the door and bumped into Lois as she tried to rush into the apartment. Neither of them looked at the other, and he could tell she was just as uncomfortable with the elephant in the room as he was.

Marriage? What was Louie thinking?

He’s thinking about his commission, Clark reminded himself. He’s looking out for us like a good manager should. And if he was giving them accurate information about their prospective bookings, he was right. They could get more gigs out of town as a married couple than as a couple just living together.

They needed to talk about it. And they needed to make a decision.

Still without looking at him, Lois asked, “Are you thirsty? I think there’s still some cream sodas in the fridge.”

“Sure. We can drink them while we talk.”

She stopped in the kitchen doorway and finally looked at him. “Clark, I – I’m sorry I put you in this predicament.”

He frowned and sat at the kitchen table. “How’d you do that?”

She walked into the kitchen, fetched two cold cans of cream soda, and sat down across from him. “When I barged into your apartment a couple of months ago and just assumed that I could stay here indefinitely.”

“I could have told you no. So don’t try to be a martyr about this.”

She lifted her eyes to his and tried to smile but failed. “Thank you for that. And I haven’t said it enough, but thank you for sticking with me. I don’t know any other man who would go this far for me.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say, “Lois, I’d go to the ends of the earth for you,” but he didn’t think that was what she wanted – or needed – to hear right now. Instead, he popped open his soda and took a big swig. “It’s not as big a deal as you’re making it out to be.”

“I think it is.” She looked at her drink and opened it. “You told me once, back when we first started working together at the paper, that you weren’t like other guys. I didn’t believe you then, not really, but I do now.” She gazed at him with dewy orbs. “I think you’d do almost anything for me.” She paused and took a sip, then set the can down and took his hands in hers. “So I’m not going to ask you to marry me, not for the sake of the story or the act or my reputation or the assignment. It’s too much. I can’t – I won’t do it.”

Looking into her eyes was almost hypnotic. He heard himself saying, “If we both agreed to get an annulment when the assignment’s over, I could see us going to City Hall tomorrow.”

She blinked several times. “What?”

“Lois, I’m willing to go through with—”

“No!”

“But we haven’t talked—”

Her hands snapped back as if they were connected to high-tension rubber bands. “No! I won’t let you do this! It’s not fair to you to ask – to either of us!”

“Lois, listen to—”

“No!”

“It would just be for show. I wouldn’t expect you to—”

“No!” She jumped up and almost ran across the living room. “You can’t – I won’t let you! It’s too much! I can’t let you!”

He spoke slowly and calmly. “You want to go back to reporting. I know you do. And you want to do it at the Daily Planet. Well, I want those things too. The only way to get them is to complete this assignment. We can’t do that if we can’t get out-of-town gigs. And we can’t get them if we aren’t married.” He leaned back and shrugged. “I really don’t think we have much choice.”

Her face paled and she reached across her torso to grab her other elbow. “I – I don’t know if I can handle being fake-married to you, Clark.”

So, he thought, there it is. I’m just her friend. A good friend, yes, but nothing more. If I told her that I loved her and wanted to spend the rest of my life with her, she’d run away like a quarter horse, blow the assignment, and never work as a reporter again. I can’t do that to her.

He made his voice as matter-of-fact as he could. “Look, I’m not suggesting that we sleep together. We’ll keep the bed and couch thing going until the job’s finished and we can annul the marriage. Nothing will change about our private lives.” She didn’t respond, so he added, “Remember, you’re the one who called this the ultimate undercover assignment.”

She took a quick, sharp breath as if she were gasping. Then her arms dropped and she seemed to deflate. “All right, Clark. We’ll do it your way.”

“It’s actually Louie’s way. It was his idea.”

She nodded. “You’re right. We’ll do it Louie’s way.” She turned and took a step toward the bedroom, then stopped. “Can we take care of it right after lunch, after we pick up our stuff from Joe DeLuca’s club?”

Take care of it, she said. As if they were planning to get a boil lanced.

“Sure. We’ll take your Jeep, if that’s okay.”

Still not looking at him, she nodded. “No problem. It’s the least I can do.”

She went into the bedroom and closed the door. The click of the latch seemed to thud against his heart like a pile driver.

He should have been deliriously happy. He was marrying the woman of his dreams, the most beautiful and talented and driven woman he’d ever known. He should have felt like shouting his good fortune from the highest point of the city. He should have been anticipating the best day of a great life from now on.

Instead, they were getting married for the money they could earn. And for the sake of some stupid undercover assignment. And because she wanted to go back to the Daily Planet and this was the only route available. And because he was too scared to tell her how he really felt about her.

He felt like a heel. If this was love, the poets could keep it.

Lois changed into her bedclothes on autopilot. She was getting married tomorrow.

She was marrying the man she’d literally been dreaming about for weeks. But not because they loved each other. It was because they wanted to get the story.

Because of the blasted story!

And the bed and couch thing? Didn’t he see how much that hurt her? Couldn’t he tell that she would have agreed to marry him with a smile if he’d pushed past her stupid, thin objections and told her that he loved her?

And the annulment.

That might have been the unkindest cut of all. The cavalier, offhand way he assumed that she’d only consent to marry him to get the story, the byline, the front page above the fold. He just stomped on her heart like it was a bug invading his home.

No, it was worse than that. Clark would capture an invading insect and release it outside. But her? He’d just throw her into the

trash compactor and press the “flatten” button. And there was no C3PO or R2D2 to save her.

She’d have to back off from the little touches and quick kisses they’d been exchanging for weeks. It wasn’t fair to him for her to keep teasing him when he really didn’t want her to. Nor did it do her heart or mind any good. That wall around her heart that she’d allowed him to breach would have to be rebuilt, stronger and wider and taller than ever before.

She didn’t look forward to her dreams tonight. She already knew they wouldn’t be good ones.

Chapter Seven

They were both up with the sun. And Clark knew that neither of them had slept much the night before. He’d heard her thrashing around, trying to get comfortable in the bed without much success. The noise had subsided around four in the morning, and he’d napped on the couch off and on since then.

Breakfast was uncomfortably quiet. Neither of them seemed to want to talk. Clark thought he understood Lois’ mood, but he knew she didn’t understand his.

He had to tell her before they signed the license.

He couldn’t tell her that he loved her – she couldn’t or wouldn’t return that love. To her, they were just friends and coworkers. Good friends, yes, but nothing more. She loved him – like a brother.

He had to tell her about Superman. And he had to do it before they left for City Hall.

But he didn’t know how.

She’d already told him that she didn’t want him to tell her anything life-changing before she went back to ruling the roost at the Daily Planet. She’d insisted that she didn’t want him to tell her anything truly important while she was in such a vulnerable state. She’d made it clear that he wasn’t to say anything important that he might think she wanted to hear.

That made two fairly important things he couldn’t bring up in casual conversation with her.

But that was before they’d decided to get married. Surely that changed everything. Surely she’d want to know that he was the also the guy who flew around the city – the world, really – doing good deeds and catching crooks and saving lives and stopping runaway trains and helping little old ladies across the street. He couldn’t imagine her *not* wanting to know.

She pushed back from the table, her scrambled eggs half-eaten and her toast untouched. As she began rattling around in her purse, he stood and cleared the dishes.

A thwack of a leather purse hitting a wooden table accompanied an exasperated sigh. “Nuts,” she muttered.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, really. I’ll need to get my birth certificate from my safe deposit box once the bank opens. I thought I had it with me.” She stood without looking at him. “I assume you already have yours.”

“It’s in my lockbox under the floorboard. I’ll get it before we leave.”

“Yeah. We should talk about setting up a joint account, too.”

He clamped down on his reaction and managed to sound calm. “No reason to if we’re going to get it annulled later. We can just keep on splitting the checks fifty-fifty.”

She was glad that she was facing away from him. That way he couldn’t see the tears in the corners of her eyes forming when he used that horrible word.

Annulment.

Somehow it was worse than talking about a divorce.

Either way, her heart was pierced through and through by his offhand dismissal. She had to get control of herself and she couldn’t do it in the dining room. Not with him across the table

from her.

The bathroom was her refuge. She burst through the doorway as if it were a piece of tissue paper.

She soaked a towel with her tears but managed to suppress the sobs. To hide the redness in and around her eyes, she took extra time with her makeup and her hair. She might feel like crap today, but she was going to look good.

She put on sweats to save her nice clothes for later. As she pushed through the bedroom door, Clark turned from the window and said, “Can we talk about something?”

He was going to lie to her and tell her that he loved her just to spare her feelings. He was about to perjure himself to ease her pain.

And she couldn’t let him do that. She cared too much for him.

No, she berated herself. You don’t just care for him, you love him. And you can’t tell him, either by word or deed. And you can’t let him lie to you about it.

“I don’t think so, Clark. I think we should just do some light housework or straighten the books on the shelves or wash the breakfast dishes instead.”

He froze in place and blinked at her. “Uh—” he managed. “I think this is important.”

Her tone was cool but not biting, and her volume was as low as she thought he could hear. “We talked about this already at the beginning. I don’t want you to tell me anything you think I want to hear. And I especially don’t want you to tell me something just to make me feel better so you’ll feel better. Let’s just accept this for what it is and move on.”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then said, “This is really important to me, Lois. And I think you’ll think it’s important too, once you hear it.”

She shook her head. “No. Save it for later. Much later. But not now.”

Regret kicked her in the backside as she saw the shimmer of pain flow across his face. Then his expression cleared. “All right. We’ll do this your way.”

With their gear from the club in the back of the Jeep, Lois steered toward City Hall. Clark was babbling like he was in love with his own voice and she wished he’d just shut up.

No, that was unfair. He couldn’t have been looking forward to this morning either. He was just talking because he was nervous.

“I walked across the street to Parker’s Jewelry this morning while you were at the bank and picked out a wedding set. It’s not junk stuff, but it’s not very expensive either. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, I don’t mind.”

“I knew we’d need something for the ceremony. You can check it out and if you don’t like it we can go back and trade it for something else.”

“I’m sure it’s fine.”

“I went on-line last night and got the details for the license,” he said. “There’s no waiting period for couples over twenty-one. All we need is our birth certificates, two witnesses, and our signatures on affidavits saying that we’re not married to anyone else.”

She nodded. “Uh-huh.”

“The license itself is only twenty-five dollars. I’ll pay for it if that’s okay with you.”

She turned in front of the old building. “Sure.”

“There are two judges on duty all day today, so we shouldn’t have a problem getting in quickly.”

The Jeep slid into the parking spot and she killed the engine. “That’s fine.”

She opened her door and got out. She’d chosen one of her better pantsuits today, a soft blue-green outfit. If she couldn’t have a real wedding dress, she wouldn’t wear a dress at all.

Apparently Clark hadn’t made any more effort than she had. He wore one of his older sport coats with unmatched slacks and no tie. That was probably for the best, she thought. It would keep her from strangling him with it.

Or maybe strangling herself.

He followed her as she stalked into the building, checked the directory for the marriage license office, and marched to the elevator. There were three other couples who seemed to be heading to the same floor as they were, and their embarrassed smiles grated on her nerves. She hadn’t slept well, and had been awakened at around six o’clock by a terrible dream she couldn’t remember now. The only remnant of it was a fading fear of being wrapped up in something – probably the sheet she’d fought with as she was waking up – a something that impressed her as being something else altogether.

Clark had finally run out of chatter, and the silence in the elevator was broken only by a passionate kiss from the youngest couple riding with them. As they reached their destination and the door slid open, the couple broke the kiss, and the young woman chuckled nervously. “Sorry,” she said to the rest of them.

Another woman laughed softly. “Just save it for the end, honey, when the judge tells him he can kiss the bride.”

The man with the second woman added, “Better yet, save it for the honeymoon or you’ll be in there all day.”

Six people laughed and blushed. Clark and Lois weren’t among them.

Cat nudged Jimmy’s arm. “Make sure you get a good shot of the deputy mayor when the clerk starts talking about specific numbers. I don’t think he’s on board with the street maintenance part of the budget.”

“You don’t have to bug me. I got it.”

She turned and sighed. “Look, Jim, I know this isn’t the kind of story you used to get when Clark and Lois were reporting, but you’re still a professional. What you do impacts me and vice versa, so let’s not sink this provisional partnership before it gets started.”

Jimmy sighed back. “It’s not you, Cat, honest. It’s – well, the news room isn’t a happy place like it used to be.”

“I know. Everything’s new, nothing’s in the same place, the ladies’ room looks more like a locker room in some very toney gym, and I still can’t get used to the ramp where the steps used to be. I nearly tripped on it yesterday morning.”

“It’s not that. I mean, it’s not just all that, and I haven’t seen the ladies’ room. The men’s room looks like something on a spaceship. The whole thing is – well, even the Chief doesn’t smile as much as he used to, and when he does, it’s not as bright. People don’t talk to each other about personal stuff like they used to, and when they do they don’t laugh as much. Now that CK’s gone, it’s like someone cut the heart out of the place.”

“What about Lois?” Cat whispered.

Jimmy glanced at her and shrugged. “I miss her too. She’d yell at me and gripe a lot, but she always pushed me to be better.

Perry’s the only one who does that now, and he doesn’t do it as often as he did. Last week I heard Myerson tell Eduardo that he was thinking about putting his résumé into circulation.” He shook his head. “I’m just not happy at the Planet anymore, and I think a lot of people feel the same way.”

She would have answered – she wanted to answer – but her attention was diverted when the elevator door at the far end of the hall opened. Three smiling couples got off, looked at the list of departments on the wall, and turned to walk hand-in-hand toward the Justice of the Peace’s office.

The fourth couple wasn’t smiling. Nor were they holding hands. They both looked for all the world that on the whole they’d rather be in Philadelphia, feeding each other to the crocodiles at the city zoo.

Then she recognized their faces.

No – it couldn't be!

It was.

Cat grabbed Jimmy's arm and yanked him along with her.

"Emergency! Come with me right now!"

"What? Where are we—"

"Clark and Lois are getting married!"

She felt him stumble for a moment but she yanked him back to his feet and kept pulling. Something was wrong, badly wrong, she just knew it. And somebody had to fix it.

Clark was far too aware that he and Lois didn't fit with the other three couples walking with them. He could have reached out and taken her hand in his, but was almost afraid that she'd jerk it away from him and throw a punch at his head. It was like walking beside an angry porcupine.

No – not angry. Not really sad, either, or scared or frustrated or – he didn't know how she felt. And that put him on edge. They hadn't always gotten along in the past, but he'd always known how she felt. He could read her emotional state better than he'd ever read anyone else's, even his parents'.

Except now.

All he could tell was that she was not happy. Not that he blamed her, of course – if he'd been coerced into marrying a woman he loved like a sister but not like a lover, he'd be less than thrilled too. And he knew it wasn't her fault. It was his.

He was concerned at how his parents would react when they found out. But Lois' parents? Judging by what he'd seen of her relationship with her family, someone might need a surgeon before that conversation was done.

Without his really realizing it, they'd drifted to the rear of the group headed for the judge's chambers. He glanced at Lois again, but she was still staring straight ahead, striding unevenly as if approaching a firing squad. Her face had paled and her mouth was pressed into a thin line on her face.

She looked like she'd rather die than marry him.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lois saw Clark nod to the others in their accidental wedding party and gesture for them to go ahead. The oldest of the other three women smiled at Lois for a moment, then tilted her head as her smile faded into apparent concern. The woman leaned toward Lois as if she were about to say something, but Lois took a half-step backward and said, "Clark, is the fee in cash or do they take plastic?"

Clark's head jerked toward her and he blinked in surprise, then said, "I think they prefer cash or a check. I have enough in bills in my wallet."

"Good." Lois slid another six inches away from Clark as the woman who'd almost spoken to her gave her a look of concern. Then she glanced over Lois' shoulder for a moment and almost smiled.

As Lois wondered what that was about, the young couple who'd kissed so enthusiastically on the elevator opened the license clerk's door and giggled into the office. At almost the same moment, Lois felt a tug on her elbow.

Clark's backing out, she thought with something approaching relief, then realized that the touch was on the elbow on the other side from where he waited. Someone else was there.

She turned to see Cat and Jimmy standing there, displaying nervous postures and obviously fake smiles. "Lois!" Cat called out. "Congratulations, girl! You finally got him!"

Lois tried for a fake smile of her own. "Yeah, he chased me until I caught him."

Jimmy reached out to shake her hand. "I'd offer my congratulations, too, but you're supposed to tell the bride 'Best wishes.' So – best wishes, Lois."

Cat took Lois' arm in hers and gently guided her away from

the office door. "Hey, Jim, why don't you try to calm the groom down? I want some girl time with the bride."

"Sure, Cat. Just be careful how much you tell her."

Cat knew something was terribly wrong when Lois didn't respond to Jim's deprecating comment. She pulled the reluctant bride ten feet up the hall and quietly said, "Come on, Lois, talk to me. You really don't want to be here, so why are you here?"

Lois' eyes flashed with a hint of the old fire. "Maybe I have to get married, Cat. Ever think of that?"

Cat shook her head. "Any other man, I might believe that, but Clark wouldn't kiss your cheek unless he knew you'd be happy about it. And he for sure wouldn't knock you up for any amount of money or influence unless you were already married. So no, I don't believe there's a chance in Gotham that you're pregnant."

Lois sighed. "It's – complicated."

"Complicated like in page three, line fourteen?"

Cat watched Lois' eyes narrow in confusion, then suddenly flare in comprehension. "What do you know—"

"Easy, Lois. Perry recruited me to give him the code phrase. And before you ask, I have no idea what any of them mean. So don't tell me about that. Just tell me why you're breaking his heart."

"Who says I'm—"

"Shh!" Cat pulled Lois closer to the marble wall. "That man has loved you since he met you. Not one woman he's met since then has even tempted him, not even me, and I don't need to tell you about that shot to my ego. He's about to marry his dream girl, but instead of floating among the clouds he looks like he's about to get lynched. So don't try to lie to me."

Lois glared at the other woman for a long moment, then hissed, "What about *my* heart? You think I look like I'm enjoying this? We're really getting married because we have to!"

"I told you not to lie—"

"It's for the act! We're locked out of a lot of family venues if we're just living together! We have to earn a living and we can't do it without the marriage license! Now do you understand?"

Cat took a slow breath and let it out just as slowly. "Yes. I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions."

"It's okay. I probably would have done the same thing if our places were switched."

"No," said Cat. "You'd scratch my eyes out for looking at Clark the way you'd like to look at him. And the only jumping you'd do would be on my head with both feet."

Lois returned Cat's smile. "You're right. So you'd best keep away from him, even after the annulment goes through."

"Annulment, huh?" Cat's head tipped to one side and frowned. "Is Clark on board with that?"

Lois looked away from her and in the general direction of the judge's door. "He brought it up just this morning while we were cleaning up after breakfast. This marriage will change our legal status, but that's all that will change."

"Huh. You don't exactly sound like you're thrilled with that situation."

Lois looked back to Cat. "I'm not. Not one bit. And if you tell him that I really will clobber you."

Cat shook her head and smiled. "You're a good, honest woman, Lois. A bit stupid sometimes, but still good and honest." Before Lois could ask what *that* remark meant, Cat nodded toward Clark and Jimmy. "I think the clerk is almost ready for you two."

Jimmy waved Clark to the wall opposite Cat and Lois and far enough from them to mask their conversation. For several long breaths, they just stared at each other, then Jimmy put his hands on his hips and quietly demanded, "CK, what's going on? If you're marrying Lois, why do you look like someone just drowned your favorite kitten? You should be deliriously happy."

Clark glanced at Lois and shook his head. “I really wish I could explain it, Jimmy, but I can’t. It doesn’t involve just me and Lois.”

Jimmy sighed and shuffled his feet. “You do realize that what you just said makes no sense at all, don’t you? Especially since I know you don’t believe in open marriage.”

“Yes. And I wish I could make some sense out of it.”

“Okay. I think you’re nuts – I think you’re both nuts – but I’m going to support you because you’re both good friends. You got witnesses yet?”

“Ah, no, I think we were just going to grab another one of the couples getting married and enlist them.”

“Absolutely not! I volunteer Cat and myself to be your witnesses. You just tell us where to stand and where to write down our names. And I want pictures before you leave, too. Trust me, you’ll want them later on. Hey, you have a ring for her, don’t you?”

Clark nodded. “Of course I do. I’m not that big an idiot.”

Jimmy gave him a sideways glare. “Up to about ten minutes ago I would have agreed with you.”

“Hey, I – wait, here come the ladies. You can tell Cat what she’s volunteered for.”

“I heard that, guys, even if I didn’t understand it. Jimmy, what did I volunteer for?”

Jimmy braced himself as if expecting an explosion from her. “You and I are going to be their witnesses and I’m going to take pictures.”

Instead of becoming angry, the tall redhead grinned to beat the band. “That’s a wonderful idea! Assuming it’s okay with Lois, of course.”

Lois nodded. “I think it’s wonderful too.”

“Then it’s settled! How many rolls of film do you have?”

“We’re almost in the twenty-first century, Cat. No film. It’s a new digital model with a four-gig memory card, 1.2 meg resolution, computerized auto-focus, and a three-inch viewscreen. So it won’t matter if you flinch, the shot will still be one of my best ever.”

“Great! Hey, do you guys mind if we put this in the Entertainment section? With a shot of the two of you together, of course.”

Whatever Cat had said to Lois, it appeared to have relieved some of the tension. She and Clark glanced at each other for a moment and then nodded together. “No problem,” they said in unison.

Cat and Jimmy exchanged a quick look, then Jimmy moved to Clark’s side. “I’m with you, CK. Until you guys kiss, of course.”

The bored clerk took down their information without saying anything other than the minimum number of words required to gather the information. He had both of them sign the license register, then the license itself. “Make sure the judge signs it or you won’t be legally married. Twenty-five dollars even.”

Clark nodded and handed him the cash. He rang it up, attached the receipt to the license with a paper clip, and pushed it back at them. “Next,” he called out.

Clark was surprised as Lois took his hand as they entered the judge’s office. He leaned down and whispered, “Feeling better?”

She gave him a small smile and nodded. “Yes, I am. You?”

“I am if you are.”

Her gaze turned thoughtful. “Maybe Cat was right after all.”

“Right about what?”

“Tell you later. It’s time to get married.”

Her light tone and open expression surprised him again. Maybe she didn’t hate the idea of being his wife as much as he’d feared, even if it was in name only. Or maybe she was flipping from one emotional extreme to the other because she was bipolar and had never told him about it.

Whatever. It was too late to worry about it now.

If someone had asked him about the ceremony later, he couldn’t have said much because it went by too fast for him to register it. He was just glad that Lois was smiling and that Cat and Jimmy seemed cautiously happy.

The part he remembered best was when Lois put her arms around his neck and kissed him. It was more than a friend kiss or a sister kiss but a bit less than a lover’s kiss. Still, any lip-to-lip contact with Lois made him smile. And it was long enough for Jimmy to get three different angles.

Jimmy shook his hand, then waited for Cat to unwrap herself from Lois. It was a day of surprises for Clark, this time because Lois seemed to welcome the contact with the other woman. Something good seemed to have happened between them in the hallway.

Jimmy gently shook Lois’ hand as Cat coyly smiled at him. “Congratulations, Clark. You’ve done a better thing than you think you have.”

“Thanks, Cat. I think.”

She laughed and encircled his neck with her long arms. With her mouth beside his ear, she whispered, “Give her time and space. She’ll be fine. Just don’t jump into anything without talking with her. And be sure to listen close when she finally does talk to you.”

“O-kay.” Before he could puzzle out what she meant, she released him at almost super-speed and pulled him toward Lois. Jimmy lifted his camera and called out, “Okay, you two, say ‘wedding night’.”

There were shots of Lois with Cat, Clark with Jimmy, and one with all four, taken by the bride from the next pair to wed. Jimmy even got more shots of Clark and Lois kissing.

When Clark saw the bride-and-groom pictures in the camera’s viewscreen, he knew he looked like he’d been clocked with a two-by-four. But he wasn’t sure what Lois was thinking about.

Surely she wasn’t thinking about – no, of course not. They were just friends, at least as far as she was concerned. He couldn’t possibly *honeymoon* with her. Aside from the fact that her feelings for him didn’t run that deep, she still didn’t know he was Superman. And that was a bridge he was absolutely unwilling to cross.

Although the shots of them kissing didn’t convey friendship as clearly as Clark had expected it would.

And somehow, in all the excitement and bustle, he never asked Lois what she and Cat had discussed in the hallway outside the judge’s office.

He unlocked the apartment door and nodded for her to enter first. She stood still, played with her fingers for a long moment as if she were waiting for him to say or do something, then she said, “Thank you.”

No pressure, he told himself. Not on Lois, anyway. Don’t press her about anything.

She waited beside the door until he entered, then she locked up behind him. “You’re not still putting a key under the planter outside, are you?”

“No, you finally broke me of that old Kansas habit. Now I just hang it on a nail above the door.”

Lois looked shocked for half a second, then she laughed nervously. “Not bad for an adlib. Remember it so we can use it in one of the routines. It might get a chuckle or two.”

He grinned back. “Sounds good to me. I know it’s a little early for dinner, but we didn’t get lunch. Want me to cook something?”

She shook her head. “I think a turkey sandwich would work for me. Is there any tea made?”

“If not, I can make some in a jiffy.”

“I recommend you use a tea pitcher instead. Peanut butter-flavored tea hasn’t made it this far east yet.”

It was a good line, so he chuckled at it. But her expression

didn't match her words. As he thought about it, her tone of voice didn't either. She looked, sounded, and behaved as if she were nervous about something.

She had to be worried about the wedding night. Or, rather, she had to be worried that he expected there would be traditional nuptial activities – sex – on their wedding night, despite the discussions they'd already had on the subject.

He opened the refrigerator and let the cool air wash over him. Oh, if it were only true about tonight's activities.

But it couldn't be true. Not as long as Superman stood between them like the Colossus of Rhodes, staring Clark down every time his mind started down the sex path.

Pushing those thoughts aside, he made a turkey sandwich for each of them and poured out the last of the tea. He pulled down his glasses and checked his pantry – sure enough, he'd need to go shopping tomorrow. They were low on bread, tea, and sugar, along with some of the spices he liked to use and several staples.

He walked back into the dining room and set Lois' plate and glass down with a small flourish, then went back for his dinner. Her tired-sounding "Thanks, Clark," followed him.

"It's no trouble. I'll have to go shopping tomorrow morning before lunch. We're out of or low on a bunch of stuff."

She took a drink and set her glass down hard, which seemed to surprise both of them. "Sorry," she sighed. "I – guess I'm a little nervous about tonight."

He swallowed the bite he'd just taken and frowned. "Why?"

"Well – I – I know we said no – uh – no – physical contact once we're married – but I thought – I mean – I know guys expect that kind of thing on the wedding night – and I thought you might —"

"No. I don't."

Her shocked look was back, along with an open mouth and a pale face as if she hadn't seen the sun in months.

"Look, Lois, what I mean is that I don't want you to feel pressured into my – our – into doing something you'll regret later. I haven't forgotten that this is primarily an undercover assignment."

She took a sharp, shallow breath. "No, you – of course. You're right, of course." She stood abruptly. "I'm sorry, the sandwich is good but I'm not hungry now and do you want the bed tonight?"

Her gaze wasn't on him. She was looking past him, probably at the floorboards near the front door. "No," he replied softly. "You take the bed. Let me know when you're done in the bathroom so I can brush my teeth."

One sharp nod and she stumbled toward the bedroom. The door closed behind her with a solid click, and he heard the sounds of a wounded woman changing clothes.

He'd hurt her. How, he didn't know, but he had. Maybe he could find out tomorrow.

Or he could just go find some Kryptonite to swallow. It might make him feel better.

It was the ultimate rejection.

Clark had to have known what she'd offered him. There was no way he could have missed it. And he'd turned her down. A guy just doesn't turn down a chance to climb in the sack with a woman – any woman – unless she utterly disgusts him.

But that kiss—

He'd fooled her with that kiss. She believed that it had started his train of thought down the track she'd wanted – or, at least, the one she thought she'd wanted – to travel with him. She would have given ten-to-one odds that he'd shyly and reluctantly agree to lie down beside her.

It had never entered her mind that he'd flatly refuse her suggestion.

And he hadn't even let her tell him that she was more than somewhat in favor of the idea. He'd derailed her without leaving

her any hope at all that he'd change his mind.

Maybe – maybe she didn't disgust him. Maybe he just wanted to have sex with a woman he really loved. Surely there weren't very many women in his past. If he'd resisted Cat Grant so determinedly, it was probable that he'd strictly limited his collection of bed partners.

That, at least, told her that he had some discernment and taste.

She thought about the kiss again. He certainly wasn't gay.

She'd kissed a couple of gay men in the past, and while her gaydar wasn't always spot on, the kiss always gave them away. Kissing a gay man had always been like she'd imagined it would be to kiss Lucy passionately. That thought always made her want to gargle with battery acid afterward.

Clark's kiss hadn't been anything like that.

Yet he'd pushed her away.

If she didn't disgust him, didn't make him want to follow Lex to the street from his balcony in Lex Tower, then the only other possibility was that he simply didn't love her.

Which meant that he had lied that day in the park.

Which also meant that he'd been about to lie to her right after they'd left the Planet, when they'd sat on his couch and she'd stopped him from telling her – something. Something that had to have been "I love you."

What else could he have been trying to say?

It didn't matter now. They were married in name only. They were husband and wife for the sake of the investigation. And as soon as they broke the story, she could let him go find a real wife. She'd take the legal blame, if there was any. Anything he told the judge would be fine with her. She wouldn't argue or fight or get in his way at all.

Whatever it took to end this federal disaster of a marriage.

She finished changing and walked into the bathroom. The mirror stared back at her accusingly.

She could almost hear the word 'Coward' coming out of the glass.

Chapter Eight

The show the next night didn't start very well.

Lois knew she'd hit her marks. She also knew that Clark had been late picking up on his cues several times and had stepped on her lines twice. His timing was way off and his mistakes had nearly ruined three of the routines. He'd even forgotten to use their signature "what page are you on" aside. It was fortunate that there was nothing to report to Perry about this club.

But Clark was still way off-stride and it showed. She'd had to prop him up and carry the show almost by herself all night. And there were too many reps from other clubs there that night to blow an entire show because he was upset – even if she fully understood why.

Even if she sympathized with him.

Just before they began the funeral home routine, while the club's stagehands were prepping the stage, Lois gently tugged Clark to one side and pulled him close as if hugging him. "Get it together, Farm Boy!" she hissed with a smile.

"Sorry, Lois, I'm just not in the mood tonight."

Still wearing a smile for the audience, she whispered, "I don't care. We're professionals and we do our best no matter how we feel. We've rehearsed this bit and we both know it forward and backward. You get this routine right or so help me I'll smack the crap out of you right here on stage!"

He smiled at her. "I don't think you should try that."

"Then we have to nail this routine. We've been working on it for a week and it's ready. If you want to go back to the Planet, you'll be hysterically funny."

His smile faded and he turned his head toward the stage backdrop. "I just got married yesterday. I should be happy. You know why I'm not."

“Once again, I don’t care. We need to make these people laugh like they’ve never laughed before and send them out the door with huge smiles. Now you pull yourself together or I *will* clobber you.”

Before he could respond, she broke away and walked to the chair beside the desk. She sat down, grabbed a huge flowered handkerchief from the top of the desk, and began bawling ostentatiously.

After a moment, Clark walked to center stage and sat behind the desk, opened a drawer, and pulled out a sheaf of paper. It was her cue to weep even louder.

He put a sad but business-like expression on his face. “Mrs. Loudermilk?”

She wailed in pitches she’d never before allowed him to hear. “Excuse me, Mrs. Loudermilk?”

Without looking at him, she nodded with her entire upper body.

“I’m Paul Cooper, Mrs. Loudermilk, and I’ll be your grief guy this afternoon.”

“Th-thank you, Mr. Pooper.”

The audience chuckled. Without breaking character, he said, “That’s Cooper, if you please.”

“Oh! Oh, I’m so sorry!”

“That’s quite all right. Your first name is Deborah?”

“Yes. I’m – I’m Deborah.”

“May I call you Debbie?”

She stopped and stared at him. “Debbie?”

“Yes, Debbie.”

“Brenda – Brenda used to call me Debbie!” she wailed again. More histrionics ensued.

The audience laughed a little uncertainly, as if they couldn’t decide if the subject matter was appropriate for a comedy routine. Clark waited until Lois calmed down a bit, then gently patted her on the shoulder. “There, there, Deborah. May I call you Deborah?”

She nodded. “Y-yes. Nobody calls me – Brenda never called me Deborah!”

And the weeping started again.

He waited as she slowed down a bit. “Very well, Deborah. How can we help you today?”

Sniff-sniff. “I – I saw your ad. I’m interested in the \$199.95 funeral.”

“Okay. Would that be for yourself?”

The audience was startled into laughter. “Me? No, it – it’s for Brenda!” She turned toward him and leaned toward the desk, then started crying again. After a moment, she managed to say, “I – I’m sorry! It’s just that – Brenda—”

“Yes, I understand. Tell me, please, where you saw that ad?”

“On – on the side of the 23rd street bus.”

“Thank you.” He bent over the desk and wrote something down. “We’re just doing a little market research here, you understand, so we’ll know where our trade comes from. Um, I’m afraid that I’m going to have to ask you some questions.”

“Oh – yes, of course.”

“Can you give me Brenda’s full name?”

“Yes, it – it was Brenda Louise Seymour-Breen.”

“Okay. Is that hyphenated?”

“It was, yes.”

They waited for the chuckle to die down, then he asked, “And what was Brenda’s address?”

Sniff-sniff-wipe. “441118 Southeast Huguenot-Walloon Drive.”

“Very well. What is your relationship to the deceased?”

She lifted her head and stared at him. “Deceased,” she said sadly. “That’s such a final word.”

“Yes, well, we are in a funeral home.”

“Oh, right. Yes, I’m her sister.”

“I assume that you’re married?”

“Oh, no.”

“You’re not married?”

“No. Brenda was married. That’s why her last name is – was hyphenated.”

He frowned in confusion. “But the name you gave our receptionist was Mrs. Loudermilk.”

“I’m a widow, Mr. Pooper.”

“That’s ‘Cooper,’ if you please.”

“Oh, your name is fine with me.”

He opened his mouth for a moment, then closed it to wait for the snorts of laughter to fade. “Of course. Well, the cost of the service you’ve requested is \$199.95.”

She dug in her purse until she found a piece of paper. “Yes, just a moment, I’ll find it, here you are, the check’s already made out. Thank you so much.”

She began to stand and he stopped her. “Before you go, Mrs. Loudermilk, I was just wondering if you would be interested in some extras for your loved one?”

She sat down again and tilted her head in confusion, then asked, “What kind of extras?”

“Well – how about a casket?”

The audience was once again startled into laughter, then kept laughing at Lois’ baffled expression. “Uh – isn’t that included in the price?”

He smiled gently and said, “No.”

She waved her hands in surprise. “We have to have a casket!”

“Yes. It looks better.”

They waited for the laughter to fade a bit, then she asked, “How much?”

He picked up a sheet of paper and pointed to the top section. “We have three prices, actually. \$1,463, \$868, and \$19.99.”

“Oh. May I ask what those prices get me?”

“The first one is for a mahogany casket with solid brass handles.”

“Uh-huh.”

“The second one is for oak with wooden grab bars.”

“Oh – well – that’s not so bad. What about the third option?”

“The third uses recycled sheetrock from a commercial demolition site.”

The audience roared. Lois all but stuffed the kerchief in her mouth to keep from breaking character. The script mentioned the third option, of course, but Clark had startled her by improvising on the details. She glanced up at him and saw that he was biting his lower lip to keep from laughing out loud.

At least he was finally working the bit correctly.

She finally got enough control to keep going. “Recycled sheetrock, huh?” He nodded somberly. “What kind of handles does it have?”

“They’re recycled kitchen drawer pulls from a home remodeling site.”

“Tell me, what—” she waited for the laughter to fade a bit “—what kind of appearance does that make?”

He opened his mouth closed it, frowned in apparent thought, then said, “Cheap.”

“Cheap?”

“Positively dreadful, actually.”

The audience broke up and the kerchief went back in her mouth. After a long moment she pulled it out and said, “I – I’ll take the oak.”

He leaned over the form and wrote something. “Oak, yes, a fine choice.”

“Thank you. Is there anything else?”

“Well, yes, there is. Please understand, Mrs. Loudermilk, I deeply regret asking these necessary questions in the midst of your grief, but – how had you planned to get Brenda down here to us?”

This time it was Clark who almost broke up in laughter as Lois put on a befuddled face and appeared to think by waving her

hands around. Finally she looked at him and asked, “Cab?”

The audience roared again. Lois busied herself with the kerchief while Clark shuffled papers until he regained control of his face and the laughter eased off. After several seconds he shook his head and said, “You’re going to have to give the driver an enormous tip.”

After a few more seconds of loud laughter, she asked, “You don’t happen to have a hearse, do you?”

“Oh, yes, we do. For \$188.50, I can give you an excellent Cadillac Slumber Wagon.”

“Oh. I – I thought you’d have three prices.”

“We do, actually. The Slumber Wagon is the middle choice. Would you like to hear the other two?”

“Well – just for comparison purposes.”

“Of course. We have one option for \$389.95, which is a horse-drawn caisson like the ones used for state funerals.”

“That’s a bit ostentatious, don’t you think?”

“For some, I suppose it is.”

“What’s the third option?”

“For a flat fee of \$25, a sub-chief of the Chippewa tribe will transport the deceased from the current location to our facility on a single horse-drawn travois.”

The audience spluttered. “Wouldn’t that take a long time?”

“He does it late at night.”

Lois waited for the chuckles to ease, then said, “Okay, let’s go with the Slumber Wagon.”

“Excellent. Now, how about someone to drive it?”

Her jaw dropped and she blinked several times. “You mean that’s not included?”

His somber face reappeared. “No, I’m afraid it isn’t.”

“Oh, all right, we have to have a driver, I can’t drive it myself.”

“No, of course not. It’s a Hearst shifter.”

“That’s ‘Hearst’ with a ‘t’ at the end, right?”

“Of course, yes. Otherwise it would just be redundant.”

The audience groaned. She turned, put her elbow on the desk, and leaned toward him. “How much is the driver?”

“We have three choices—”

“Oh, naturally!”

“Naturally?”

“Naturally.”

“So I throw the ball to Naturally?”

The audience exploded. “Can you at least do one routine at a time?” she growled. He nodded, chastened. Lois waited for the laughter to die down again, then asked, “I don’t suppose you could share them with me, could you?”

“Of course. Now, you understand that these costs are set by the union, not by us.”

“At this point I don’t care if a hen sets on them! What are the three choices?”

“Very well, Mrs. Loudermilk. The first choice is a liveried limousine driver licensed by the state. That cost is \$275. The second one is an out-of-work cabbie licensed by the city. That cost is \$140.” He paused. “Do you want to hear the third option?”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I might as well. Just for—”

“Comparison purposes, I understand. That cost is \$37.62.”

“Uh-huh. And what does that get me?”

“The owner’s fifteen-year-old niece.”

“Fifteen? Isn’t that a bit young?”

“Yes, but she’s scheduled to take her learner’s permit test in five weeks.”

The audience tittered. “And the \$37.62 is for what?”

“Makeup and a phone book to sit on.”

Lois dropped her head into her hands as the audience laughed again. “I’ll take the limo driver. Brenda can afford it. Now is *that* everything?”

“Just one more item, and this is the last one, I assure you. I’m truly sorry to intrude on your grief in this manner, but it is my job, after all.”

“Yes, yes, what is it?”

“Had you planned at all on burying Brenda?”

The audience roared with laughter. Lois almost fell off the chair, then straightened herself and made a fist as if she wanted to take a swing at him. “Buster, that was the reason I gave you the \$199.95!”

“Of course. Do you happen to have a plot?”

“No, but I’m sure you do!”

“Yes, we do. We have—”

Lois said “three prices” in unison with him, then nodded her head in resignation.

“They are, in order, \$979.95, \$525 even, and \$14.95.”

“Fourteen ninety-five?”

“Yes, that’s the third option.”

She began pulling the kerchief through the fingers of one hand with the other. “I’m just curious.” She waited while the audience chortled in anticipation, then asked, “What happens for \$14.95?”

He shifted in his chair and straightened. He looked like he’d just tasted bourbon when he was expecting chocolate milk. “Um – for \$14.95 – we – er – we have two men who would take Brenda away on an oxcart and – and I’ve never had the courage to ask what they do next.”

She flipped the kerchief up in the air and said, “I’ll take the \$525 option, okay?”

“Of course, Mrs. Loudermilk. If you’ll just sign here – thank you. Please take some of our business cards and pass them out to your friends. If five of them use our service, you’ll get a fifteen percent discount on your next purchase.”

She jumped up and ran offstage as the audience broke up again. After a moment, Clark gathered the business cards in one hand and offered them to the audience. After another long moment of laughter with no takers for the cards, he smiled and walked offstage to the side opposite the one where Lois had exited.

The audience cheered and clapped and called for an encore. After a brief interval, Lois came to center stage and bowed to the crowd, then turned and gestured for Clark to come back. He walked out with his head down and his hands in his pockets.

“Thank you, thank you all,” Lois called. “We hope you enjoyed hearing us as much as we enjoyed doing the show.”

“Speak for yourself, Lois.”

“Yes, we – what did you – wait a minute! What do you mean by that?”

“Well, we got married yesterday afternoon, and as much as I like it when we can make people laugh, it’s not exactly the way I thought I’d be spending my time tonight.”

She leaned against his shoulder and grabbed his arm. “Aw, honey, you know we had this show scheduled! We couldn’t disappoint all these nice people.” She leaned closer and said in a loud stage whisper, “Besides, doing this pays the bills, remember?”

He shrugged as sporadic applause broke out. “As much as I hate to admit it, you do have a point.”

“Of course I do.”

“So from now on, what do we do with all the hotel keys women throw at me?”

She gave him a sharp frown and waited for the chortles to fade. “There aren’t that many keys, Clark.”

A middle-aged woman in the second row called out, “There don’t need to be that many for him to score big!”

Many of the women in the audience laughed hard. Not many of the men did. They knew that the majority of them didn’t compare favorably to Clark in the good looks department.

Lois gave the heckler a brittle smile. “Careful, sweetheart. Your scoreboard doesn’t count that high.”

The second laugh was split fairly evenly between male and female voices. The heckler waved at Lois as if dismissing the comeback and laughed with the rest. “I’m just funning with you, girlfriend. You take that man home and show him a honeymoonin’ good time, okay?”

Lois smiled at the woman in the audience. “That’s an excellent suggestion – girlfriend. I think I ought to implement your suggestion.” She turned to her husband and kissed him square on the mouth. “What do you think about that suggestion, dear?”

Clark looked startled for a moment, then put his hands on Lois’ waist and nodded. “Right now I’m wondering why we’re still here.”

The audience broke up again, then stood and applauded enthusiastically. They walked offstage hand-in-hand, waving to their newly-won admirers.

Lois opened the locks on the door to their apartment and stepped inside, knowing that Clark would close and secure the door before he came down the short flight of steps. It was still early for them – the club gig was done for the night, Louie had some business to take care of at the pool hall, and Kim was at her office meeting with a client. There was nothing preventing them from talking or making dinner or – or doing anything else.

The thought of “anything else” sent a warm chill down her spine. On the one hand, the thought of making love with Clark as her husband made part of her want to trip him and pull off her clothes before he could get up. On the other hand, the lack of tender touches or passing kisses between them gave her the distinct impression that she was coming close to wearing out her welcome, even if the lack of them had been her idea in the first place. She felt as if she were being pulled apart by forces she could neither influence nor control.

She stopped at the bottom of the steps to Clark’s – to their living area. Maybe if she stood directly in his way, he’d at least put his hands on her shoulders to move her. Maybe he’d even brush her hair with a brief kiss. If she were really lucky, he’d move in front of her and give her one of those electric smiles. If he did, she was sure she’d have the energy to activate the flux capacitor and go a few months back in time and let him tell her what he was going to tell her that first day when Perry had sent them undercover.

He glided past her without touching her and went to the kitchen.

“You hungry?” he asked. “I can put something together pretty quickly.”

“N-no,” she managed. “I don’t want anything.”

He opened several cabinets, looked in the refrigerator, then sighed. “It’s just as well. I really need to go shopping. Should have gotten it done this morning like I said I would.” He plucked a windbreaker from the coat tree beside the front door and slipped it on. “There’s an all-night bodega about six blocks from here. Is there anything you want me to pick up?”

She shook her head without looking at him. “No, nothing I can think of.” Unless you know where to find a really great guy who loves me as much as I love you, she thought.

“Okay. I’ll be back before too long. Keep the door locked and don’t let any bad guys in.”

And he was gone.

She waited a beat before moving to the door and securing it with everything except the chain. Then she turned and headed for the linen closet. It was her turn to take the couch.

She was starting to hate that blasted couch.
It didn’t look any better through her sheen of tears.

Clark walked to the alley a block away, pulled off his glasses and checked them as if he were deciding whether or not to clean them, then spun into the Suit and took off. He hadn’t made enough

night patrols lately, and it was getting harder rather than easier to slip away from Lois to make the ones he did get in. He also hadn’t talked to his parents in over a week.

What would he say to them? “Hi, Mom, hi, Dad, Lois and I got married but it’s just for the undercover assignment we’re on and right now we’re living in the same apartment but once we’re done with the story we’ll get an annulment and I’m thinking about moving to Outer Mongolia and making some Kryptonite earplugs so I don’t have to hear her tell me how she can’t wait until she’s single again.”

He flew higher and began scanning the darkened city. Come on, muggers, he thought, here’s your chance to meet a sexually frustrated Superman who’d love to release some tension all over your fragile, crushable little heads.

She was so beautiful, so vulnerable, so trusting, that keeping his hands to himself was almost painful. It was as difficult as trying to move the Nightfall asteroid again to walk past Lois and not touch her, not kiss her, not take her in his arms and fly her around the room and the city and the country and set her down on some unoccupied mountain peak in the Rockies and tell her that she could either make love to him right then and there or walk to civilization.

And that train of thought was extremely unproductive, unless he wanted a surplus of unresolved tension crammed into his bright red outside underwear.

A fleeting thought that he could release some tension with another woman sneaked its way past his mental filter, but he banished it as quickly as he could. Not only did he not want just any woman – just Lois – there was no way he could be intimate with any woman unless there was a permanent relationship in the offing. That sort of encounter would be way beyond awkward for him.

He could see the National Inquisitor’s headline now. Superman Rescues Beautiful Woman from Mugger Then Seduces Her. The subheading might read, The Whole Story From The Woman Who Eased Superman’s Weary Mind. Right now, any story like that – and there had been several over the months since he’d first flown in the Suit – would be easy for him to deny. But he could never lie to the press as Superman. Doing so, even about such a private matter as this, would lead him down a dark path he feared more than Tolkien’s Fellowship of the Ring shunned Mirkwood.

While it might be a catharsis for him – as Clark – to be there when Lois first read that headline, it would also be mean-spirited and spiteful of him. There was no scenario he could envision which contained that sight where his father wouldn’t be deeply disappointed with his actions and his mother wouldn’t rip his ear off.

And Lois would eventually read that tabloid story. Superman could never reveal his feet of clay to her in that crass manner. The hero meant too much to her.

Besides, he loved Lois. With everything that resided within his soul, he loved her.

He wished that weren’t true. Maybe then his heart wouldn’t feel as if it were cracked and leaking all manner of things. Maybe then he wouldn’t feel torn asunder by the twin desires to go back to the apartment to be with her and the need to stay away so she wouldn’t impale his soul with every jagged, brutal glance in his direction.

He decided to cut his patrol short. Not only had he not found anyone rolling a drunk or breaking into a parked car or assaulting an innocent victim, there weren’t even any good car wrecks where he was really needed. The only ones he found were fender-benders or were being handled quite well by police and other emergency personnel. The city didn’t need Superman at the moment.

And he had shopping to do.

As Clark, he could walk around the store at midnight and not

be noticed, except by the store owner who was ever alert for shoplifters or thieves who might rob the register. His cart was getting full, so he cut off his shopping spree and walked to the front to pay for his purchases.

But as he stood in line behind an older lady with three cans of soup in her basket, he glanced up and saw the ice cream freezer. Lois would love some Blue Bunny Fudge Chocolate. Maybe it would bring a smile to her face. It would be something to ease his torture, even just a tiny bit.

With four paper bags filled nearly to overflowing and one plastic bag holding the quart of ice cream dangling from his wrist, he knew he had to go straight back to the apartment. But he still managed to shadow the older lady as she shuffled home – without incident, fortunately.

Lois lay in flickering darkness, the comforter pulled up around her neck and the TV sound turned so low it was almost muted. The old black-and-white movie, a romantic comedy from the 1930s with some serious overtones whose title she'd missed, played to a disinterested observer on the couch.

She didn't know what to do. She'd stopped Clark from telling her that he loved her twice, and now that she would have welcomed his declaration with all the enthusiasm she could muster, it appeared that he wasn't willing to get slapped down again. Once again she'd jumped into the deep end without checking to see if the pool held clear water or freshly hatched and hungry tiger sharks. She was starting to think that moving in with him had been a huge, huge mistake from the very beginning.

What would she do when Clark came back? Would she wimp out and pretend to be asleep so he couldn't reject her again? Would she stay on the couch under the comforter as it lied to her about whether its name mirrored its function? Would she get up and help him put the groceries away?

If she did get up, would she risk her heart again? Could she be close to him – beside him in the kitchen and dining area – without either attacking him or breaking down in tears? Or both? Did she have the courage it would take to storm a beach under enemy fire and share her heart with him?

Maybe she should just throw the Hail Mary and walk out of the shower in the morning without wrapping a towel around herself, dripping all over the carpet and squeezing her hair in her hands to show off her figure to its best advantage and walk up to him and wrap herself around him and try to induce a heart attack. If it worked, she'd show him just how much she loved him, assuming he survived.

If it didn't work, she could go up to the roof and silently jump and hope Superman wasn't passing by.

A sudden thump on the door rattled her. "Lois?" someone whispered from outside the door. "Lois, are you awake?"

That had to be Clark. An attacker wouldn't approach the apartment like that.

She got up and reached for the locks, then had the frightening thought that a really smart bad guy might do exactly that. She lifted herself up on her toes and looked through the peephole.

A sigh of relief escaped her when she saw Clark standing in the hallway laden with his grocery burden. As she looked, he reached out and tapped the door again with his foot and stage-whispered, "Come on, Lois! These things are getting heavy!"

A small smile crept over her lips as she flipped on the light, then released the locks and opened the door. "Need some help?" she asked.

He all but threw one bag into her arms. "Oh, all I can get, thanks."

She closed and secured the door as he plodded toward the table and set down his bounty. "There. That ought to keep us fed for a few days."

She glanced at the clock. "I see why it took you this long. Did

you leave anything for the next customer?"

"Depends on how hungry he is." He lifted the plastic bag on his wrist. "Here, take this. I saw it and thought of you."

She put her bag on the table, then peeked into the plastic one he'd offered to her and smiled wider. The little dear really had thought of her after all.

She'd risk her heart to him tomorrow. Right now there was a pint of Fudge Chocolate ice cream calling her name. And while ice cream might add a couple of pounds to her frame, it wouldn't rip her heart out of her chest and run it through the shredder.

The next night at the Palm Tree, they put on a great show. Everything had clicked, they'd delivered the coded message to Cat, and the manager had given them two thumbs up from the wings. The audience was still laughing and applauding.

As soon as they cleared the stage, Kim grabbed Clark's hand and shook it hard, then released it and embraced Lois. "You guys were hysterical! Everything was perfect! And Clark, I really liked that little aside to the girl who left and came back. Lois, you handled the hecklers really well. Those two things seem to set the two of you apart from other comics and make people remember you."

"Thanks, Kim," Lois grinned. "You think we have an act now?"

"Oh, absolutely! You guys keep doing that classic stuff with the modern touches and you'll hit the big time in no time at all!"

Clark smiled. "I'm glad to hear that. I just hope our booking agent feels the same way."

"Are you kidding? Dad can't keep up with the demand!" Kim lowered her voice and gestured both Clark and Lois closer. "I really shouldn't tell you this, but he's working on a live TV broadcast from the Argosy Theater in Gotham City. It's only average money for you guys, but the exposure will be priceless. You can't buy publicity like that without killing someone."

Kim didn't quite understand why the two of them exchanged a look instead of laughing out loud.

As the two of them walked out through the stage exit door, two large men in expensive suits followed them down the alley. Lois grabbed Clark's arm, put her face beside his ear and whispered, "Thugs at six o'clock."

He turned his head and kissed her on the cheek. "Saw them," he whispered back. "Just act normal."

She giggled and turned to face him. "Oh, yeah, it was great! And the girl who ran out – uh, hi, guys, what's up?"

The two big men stopped about six feet from Lois. Clark turned to face them and unobtrusively slid between Lois and the men. "Can we help you?" he asked.

"Yeah," growled the one shaped like a fire hydrant. "We want to book you for a private party."

Clark frowned. "Who's giving this party?"

"Mister Smith," the second, more refined-looking one replied in a surprisingly clear tenor voice.

Lois decided to think of them as Thing One and Thing Two just to keep them straight in her mind. She stepped up to Clark's side. "All of our bookings go through our manager Louie. I can give you his phone number."

"We're presenting this opportunity to the two of you, not to Louie," grunted Two. "This booking is – off the books, you might say."

The two men both chuckled as if Two had just told a joke. "Mister Smith needs your answer pretty soon," added Two.

"How soon?" Clark asked.

"Tonight, if you please," said One.

As one, Clark and Lois shook their heads in the negative. "We can't cut Louie out of the booking loop," Lois said. "He's the reason Mr. Smith has heard of us. You'll have to talk to him."

Two took a step forward and growled, “We ain’t talking to no fake—”

“Hang on.” One put a hand on Two’s elbow and gently pulled him back. “All we were instructed to do was ask. They’ve given their answer. We need to take this to Mister Smith and let him decide what to do.”

Two answered One without taking his eyes off Clark. “We was told to get them booked and that’s what we’re gonna do.”

“No.” One’s response was gentle but firm. “We have to report back. We can’t force them to take the job.”

Two glared at Clark for a long moment, then relaxed slightly and stepped back. “Fine. We report in.” Then he pointed a thick index finger at Lois. “Don’t think this is finished, honey.”

A few months before – with the resources of the Daily Planet directly behind her – Lois would have popped off with a snarky crack about his personal habits or his taste in clothing. But now that she was out at the end of the branch by herself, she felt exposed and bereft. Things One and Two walked past them to the end of the alley and waved to someone, and within seconds a big black sedan pulled up in front of them.

After they piled in and left in the car, Lois let out a breath she’d been holding. “That was a little scary.”

“Yeah. I wonder who Mister Smith is, and why they kept saying ‘Mister’ like it was a title instead of an honorific.”

Before Lois could answer, she heard shoes clicking on the alley floor behind them. A husky alto voice said, “You two okay?”

Lois spun to see Cat Grant standing under one of the two working streetlights. “What are you doing here?”

Cat opened her purse with her left hand, then lifted her right hand from the folds of her skirt. Then she put a small revolver in the purse and snapped it shut. “I saw those wise guys following you and decided you might need some reinforcements.”

Clark nodded. “Thanks. I’m glad you saw what happened. And I’m very glad you didn’t shoot either of them.”

“I wasn’t planning on pulling the trigger unless they pulled weapons on you. My next move would have been to shout ‘Hold it!’ and cock the hammer. That usually stops idiots like them.”

Lois exhaled through her nose. “I’m still glad you were here. You need a lift?”

Cat smiled and flounced past them. “No thanks. I told my date that I’d meet him at the front door.” She stopped and turned to face them, her smile gone. “You two be real careful for a few days. I don’t think these guys play within the rules.”

Clark was worried about Lois. She fidgeted behind the steering wheel all the way back to the apartment. No one would ever call her a smooth driver on her best days, but Clark had to remind her of red lights twice and alert her about a pedestrian crossing against the light once. All three times she’d slammed on the brakes and skidded slightly, and she watched her mirrors more than the road before them during the entire trip back. Her hands turned white on the wheel and stayed that way until she pulled into the parking space.

Those men had frightened her despite her previous experiences with danger. He had to force down his anger against them just to stay with her all the way to their front door.

Clark opened the apartment door and nearly had it ripped out of his hand when Lois burst through. She all but ran to the kitchen and flattened herself against the wall out of sight of any windows.

He set all the locks, then picked up a dining chair and jammed it under the doorknob. “Lois?” he called softly. “It’s okay. Nobody’s getting in tonight.” He walked to the kitchen and stopped in the doorway. “Lois?”

“Wh-what?” she stuttered.

She was scared. Anyone could see that. The encounter with the two thugs had frightened her badly, and he was once again overcome with fury at the two men who’d done this to her.

“Lois, it’s okay. I’ll protect you.”

She wiped her face with her hand. “I know. It’s just – they—” He slowly reached out and touched her shoulders, then drew her close to his chest. “You’re safe with me, Lois. You know you are.”

“Yeah,” she sniffed. “Safe with you like I’d be safe with Superman. I – I shouldn’t be scared. You wouldn’t let anyone get to me if it meant your life.”

“No,” he breathed, “I wouldn’t.”

Her breathing slowed and deepened and she seemed to relax against him. “It’s just – just that – I felt so alone.”

“You weren’t alone, Lois.”

Her smile shone through the darkened apartment. “I know. I was safe with my best friend. But – but the Planet wasn’t with me.”

He nodded slowly. “I understand.”

She slipped back but didn’t let him go. “Every time I’ve been threatened before, I knew that the Daily Planet would be there. Even if I didn’t survive, someone from the paper would push the police to find my killer and bring him or her to justice.”

“But not tonight?”

Her hair danced around her face as she shook her head. “Not tonight. I was sure Thing Two was going to kill me and leave my body in a dumpster and I’d end up in a landfill and no one would know what happened to me including you because they’d have to kill you too because you were a witness and the only thing I could hope for was to be buried next to you when someone finally found us and—”

“Shh. It’s okay.” He wrapped her up in his arms. “I would not have let that happen, Lois. No way would I let that happen.”

She returned his hug and stood there for almost a minute. Little by little, he felt the tension seep out of her body until she was almost back to normal.

It was nice. He was pleased that she trusted him with her safety. He would have liked it better if she’d said that she was safe with her husband, though.

He was starting to hate the Friend Zone.

And this silent embrace had to end before he did something stupid. “Lois?”

“Yes, Clark?”

“What did you mean by Thing Two?”

A laugh burst out and he knew she was herself again. “Dr. Seuss’s ‘The Cat In The Hat’ had characters named Thing One and Thing Two in it. I used to read it to Lucy when she was in pre-school. That story just popped into my head and the labels seemed appropriate.”

He chuckled with her. “Good choice. Hey, are you hungry?”

She shook her head again. “I’m more tired than I am anything else. How about we just hit the hay?”

“Sounds good to me. It’s my night on the couch, isn’t it?”

She tensed against him. “Actually – I was hoping that – that you’d stay with me tonight. In the bed, I mean.”

He loosened his arms and leaned back a little. “Huh?”

“Not for sex! No, I – we made a deal when we got married and I’m not asking you to go back on it now. I just – I’d sleep better if you were there with me.”

He wanted to sleep next to her. He’d wanted to sleep next to her since she’d all but forced herself into the apartment. It would be heaven to wake up beside her.

It would also be agony to sleep beside her knowing that he couldn’t touch her.

But he also knew that she wouldn’t have asked if she hadn’t been so frightened. So he pasted a smile on his face and nodded. “Of course, Lois. I’ll even let you have the bathroom first.”

“Thanks, Clark. You’re wonderful.” She started to slide past him, then stopped, stood on her toes, and briefly pressed her lips to his.

The quick kiss she gave him was both agony and ecstasy for him.

But he knew it was born out of her fear, not love for him. The two thugs might have frightened her badly enough to want some human contact tonight, but they couldn't have scared her enough to love him. Life just didn't work like that.

Especially not his life.

Chapter Nine

Lois awoke refreshed and rested.

And pinned to the mattress by Clark's arm draped across her midsection.

She thought about trying to turn over to face him, but she was too comfortable. Besides, his soft, even breathing told her that he wasn't awake yet.

She thought back and tried to remember the last time she'd felt so safe, so protected, so cared for in her life. She considered the few men with whom she'd been intimate in her life, the ones she'd awakened beside, and compared those feelings to this morning.

There was no comparison.

Clark was The One. She'd slept under the covers last night even as he'd been a complete gentleman and slept atop them. Not once, not even when she gave him any opening, any hint, any suggestion that she'd appreciate being closer to him, had he taken advantage of her.

Despite her insistence that he not tell her about his feelings for her, she couldn't turn off her feelings for him. Sleeping beside him had dislodged something inside her and made her unable to thrive without him. She would never again say to him or hint to him or show him in any way that she wanted to leave his side.

Of course, it wasn't entirely her decision. There were other considerations, like his freedom of choice and his feelings for her — assuming he still felt the way he'd hinted he did — and her very real need to visit the bathroom.

Maybe that fresh-from-the-shower idea wasn't the worst one she'd ever had.

Maybe she'd try it in a couple of days. They had to get breakfast and get to a rehearsal with Louie before noon. He had some new ideas for their routine and he'd seemed eager to find out what they thought.

She knew she was just putting off a conversation they desperately needed to have, but once again her courage failed her.

Louie handed two identical scripts to his favorite comic team. "Here ya go. I think this is gonna push youse guys out in front of just about everyone else in town."

Lois began reading. After a moment, her eyes went wide and her jaw dropped. "Louie, we can't do this material! We'd run off half our audience!"

Louie lifted his hands in feigned helplessness and turned to his daughter, who shook her head and said, "Don't pull me into this, Dad. I told you they wouldn't go for it."

"C'mon, Kim, help out yer old man! These two gotta get some original material in the act. This is the kind of thing comics do nowadays!"

"What, get rude and dirty?"

Louie took a deep breath and wiped his hands over his face. "Can you help me convince them to try it? Just once? And if it don't go over, it don't go over."

Kim frowned at her father, then slowly nodded. "Okay. But if the test audience doesn't love it and both Clark and Lois hate it, it'll have to go. Agreed?"

"Yeah, yeah, fine!"

"Shake on it, Pop."

Louie glared at his daughter for a long moment before putting his hand out. "Girl, you drive a hard bargain, but okay."

She took his hand and laughed. "Who do you think taught me

how to do that, anyway?"

Lois smiled and waited for the small test audience to finish clapping. "Thank you, thank you so much. Tonight we have a special guest with us. Direct from the Munich Institute of Advanced Regressive Studies, please welcome Professor Doctor Baron Herr Ludwig von Futzenbaum!"

Clark slowly strolled onstage, wearing a 1940's vintage padded suit with a top hat and a false Van Dyke beard and mustache. He'd exchanged his wire-frame glasses for heavy plastic frames with no lenses. His left eye also sported a monocle.

The applause fell apart into near-hysterical laughter as Clark stood beside Lois with his hands folded across his ample fake stomach and beamed at the audience. Lois waited, smiling, as the initial laughter ran down.

"Professor, welcome to Metropolis."

"Sank you very much."

"What is your—"

"Ja, zat is vat mine great-uncle ze U-boat captain said many times."

"Excuse me, but what is a U-boat? Does it tell the other ships to do a U-turn?"

Clark puffed himself up and glared at her through his monocle. "Nein, young fraulein. It iz short for Unterseeboot. Ze English name is 'submarine'."

"Ah, your great-uncle, the submarine captain?"

"Ja. He said many times, 'Sank you very much.'"

Some in the audience groaned at the pun. A few laughed. Lois said, "I told you the line wasn't that funny."

Clark broke character for a moment and replied, "Nobody scores a touchdown on every play!"

"Just do the rest of the routine, all right?"

"Fine." He adjusted his shoulders and folded his hands across his padded belly again, but before either one could speak, a tall auburn-haired woman in the second row wearing a short green dress stood up and threw a hotel card key on stage.

Clark picked it up and examined it, then looked at the woman who'd thrown it. "Young lady, vat is de meaning of dis item?"

"Whaddya think?" she yelled back.

"Hmm. It iz perhaps a sign zat you are seeking ze approval of strange men due to ze lack of approval you perceive in your own life. Or, it may zimply be zat you are just horny as a three-headed goat."

The dozen or so people in the room laughed less than Lois thought the line deserved. She reached out and took the key from Clark, then tossed it back to the woman. "Come see me after the show, honey, and we'll talk about it." She turned back to Clark. "Now, Professor—"

"Doctor, bitte."

"I hadn't planned on biting anyone!"

"Oh, nein, nein! In English, it means 'please.' I vas not of you asking for a dental examination."

A few scattered groans greeted the line. Lois glanced at Kim before continuing. "Of course. Doctor, can you tell us what the Institute for Advanced Regressive Studies does?"

"Zertainly. Ve study ze regressive tendencies of society in order to advance our knowledge."

Lois paused as if waiting for more — waiting for laughter which didn't come — then she said, "Could you be more specific, you know, give us a little more information?"

"Off course. Ve observe ze human subject in its natural envir-r-ronment und determine vat, if any, regression has taken place. For example, ze feline-garbed woman who threw her key onstage haz obviously regressed to a cavewoman state due to ze amount of martinis she haz made to dizzappear."

Instead of laughing, the audience groaned wearily. Lois opened her mouth to deliver the next line, but instead shook her

head and stepped out of character. “Louie, I’m sorry, but I just don’t think this premise is all that funny.”

Louie threw up his hands in apparent exasperation. “C’mon, Lois! Ya gotta give some audiences a little something off-color to laugh at! Ya can’t be Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm all the time! Ya need some slightly adult material!”

Lois glanced to Clark as if asking him a question. He sighed and put his hands in his pockets. “I have to go with Lois on this one, Louie. I’m not feeling it either.”

“Guys, please! Ya gotta expand your repertory!”

Kim put her hand on her father’s shoulder. “Dad, I think they’re right. This routine feels like the first time they performed in the pool hall.”

“What’re you talkin’ about?”

“Remember what you said, that using Lois as the ditz and Clark as the straight man didn’t work because it sounded like they’d memorized a play in a foreign language? This is like that, except it’s worse.”

Louie stared at the floor, sighed, and shook his head all at once. “Okay, fine, youse guys don’t like this turkey. What about the next two or three? You like any of those?”

“I liked the one with Lois as the bubble dancer,” Clark offered.

The small audience laughed. “In your dreams, Farm Boy,” Lois growled.

He dipped his head slightly in a small bow and said, “As you wish.”

Lois shook her head. “I knew we shouldn’t have watched ‘The Princess Bride’ again last night.”

The audience laughed again, then Kim clapped her hands twice. “What about the Michael Jackson dance routine? It sounded funny to me.”

The woman who’d thrown the key turned around and demanded, “How are you gonna make people laugh at Michael Jackson?”

“Hey!” Louie snapped. “Youse is only supposed to heckle the comics, not the management!”

“Oh, please,” the woman said.

“Hang on now!” Kim called. “It’s a play on the song ‘Billie Jean’ and a line in the chorus. Lois and Clark dance to the song but they don’t say anything. You know the line ‘the child is not my son’ and how Jackson says ‘child’ like it’s ‘chair?’ That’s where the funny is!”

The woman lifted an eyebrow. “This I gotta see.”

Kim smiled at Lois. “Then let’s show them, partner.”

Lois set up the boom box and dropped in Jackson’s “Thriller” CD as Clark pulled off his German professor makeup. The audience watched the routine and they all laughed, even the woman with the key.

As Lois turned off the CD player, Kim clapped for attention and called out, “Clark? I thought you were into classical stuff like the waltz and foxtrot and such. Where did you learn to dance like that?”

He shrugged. “Lois taught me, mostly. We’ve been watching a lot of MJ’s videos lately. That man is really light on his feet.”

“Well, you’re not going to get a job as a dancer, but that’s not bad. You’re pretty agile for your size. Can I make a couple of suggestions?”

“Sure, as long as they’re not too involved.”

She jumped up and stood between Clark and Lois. “Okay, first thing is you need to use your arms a little more. You’re moving like this—” she demonstrated “—but you should go for something more like this—”

Clark watched her move with her arms raised more to the side and nodded, then tried it himself. “You mean like so?”

“Yes! Lois, you see what I mean, don’t you?”

Lois grinned at her. “I sure do.”

Kim smiled back. “Yeah, like – hey! I meant the dancing!”

“Oh, right, you did, I’m sure.”

Clark stopped and lifted an eyebrow at Lois. “I never knew the moonwalk could get this kind of reaction. No wonder he likes that move.”

The first Gotham City show had gone smoothly and it was time to debut the new routine. Lois just hoped she got the chair sequence right.

And since it was also their last routine of the night, she hoped the audience laughed and didn’t run them off the stage before they finished the bit.

“Oh, Clark, can you come here for a minute?”

“Just for a minute?”

Lois grinned like a cheese-eating possum. “Maybe about three and a half minutes.”

“Okay, as long as it’s not any longer than that.”

“What’s wrong, honey? Are you tired?”

He heaved a big sigh and wiped his forehead with an ugly rag he’d pulled from his pants pocket. “Oh, yeah. I’m ready for this routine to be over and done so we can go home.”

Her grin vanished. “What, you don’t like making these nice folks laugh?”

“No! I like that just fine! I’m just tired from helping a friend move this morning.”

“Why would that tire you out?”

“He had a lot of chairs that he didn’t have room for, so I brought them with me tonight.”

She stared at him. “You brought chairs?”

“Yes.”

“Someone else’s chairs?”

A laugh rumbled up from the audience. “Well, I didn’t buy them from him.”

Lois’ amazement brought more chuckles. “To our show tonight?”

“Yes, Lois, I brought someone else’s chairs to the show tonight.”

“What are we supposed to do with them now?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

She frowned in thought and tapped her teeth with one fingernail. “Well, we have one more routine to do before we leave, so maybe we could come up with something—” She was interrupted by enthusiastic applause from the audience. “Hang on, folks, this one’s a bit different. We hope you like it.”

The lights dimmed and the thumping drum intro from Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean” rolled out of the speakers above the stage. Clark began moving his feet in rhythm with the song as Lois slowly strutted to one side, then returned to center stage. By the time the main vocal began, he’d shucked his jacket, thrown it over his shoulder, and was dancing front and center on the stage with Lois right behind him.

She reached out and tapped him on the shoulder, then pointed at his chest with one finger.

She was more like a beauty queen from a movie scene

I said don’t mind, but what do you mean I am the one

Who will dance on the floor in the round

She said I am the one, who will dance on the floor in the round

He stopped moving and stared at her as she danced in front of him as if she were Scheherazade and he was her favorite king.

She told me her name was Billie Jean

As she caused a scene

Then every head turned with eyes that dreamed of being the one

Who will dance on the floor in the round

He picked up the step again, then turned to follow her with his eyes as she danced around him and put her hands over her heart as if she’d been emotionally destroyed.

*People always told me be careful what you do
And don't go around breaking young girls' hearts
And mama always told me be careful who you love
And be careful what you do because the lie becomes the truth*
As she danced in front of him wiggling her hips and touching his cheek, he shook his head and broke rhythm. Lois mimed showing him a picture and he determinedly shook his head. Then she ran offstage, grabbed a metal folding chair, and brought it to him. He folded his arms across his chest, turned away, and shook his head again.

*Billie Jean is not my lover
She's just a girl who says that I am the one
But the chair is not my son
She says I am the one, but the chair is not my son*
She ran off again with the metal chair and brought back a wooden barstool. Clark waved her off and caught the beat again, moonwalking away from her. The audience, having finally gotten the play on the words, laughed and clapped. Some of them tried to clap with the beat, but it didn't catch on with the rest. Lois faced the audience and silently mouthed "White people clapping" to their listeners. The ones who saw her laughed.

She says I am the one, but the chair is not my son
Lois mimed shooting him with her finger, then blew smoke from the "barrel" of the imaginary pistol she held. Then she holstered the "pistol" and resumed dancing toward him.
*For forty days and for forty nights, the law was on her side
But who can stand when she's in demand?
Her schemes and plans
Cause we danced on the floor in the round
So take my strong advice, just remember to always think twice
(Don't think twice)*

She leaned toward him and shook her index finger at him in admonishment.

Do think twice! (hoo)
He danced back in apparent horror, then they clasped hands and skipped in a circle as if surrounding a maypole. She broke away and mimed showing him the photo again.
*She told my baby we'd danced till three, then she looked at me
Then showed a photo, my baby cried, his eyes were like mine
(oh no)*

Cause we danced on the floor in the round, baby
He pulled her to him, put his nose in her hair and inhaled deeply, then jumped away in apparent fear, again on the beat.
*People always told me be careful of what you do
And don't go around breaking young girls' hearts
She came and stood right by me
Then the smell of sweet perfume*
Lois pulled several of the hotel room keys from her pocket which had been thrown onto the stage earlier and offered them to him. He all but ran to the far side of the stage.

*This happened much too soon
She called me to her room*
She ran to the side, grabbed an electric blue wingback chair strapped to a furniture dolly, and rolled it out to center stage. Clark gave her an imperious "talk to the hand" gesture.

*Billie Jean is not my lover
She's just a girl who claims that I am the one
But the chair is not my son*
She shoved the chair offstage and grabbed a folded chaise lounge from beside the curtain. Once again he rejected it, this time as he danced and spun as if he were wearing just one glove.

*Billie Jean is not my lover
She's just a girl who claims that I am the one
But the chair is not my son*
Once again she frowned and pointed sharply to the lounge chair, but he still shook his head.

She says I am the one, but the chair is not my son

She threw the chaise lounge offstage and grabbed an inflated pool ring in the approximate shape of a seahorse. He seemed to consider it, then shook his head.

She says I am the one, but the chair is not my son
Lois threw the pool ring at him, missed, and turned around to grab a wheelchair.

*Billie Jean is not my lover
She's just a girl who claims that I am the one
But the chair is not my son
She says I am the one, but the chair is not my son*

Clark considered the wheelchair for a moment, then smiled, put his coat back on, nodded, and sat down. Lois strained to push him offstage as he sat in the chair, wiggling his feet and head to the beat while Michael Jackson repeatedly insisted through the fadeout that Billie Jean was not his lover.

The crowd, who had laughed at each new chair ever since the barstool had shown up, roared and clapped with approval. Their applause and calls for an encore followed the duo offstage as the club's MC took the mic.

"Sorry, folks, that's it for Lane and Kent, the hottest comedy team in town! At least, that's it for tonight. They'll be back tomorrow evening at eight, so tell your friends and neighbors, and maybe we can convince the fire marshal to look the other way just this once!" Laughter and applause broke out again and he had to yell into the microphone to be heard. "Good night and be safe!"

Clark and Lois left the club through the front door and immediately saw that the thugs Lois had designated as Thing One and Thing Two were back. The burly, ill-tempered Thing Two was leaning against the driver's side front fender of Lois' Jeep, as the taller and more affable Thing One smiled and walked toward them.

"Good evening," he said pleasantly.

Cautiously, Lois answered, "Well, hello to you, too. How do you like Gotham City?"

"Oh, it's nice enough, but contributing to Gotham's tour guide is not why we've crossed the river between Gotham and Metropolis. We've been asked to repeat Mister Smith's invitation to perform at a party of his. And I can assure you both that Louie will receive a generous fee for his efforts."

Clark nodded. "That's good of you. But have you – or, perhaps, Mister Smith – actually spoken to Louie about this booking?"

One shook his head. "I can't say that Louie has or has not been contacted. I don't know. All I do know is that we have no intention of cutting him out of the loop." He tilted his head to one side and put one hand in his pants pocket. "And I find it interesting that neither of you has asked what your fee for this performance might be."

"Okay," said Lois, "I'll bite. How much are you offering us for this private party?"

"Two and one-half times your usual fee. In cash." He paused, then said, "Of course, since cash is notoriously difficult to track, the IRS doesn't have to know anything about this transaction."

Clark smiled and mirrored the other man's pose. "See, that's the thing. We've already drawn the attention of the IRS just because of what we're doing and where we're doing it. I don't think we can afford any more scrutiny from them at this point. Besides, Louie needs to handle all of our booking fees because he's responsible for making sure our tax situation is copacetic."

One straightened and pulled his empty hand out of his pocket, then crossed his arms. "You seem to be almost unreasonably honest, Mr. Kent."

"I'm sorry about that. I don't mean to be unreasonable. But I also don't want our manager to lose any trust in us. And we can't be double-booked – you know, that pesky can't-be-in-two-places-at-once thing really gets in the way at times. We can't take a gig

unless it's booked and paid for through Louie first."

Two took a hard step toward them. "I don't think you two get it. Mister Smith ain't a guy you wanna say 'no' to. Not never. And since we represent his interests here, you really don't wanna say 'no' to us, neither."

Lois slipped behind Clark's left shoulder. To her surprise, her partner seemed to get bigger and firmer as he set his feet on the sidewalk. "We aren't accepting your booking," Clark repeated intently, "but neither are we declining it. All we're saying is that you need to book us through Louie. He's the one who's guiding our career now."

Two reached out to Clark, pushing One away from him as he stomped closer. "Listen, pipsqueak, you better not—"

The moment the bigger man's left hand closed around Clark's right upper arm, Clark turned to his right and grabbed his attacker's wrist and twisted it and bent over and the big man flipped over Clark's left hip and smacked down on the sidewalk as his breath whooshed out of his lungs. Lois moved to the side and said to the Thing One, "You want some of this too, buster?"

One raised both hands and shook his head. "No, thank you. Please forgive Benton. He can be a bit – ah, impulsive at times." To Clark, he said, "Mr. Kent, if you will allow me to assist my partner, we'll deliver your response to Mister Smith."

"As long as that's all you do," Clark growled.

One smiled thinly and without real humor. "I have no desire to fight either you or Ms. Lane, and especially not both of you at once. Your formidable reputations are well-earned."

Clark backed away and waved One over. "He's all yours. But I think that next time you should come by yourself, and talk to Louie when you do. I don't entirely trust your buddy here."

"A completely understandable reaction." He bent down and lifted Two up by his arms. "Come along, Benton, let's go. Count yourself fortunate that Mr. Kent did not smash your head against the concrete."

The heavier thug's eyes weren't quite in focus, and he probably would have fallen had his partner not looped his arm around the man's back. The old sea chanty "What Can You Do With A Drunken Sailor" popped into Lois' mind as she watched them meander to a Ford sedan parked behind her Jeep. One put Benton in the passenger seat and buckled the belt, then walked around the car to the driver's door. He hesitated before stepping into the car and appeared to consider saying something else, but he only smiled thinly at Clark before buckling his own seat belt.

After they'd driven away, Clark turned to Lois and touched her elbow. "You okay?"

"Sure, I'm fine, they never touched me." She gave her partner an appraising once-over. "When have you had the time to learn judo?"

He smiled back. "Aikido, actually. I spent a few months in Okinawa several years ago when I was traveling the world, and there was a young sensei just starting out who was willing to teach the big clumsy white boy how not to get killed in a fight. I only got to green belt before I moved on, so I don't have a whole lot to brag about. Doesn't compare to your brown belt in Tae Kwando."

"I'm still impressed. That was a good throw."

"Thanks. But I think it was only because I surprised him. If I meet him again, he'll be more cautious."

"Or he might bring a gun with him."

Clark's eyebrows went up. "I thought about that, but I felt like keeping you safe was worth the risk."

His words touched her spirit and made her want to turn cartwheels, but she controlled her reactions as best she could. "Thank you. I – I appreciate it."

He nodded to her. "Ready to go home now?"

She smiled and nodded. "Uh-huh. Do you want to drive?"

"No, you take the wheel. I'll do my best to make sure no one is following us."

Her good mood meter dropped a couple of notches. "I hadn't thought about that, but you're right. Let's go, partner."

They made it back to the apartment without incident. Lois opened the door as Clark stood watch in the hallway. He pulled down his glasses and peeked into the apartment, then outside the building, but saw nothing amiss.

The overhead light snapped on in the apartment and he stepped in. She secured the locks and the door chain with rapt attention to her task. Over her shoulder, she asked, "Do we want to talk to Louie about Mister Smith now?"

"Yes, I think we'd better. We're meeting him at eleven in the morning as usual. We'll brief him then."

She turned to face him. "Did you see Cat in the audience tonight?"

"No."

"Neither did I. I hope that's not a bad sign."

Clark paused for a moment and listened for electronic bugs. The wireless transmitters always gave off a constant high-pitched single-toned whistle, one far too high for normal humans to hear. And passive microphones would return an echo to his ears, along with an intermittent ultra-high pitched whine.

Nothing. The place was still clean.

"I'm sure she's fine," he said. "She probably had a date or another story to chase down. Jimmy told me that she's turning into a good reporter who asks good follow-up questions."

Lois pulled off her suit jacket. "When did you talk to Jimmy?" "A couple of days ago at the deli down the street from the Planet. We ran into each other and had lunch. I had a yen for one of their hot turkey sandwiches."

She grinned at him as she hung up the jacket. "The one with the mushrooms and cheese and thick bread?"

"Yep. You'd already had your yogurt or I would have called and offered to bring one back for you."

"Are you kidding?" She lifted one foot after the other and pulled her shoes off. "I've gained about eight pounds since you started cooking for me on a regular basis, and I can't carry extra weight like you can. I have to work hard to stay slender."

His eyebrows drew together. "Honest, Lois, I hadn't noticed that you'd put on weight. In fact, if you hadn't told me, I still wouldn't know."

She stopped and tilted her head to one side, a soft smile slowly blossoming on her face. "I don't know whether to be grateful to you or feel ignored."

The words escaped his lips before he could capture them. "I have never been able to ignore you, Lois."

The soft smile turned into a slight frown, though her eyes still showed amusement. "Now I don't know if you mean that in a positive way, like you're happy to have me around, or that I'm like a blister on your heel that you can't stop thinking about."

"You're no blister. And I'm usually glad to have you around."

"Usually?"

"Except when you slap my chest and tell me I have no comedic timing or sensibilities."

"Only during our routines!"

He rotated one shoulder as if working out the kinks. "They don't always feel routine."

She laughed softly. "I'm sorry about that. I'll try to do better."

He barely managed not to say that the only way she could do better would be to stay with him forever. Instead, he hogtied his impulse and threw it down on the rodeo arena floor. He took a deeper-than-necessary breath and said, "I know it's late, but are you hungry? I could fix something quick and light for us."

She shook her head. "No, I'm good. I'm just – I think I'll turn in for the night, okay? It's my night for the couch, so I'll take the bathroom first if that's okay with you."

"Sure. Sleep well. And don't let any Things in, no matter what

the number might be.”

The reference apparently baffled her for a brief moment, then she seemed to remember her nicknames for the two thugs who’d “invited” them to give a personal performance for a Mister Smith, whoever he was. She stopped at the bedroom door and looked back at him. She seemed to be thinking about saying something, then nodded once and went into the bedroom. “You too, Clark.”

He listened as she gently closed the door. It seemed to say, No peaceful slumber for you, Bubba. You don’t dare float in your sleep tonight – you’d drift right into the living room and hover over her like a doomed dirigible.

She’d probably wake up, see him, scream in terror, and be crushed when he awoke and fell down on her.

And then Perry would kill him for sure.

She thought about the many things she might have said to him. I love you more than life itself.

I want to spend the rest of my life with you.

Being with you here, in this apartment, is torture if we’re separated by misunderstanding or hesitancy.

Instead, she’d chickened out and murmured, “You too, Clark.”

Lois shut the door as gently as she could, then turned away from him and wiped her eyes. They’d almost shared a tender moment. But once again he’d rerouted the discussion away from intimate feelings to food. It was almost a cliché to her by now – they’d move toward something deep and personal, and Clark would sidestep at the last minute and suggest something to eat.

Just like he had the morning after he’d slept beside her.

At least he wasn’t running off every moment. At least he was just in the next room.

But he might have been in the next state for all the closeness she shared with him.

She’d thought he was going to say or do something tonight. After the second encounter with the Things, they had both seemed to open up to the other. Some of the bricks in the wall between them had fallen, and Lois had been encouraged.

Then Clark had ducked down behind the food thing and dodged her gentle invitation once more.

Maybe he needed something more direct. Maybe she really did need to step right out of the shower, looking sexier than any centerfold fantasy with water glistening on her skin and dripping from her hair and slink up to him and give him the best, the deepest, the dampest, the most intimate kiss of his life.

And then she could pick up the ten thousand pieces of her shattered heart when he rejected her yet again. It almost destroyed her just to think about it.

Oh, he’d be as gentle as a lamb, as considerate as a funeral director, and as impersonal as a tire salesman. I appreciate the sentiment, Lois, he’d tell her, and you’re certainly deserving of some good man’s love, but that kind of relationship just isn’t in the cards for us, not now, not ever. He’d try to let her down easy, but there was no way to un-ring that bell. Not only would her heart be irretrievably broken, any chance of going back to the Planet together would vanish like dew in a blast furnace.

Maybe they should do the show Mister Smith wanted them to do. Maybe he was a gangster – probably was, given the behavior of his representatives. Maybe she could provoke him into shooting her. Maybe she could die in Clark’s arms as he lied to her and told her that he loved her after all.

She was close to preferring that over being so near him while they were so far apart.

Chapter Ten

At six minutes before eleven the next morning, Louie and Kim opened the front door of the pool hall to admit Clark and Lois. Kim was not surprised to see the signs of fatigue on both of their faces. In fact, both of them were starting to take on the appearance

of a couple of raccoons, what with their slightly sunken eyes and dark rings above their cheeks. Something had to give between these two – whatever was bothering them needed to be resolved as soon as possible or they might fall apart and disintegrate.

Her father must have seen the same signs. “Hey, Kim,” he said, “do you mind grabbin’ a couple of cold Cokes for these two? They look thirsty to me.”

“Sure, Pop.” She turned and headed for the fridge in the back room, but stopped when Clark said, “Louie, we may have a fairly serious problem.”

“What is it?”

Clark paused and shuffled his feet for a moment. “Have you heard of a man called Mister Smith?”

Kim was startled to see her dad stiffen and go motionless at Clark’s question. Without a word from anyone else, Kim hurried to the back room and returned with four twenty-ounce bottles of Coca-Cola, all with the tops already removed.

Her dad had all but collapsed into a folding chair, his face pale and his breathing shallow. Lois had her hand on his shoulder. “Louie,” she asked softly, “are you okay?”

Kim handed out the bottles, beginning with her father, who chugged nearly half of his drink before coming up for air. “Where did youse guys hear that name?”

Lois straightened and looked to Clark, who said, “Two men met us after last night’s show with an invitation to do a private party for the guy. One of them was called Benton. We didn’t get the other man’s name.”

Louie’s gaze drilled into Lois’ eyes. “That the first time you seen them?”

Lois shook her head. “No, the second. The first time they issued the invitation, Clark asked them if they’d talked to you, they said no, we said we wouldn’t do any gig unless the booking came through you. Last night the one not called Benton offered two-and-a-half times our usual fee and said that you’d be taken care of – financially, I mean. Clark told them that they still had to go through you to book us. The one called Benton tried to shove Clark around, but he used some Aikido move to flip Benton on his back on the sidewalk. We figured that you needed to know about this.”

Kim nodded. “No wonder the two of you look like you’ve pulled an all-nighter. Those guys would worry me too.”

Louie waved his hand dismissively. “Ah, Benton and Roberts is just glorified messengers. They won’t take a leak without askin’ their boss first.” He shook his head and sighed. “I had no idea that Mister Smith even knew youse existed. He’s real trouble.”

Lois’ eyes lit up. “How so, Louie?”

“Cause he’s one of the bosses homin’ in on the action since Luthor turned himself into a street pizza.”

Kim slapped her dad on the back of the head. “Pop! Come on! Try to be sensitive for once, okay?”

She looked up at Lois, whose face had paled slightly. Her father exhaled and said, “Sorry, Lo, I kinda forgot for a minute.”

“It’s okay, Louie.” She turned to Clark and said, “I guess we’ll do the deli for lunch instead of the Italian eatery. I don’t feel like cannoli now.”

Clark’s soft smile surprised Kim. “Sure, Lois. Whatever you want.”

And Kim was surprised again at the color which returned to Lois’ face.

The two of them held each other’s gazes for a long moment, then Clark turned to Louie. “Okay, business manager, what do we tell these guys when they come back again?”

“If they come back,” Kim interjected.

Her dad shook his head again. “Naw, they’ll be back. Mister Smith don’t give up on nothin’.” He stood as tall as he was able. “I’ll put out a couple of feelers to see how mad he is. And I’ll let him know that I’ll cooperate with anything he wants ta do that’s

reasonable. He don't scare me."

Clark tipped his head to one side and frowned. "You sure about that? You looked pretty ragged a couple of minutes ago."

"Naw, youse just surprised me. I can handle these clowns."

I hope he can, Kim thought. She was too old to break in some other dad.

Clark frowned at the script in his hand and turned it face-down on the table. "I really don't think we can put this one over. I don't sing unless I'm playing a drunk. People don't mind if I sound horrible then."

Lois sighed. "I know this isn't exactly Oscar or Emmy material, but we promised Louie that we'd go over these today and get back to him." She pulled up one corner of the face-down script, then released it and sighed again. "The chair bit went over so well that he wants us to do more original material. It would help our bottom line not to pay script royalties, too."

"Hmm. Hey, what if we do something country-style? You know how badly most male country vocalists sing. I could probably fake some of that stuff."

"Mmm...I don't know. I don't listen to country stations, so I have no idea what's popular now."

"Doesn't have to be current stuff. I could do Hank Williams' 'Your Cheating Heart Will Tell On You' as 'Your Squeaking Fart Will Smell On You' and you could just be trying to stop me."

She looked startled for a moment, then slowly smiled. "You know, that might work at that. As long as we weren't doing the bit in one of those bars with both kinds of music."

He frowned. "Both kinds?"

"Sure. Country *and* western."

He hesitated until he identified the Blues Brothers reference, then he chuckled. "Yeah, we'd have to pay attention to the venue."

"What else could we do?"

"How about – how about something like 'Stand By Your Spam' instead of 'Stand By Your Man'?"

She laughed. "Oh, I wish there was a real song with that title."

"Real songs, huh?" He grinned wide. "We could do 'I've Got Tears In My Ears From Lyin' On My Back In My Bed While I Cry Over You.' That's a real song."

Her laugh was almost a bark. "It is not either!"

He lifted one hand. "I'm as serious as a speeding ticket, that's a real song title. Homer and Jethro, the guys who did the Beverly Hillbillies theme song, made the charts with it back in the late 40s. Plus it's got a really funky trombone part."

"Trombone part in – no. I still don't believe it's a real song."

"Okay, what about the Conway Twitty and Loretta Lynn tune 'You're The Reason Our Kids Are Ugly'?"

She all but fell off her chair to the floor laughing.

"You don't like that one? What about 'Mama, Baby, Mama, Let Me Jump In Your Pajamas' by Kinky Friedman?"

This time she hit the carpet and slow rolled from side to side while holding her stomach.

"Or Ray Stevens' 'Get Your Tongue Outta My Mouth Cause I'm Kissin' You Goodbye'."

She waved one hand in the air. "Stop! You're killing me!"

"And then there's—"

"No! No more!" She struggled to her feet and stumbled to the bathroom.

The door slammed shut with Lois still laughing inside. "Hey, Lois? We could do 'Mama, Get A Hammer, There's A Fly On Daddy's Head.' My folks used to have that 45-rpm single."

The sound of a fist hitting the bathtub accompanied her hysteria. A few more titles came to his mind, but since they were about busted relationships, he decided not to mention them. Discretion was, after all, still the better part of valor.

He waited a long moment, and it sounded like her laughter was under control now. "One more!" she shouted through the

door. "I dare you to give me one more!"

He smiled and mentally told discretion to take a hike. "Okay. 'I Wouldn't Take Her To A Dogfight Cause I'm Afraid She'd Win'."

Her laughter came more sporadically, but only because she was having trouble breathing.

Louie folded his arms across his belly – significantly smaller than it had been only weeks ago – and tried to breathe around his laughter. "Country DJ! Yeah! That's great! It's – ha-ha-ha – it's in – ho-ho – in the show!" He tried to stand but couldn't quite make it and flopped back down in his chair.

Lois leaned on her partner with her arms draped across his shoulders for support. She was laughing uncontrollably too. Clark, however, just stood there in front of Louie with a bland if slightly bemused expression on his face.

Louie waited for his breathing to come back to normal. "Ya big mook – ha-ha – that was great! It's even better than the chair sketch! They'll love it in Philadelphia!"

Lois rolled her head around to look at him. "Does that mean that – whew – that we have a booking in Pennsylvania?"

Louie nodded back at her. "Yep. First one that far west. And it's the best appearance fee we got so far, too."

Clark blinked and smiled. "How many nights, and when do we start?"

"Sixteen shows over twenty days, starting a week from Monday. You got a matinee on the last Saturday – that makes two shows that day – and they're paying for the hotel room. Plus you got sixty-five bucks a day per diem for meals and incidentals. Anything you don't spend outta that is pocket money for the two o' you."

"So we'll have five days off over three weeks? Do they pay the per diem on those days too?"

"Yep. I made sure o' that. It's in the contract."

Clark nodded and held out his right hand. "Louie, it sure sounds like you're earning your commission."

Louie took his hand, once again marveling at the man's hidden muscles. "Thanks. Oh, I do have somethin' else. This maybe ain't such good news as Philly, though."

Lois sobered and stood erect on her own but put her hand in Clark's. "You heard back from Mister Smith, didn't you?"

"Fraid so. He wants you two ta do a birthday party for his new wife. Said there's gonna be fifty to seventy people there, wants your best stuff. He heard about the baseball routine and wants ya to do that one again cause his new wife is a big baseball fan. Oh, and he wants ya to do a short set before dinner, then a longer one after everyone eats and when they start gettin' a little drunk."

Clark's voice was as hard as his biceps. "How dangerous is this gig?"

Lois broke in before Louie could answer. "It doesn't matter! It's a gig and they're paying us real money!"

Clark turned to her and lifted his left hand, the one still holding Lois' right. "I don't want you to be in danger."

She pulled her hand free. "I can take care of myself! You don't have to baby me!"

Louie lifted both his hands to forestall the fight he saw coming. "Easy, both o' ya! Clark, there ain't no real danger as long as you two don't poke around where you're not supposed ta be. Lois, we all know how good you are in the clutch, but these boys don't play good with others and Clark's got every right to ask the question. My advice is to go do the show and be as funny as you can be, which I know is real funny, and keep your noses clean while you're there. Okay?"

Clark looked at Lois. After a long moment, Lois looked at Clark, and they did that silent discussion thing they often did. Then they both turned to Louie and nodded together. "We'll do the

show, Louie,” Lois said. “And we’ll be very careful.”

He didn’t want to show it, but he was relieved. They’d do the show, bring in some badly needed cash, and maybe score some feel-good points with one of the newest local mob bosses. All they had to do was to make a bunch of not-very-smart mobsters laugh. “Glad to hear it. I’ll give you the address before you leave. The show starts the Saturday night after you get back from Philly at five-thirty, okay?”

The shows in Philadelphia had gone over extremely well. Not only had they been paid their promised per diem every day – something Louie had told them didn’t always happen to new performers – they’d packed the house every night after the first one. And the newspaper reviews had been uniformly good. Some had even openly raved about them.

They’d shared a hotel room with a double bed and a couch. Their uneasy truce had held and there had been no interpersonal problems between them.

They’d returned to Metropolis around noon on Friday and rested until the next gig.

On Saturday night, at five-twenty in the evening, they were in their dressing room getting ready for Mister Smith’s wife’s birthday bash, and Clark thought they were going to go over the first set for the final time. She startled him badly when she pulled out a black long-sleeved jersey and pulled it on over her shirt instead of reaching for her dress.

“Lois, what do you think you’re doing? We go on in ten minutes.”

“You go do the first show. I’ve got to step out for a few minutes.”

“And do what?”

“Shh! I’m going to poke around and see what I can find about these guys. They’ve got to be mobbed up.”

Clark couldn’t believe it. They were already at the party, about to start their first routine, and Lois was leaving him in the lurch.

“What do you mean you’re stepping out? You can’t leave! We have a show to do!”

“Keep your voice down! We won’t have this chance again. There’s no telling how much info I could pick up just poking around out there.”

“Blast it, Lois! You’re doing it again! You’re running off and leaving me holding the bag!”

“What do you mean ‘again?’ You’re the master of the disappearing act!”

“So you’re just paying me back by bailing on me?”

“I’m not bailing on you, Clark! You can do the short set by yourself!”

“I probably could if I weren’t worried about what you might be doing while I’m out on that stage! If anyone catches you snooping around—”

“No one will catch me! You just hint that I’m having bad cramps because it’s my time of the month and none of those tough guys will ask for any more details!”

He pulled off his glasses and rubbed his face with one hand. “What about the women? What if they want details?”

“Just tell them all you know is that I took some Midol and I’m resting and that I’ll be on-stage for the late show! They’ll nod and smile knowingly and tell you not to worry about me!”

He looked into her hard, determined eyes, then finally nodded. “Fine. I won’t argue any more. Just – please promise me that you won’t get caught.”

One side of her mouth curled up in a smile. “I promise, Clark.”

She turned to go, but he caught her arm. “No. I – I really mean it. I couldn’t stand it if you were hurt or – or if something happened to you.”

She made eye contact with him for a long moment, then her expression softened. “I promise you, Clark,” she said gently, “I will come back. And if there’s any evidence of criminal behavior to find, I’ll get it. Either way, they’ll never know I was there.”

He loosened his grip and let her arm slide through his hand. He watched her slip out of their dressing room, her black outfit and watch cap disappearing down the hallway like the Cheshire Cat’s shadow.

He finished putting on his tux and thought about the danger in which Lois had once again placed herself. If they hurt her, he’d take this place apart, thug by thug, secret identity or no secrets left.

Lois ghosted along the corridor, testing doors and noting any burnt-out lights or places to hide. Silence and darkness were her best friends now.

A pair of heavy footsteps thudded along the wooden floor ahead of her from just around the next corner. She cat-footed to her left and ducked down behind two stacked sawhorses covered with thick, coiled rope and listened for any alarms.

The voices came into focus. “—and the whole place went nuts when the broad brought out the wheelchair.”

A more cultured voice answered. “Somewhat insensitive, don’t you think?”

“Naw!” the first voice growled as the two men passed her hiding place. “After all them other chairs, that one was the perfect thing! It was funny as—”

“I know, I know. It was as funny as the pawnshop owner whose arm you broke in two places last week. But I really meant that referring to the woman as a ‘broad’ was insensitive.”

“Aw, you’re nuts! She’s some looker, that’s for sure! Anyway, it was better than the pawnshop, man! I laughed so hard I almost wet my pants! I mean, I ain’t never seen nothing—” and the voices faded away.

Lois held her breath for a slow count of three, then exhaled and stepped back out into the corridor. Not only were these people Neandertals, they were stupid ones. She was positive that they didn’t recognize the irony of murderous gangsters discussing the political correctness of calling women “broads.” It would be a real treat to bring them down.

She resumed her recon mission. Surely there was an office somewhere along these walls.

Clark opened the door cautiously to see Thing One lifting his hand to knock a second time. “Ah, Mr. Kent. We were not properly introduced the last time we met. My name is Roberts.”

Neither of them offered to shake hands with the other. “Just Roberts?” Clark asked. “Is that your first name or your last name?”

“It is the name I use professionally.”

Clark nodded without taking his eyes off the man. “Is your partner with you? Benton, I think is his name?”

“Benton has other duties this evening, Mr. Kent. I am here to escort you and your wife to the stage entrance. The backstage area can be a bit confusing.”

“I’m afraid it’ll just be me to start with tonight. Lois isn’t feeling well at the moment.”

Roberts’ concerned expression appeared to be genuine. “Oh, dear. Is there anything I can do? Does she require medical attention?”

Clark shook his head. “No, thank you. She’s just – she’s having a rough time this month.”

“This month – ah, I understand. I will convey the message to Mister Smith.”

“Thank you. Please also tell him that she will probably be well enough for the longer set after dinner, although she probably won’t want to eat much tonight.”

“I will make sure Mister Smith is aware of all of that. My

sympathies to both of you. I know that such feminine inconveniences often affect the masculine also, even if the effect is indirect.”

Clark nodded again. He was getting a little tired of the man’s transparently false courtesy, and he wondered how many people Roberts had threatened, injured, or even killed in his “service” to Mister Smith. “Thank you. I’ll tell Lois when I come back. Oh, I wanted to thank Mister Smith and his wife from the stage for – for inviting us. How should I address them?”

Roberts’ eyebrows rose in apparent respect. “An excellent idea, and an excellent question. I suggest the phrase ‘Mister Smith and his bride Angelique’ when referring directly to the happy couple.”

“Got it. I’m ready to go now.”

“Of course. This way, please.”

Lois shook her head, amazed at the hubris of some gangsters. The office door had been locked, but her set of picks got her inside within twenty seconds. Some lock. And none of the file cabinets had been secured against unauthorized access. Even the elderly computer in the inner office – whose door had *not* been locked – was not password-protected. Too bad she hadn’t brought a floppy disk or two with her. She could have copied all kinds of interesting-looking files.

It was almost too easy.

Either this was some kind of trap or these guys really were idiots.

Then she found the mother lode in the second file drawer she checked. Documents detailing illegal transactions of all sorts – construction kickbacks, substituted sub-standard materials, bribes to building inspectors, even a list of reporters, elected officials, and police officers and detectives to avoid if possible. She smiled when she found Bill Henderson’s name on that list. Her smile grew even wider when she saw Perry’s name.

The tiny camera under her watch cap was Cold War vintage, but with Jimmy’s help she’d learned to operate it perfectly. She took all four rolls of film, taking shots of the contents of the file and displays on the computer monitor, and didn’t get everything she wanted. The file folder tempted her, but taking it would tip off someone that their security was less than air-tight, and she and Clark would be by far the most likely suspects. So she returned it to the state in which she’d found it and snapped off her wrist light.

Too easy, my left kneecap, she thought. More like these guys were too stupid to replace Lex Luthor.

She eased back to the outer door and looked back to make sure nothing was out of place. Just then a burst of laughter came through the wall and she smiled. Clark was certainly doing his part for the team.

Roberts walked out on the small stage and smiled at the audience. “Ladies and gentlemen, due to a temporary medical condition afflicting the distaff member of the Hottest Comedy Team In Town, may I present to you Clark Kent!”

Sporadic applause greeted Clark as he walked to center stage front. “Thank you, thank you, ladies and gentlemen. I’d like to give special thanks to Mister Smith and his lovely bride Angelique for inviting us here this evening.”

As he led the audience in the ensuing applause and noted which couple smiled and nodded to the rest, he glanced offstage to his right to see Roberts watching with his hands crossed behind him, a polite smile gracing his features. Clark was satisfied that he didn’t plan to check their dressing room for Lois’s presence.

“As I’ve already said, thank you. Before I came out here tonight, my wife told me that I—”

A short, rotund blonde woman in the fourth row stood and called out, “Is she okay?”

“Uh – ma’am?”

“I asked you if she’s okay! She need anything?”

“Thank you, but no. She’s already—”

An older redhead – definitely not in Cat Grant’s class, and not even in the same school as Lois – also stood. “She got some Midol?”

As some of the men in the audience laughed uncomfortably – and some blushed – nearly all the women leaned forward to listen. “Ah, yes, she does,” Clark answered. He even made his face redden a bit – which wasn’t all that difficult. He didn’t like talking about a woman’s monthly cycle either.

The short blonde asked, “She gonna be okay? For the late show, I mean.”

Clark nodded. “She told me to tell you that she’d be onstage for the second show. In the meantime—” he heaved a sigh of disappointment “—I’m afraid you’ll have to put up with me.”

Three room keys came out of the audience and landed near his feet. He stared at them as if they were coiled rattlesnakes. “If anyone thinks I’m putting those in my pocket, you’re quite mistaken.”

All the men and women laughed. He caught two separate tones – one of slight disappointment and one of released tension. The first was mostly high-pitched and feminine, the second lower and masculine.

He turned to his right. “Excuse me, Mr. Roberts? Could you assist me, please?” Clark carefully picked up the keys and handed them to Roberts, who smiled as he held out his hands to receive them. “Please make sure these get back to their rightful owners.” Roberts nodded and Clark said, “Thank you.”

Clark waited until he was alone on the stage, then turned back to the audience. “I’m sure you all know that’s not what I meant when I said you’d have to put up with me.”

The entire audience laughed, including Mister Smith and the woman beside him who looked almost young enough to be his granddaughter. It was an encouraging sign, so Clark decided to try out something he’d discussed with Kim the last time he’d seen her. She’d warned him against using it in any family-friendly venue, but he was sure he could get away with it here. Besides, it was perfect as misdirection, just in case anyone of a criminal mindset was thinking along the lines of “secret identity” for Superman.

“Now, I know that everyone knows who Superman is, right?” Scattered clapping was almost overridden by moans and groans. “Have you ever wondered where he goes when he’s not out there wrapping muggers and convenience store robbers up in street signs?”

Most of his listeners frowned in thought. The required effort seemed to be more than many of them could muster.

“I don’t know what any of you might have thought, but I think he puts on regular clothes and walks around town like a guy looking for a job, or maybe like a lawyer fresh out of law school. That way he can check out the city without looking like he’s checking out the city.”

“You mean he hides in plain sight?” a man called out.

“Maybe,” Clark shrugged. “But I think I know how to find him. If he does walk around like a regular guy, he has to go to the little superhero’s room sometime, doesn’t he?”

Several people snorted. One woman laughed aloud and clapped her hands twice. Clark lifted one finger. “Here, I’ll show you what I mean.”

Even more of them laughed. Clark turned around to face away from them and put both hands in front of him at cummerbund level. “See?” he called over his shoulder. “Maybe he’s showing off or maybe he really needs to use two hands, but he’s not Superman.”

He held the pose until the laughter built to its maximum. “What about this guy?”

He put one hand on his hip and stood straight. “Still not Superman.”

More laughter ensued. He spread his feet a bit more and put both hands on his hips and sang – badly, of course – the first few phrases of the Superman theme from the new Christopher Reeve “Superman” movie advertisements. “This guy? Total body control, right? Who else but Superman?”

The place broke up. As Clark turned to face them again, he saw Roberts offstage, laughing openly and sincerely. The man was leaning against a backdrop support with his eyes closed. Even the stage crew was convulsed in hilarity.

They’d laugh at almost anything he said now.

Roberts led Clark back to the dressing room, still chuckling. “I had been under the impression that you were not particularly funny without your partner, Mr. Kent, but you have proven me wrong. The two of you will have to work hard to top your solo routine.”

“Thank you, Roberts. I’ll tell Lois that. She loves to hear that I don’t really need her.”

Roberts paused and looked back over his shoulder to see Clark’s slight grin, then chuckled some more. “As I said, Mr. Kent, you are quite funny by yourself.” They stopped at the dressing room door. “I hope Mrs. Kent is feeling well enough to come to dinner. If not, I can bring something here for her.”

“I’ll ask her—”

“Oh! Clark! Clark Kent!”

Both men snapped their heads around to see Mister Smith’s trophy bride barreling down the hallway toward them. “Hey! My husband sent me to check on your wife! I want to make sure she’s feeling okay!”

Clark blinked a couple of times. “Thank you, ma’am, but I’m sure she’s better now.”

“Nonsense! I’ll talk to her myself!”

Clark reached for the doorknob and pushed the door open about an inch. “Please, let me make sure she’s ready for company. She usually—”

“Are you kidding? Times like this a woman needs another woman to talk to, not some man who’s never had to put in a tampon in a bus station bathroom!”

“Uh—” Clark had no idea how to respond to that statement.

“It’s all right, Clark,” Lois called from inside the room. “You can let her in. I’m decent enough.”

The long-haired brunette-rooted blonde pushed past Clark with a triumphant grin as Roberts stepped back out of the woman’s path. Clark shrugged at him. “I think I’ve been overrun.”

Roberts smiled sincerely. “You do see that I’ve moved away from her line of advance?”

“I don’t blame you. I’d better get in there and support Lois.”

“Of course, Mr. Kent. I will come back in approximately fifteen minutes to either escort you both to dinner or to arrange for something to be delivered here.”

“Ah, let’s plan on having a tray sent here, if you don’t mind. No sense pushing the envelope.”

“Very well. I will send a server with an assortment of delicacies guaranteed to rest easy on the digestive system.”

Roberts turned, still smiling, and strode off on his errand. Clark took a deep breath and pushed open the door to the dressing room. “Is it safe for me to come in?”

“Come on in, Clark!” ordered Angelique. “Your wife is lying down on the cot but she’s feeling much better! Oh, Lois, you should have seen him talking about Superman taking a leak in the men’s room! It was hysterical!”

Lois’ eyes widened and she shot a quick glance at Clark, who shook his head and waved his hands as if begging her not to say anything.

It didn’t matter, because Angelique was still talking at full force. “I can’t wait for you two to do that baseball routine! I loved it when I saw that old video of Abby and Cosell doing it! But you

two are even funnier!”

“Thank you—”

“Oh, Lois, don’t talk to me! Save your voice! I just hope you’re well enough to come and eat dinner with us!” The woman stood and bounced up and down several times. Even from that angle, Clark could see why Mister Smith was so taken with her. “No, I got a better idea! You two stay here and rest! I’ll send Roberts back with a couple of plates of food and you just eat what you want and don’t worry about anything! You don’t start the next segment for almost an hour so you can digest some of what you eat!” She jumped around Clark and almost sprinted through the door.

Clark watched her disappear, then closed the door behind her. “Wow. I don’t think I’ve been that overwhelmed since Cat Grant first asked me to dinner.”

He was surprised at Lois’ frown. “Cat isn’t anywhere as bad as she is.”

“Oh, no, she’s not. Anyway, do you want to make any changes to the set list tonight?”

The frown slipped away from her face but the expected smile didn’t appear. “No, let’s just go with what we planned.”

“Okay.” He paused to listen for prying ears, then quietly asked, “Did you find anything?”

She drilled him with an obsidian glare. “It was worth the risk.”

“Good. I mean, I’m glad you found something.”

Lois’ only response was to throw back the covers, stand, and reach for her performing clothes. Since she was wearing only a T-shirt and underwear, Clark turned away to give her a modicum of privacy.

The look she’d given him before her evidence hunt obviously hadn’t meant what he’d thought it had. He’d allowed his hopes that Lois cared for him as more than a co-conspirator in their undercover mission to rise again. He’d been warmed by the thought that maybe – just maybe – Lois was starting to come around to liking him for himself.

But now, behaving as if she didn’t care a whit if he saw her in her skivvies, treating him like a mannequin once again, kicked the slats out from under those hopes. She obviously had no concern for his feelings. She had to know that seeing her dressed – or undressed – like that was like dangling fresh bait in front of a shark. She had to understand that he might as well have been a hired servant for all the consideration she was showing him.

When would he learn? When would he accept that she didn’t want him around except for mission support?

Maybe when his heart stopped beating. He must be a slow learner.

She pulled off the T-shirt and balled it up in her hands, then threw it on the cot where she’d been resting. How dare he compare Cat to that – that fake platinum bombshell? How dare he imply that he’d been overwhelmed so thoroughly by two different women who weren’t named Lois Lane? How dare he completely ignore her?

That was the worst of it. He’d gone directly from that – that brassy gold-digger and compared her to his first meeting with Cat Grant and skipped over all the times she and Clark had shared danger or thrills or talk of love – even obliquely – or their time together on this assignment or – or anything!

She sensed that he’d turned away from her almost immediately after she’d gotten out of bed. He didn’t even want to look at her partially unclothed body. He didn’t want her. And he certainly didn’t love her. How could he care about her and behave in that way? If he had any real affection for her, wouldn’t he make some comment? Wouldn’t he at least say “Excuse me” before he turned away? Wouldn’t he at least take a deep breath when he saw her state of undress? Shouldn’t he have made some appreciative comment about her? Or warned her that letting him see her like

that wasn't conducive for them making their curtain time?

She called on her martial arts training, took her own deep breath, and hauled on the reins of her emotions to bring them back under control. They still had a routine to do – several, actually, since this segment was supposed to be at least forty minutes long. They hadn't done any segments longer than twenty-minute segments before, but they were the only act tonight, and they had to fill out the time or risk offending the gangsters.

She gently tugged on her pantyhose – she only had one spare pair with her and she didn't want to tear these because she was upset. Then she stood and slithered into her dress, a sleeveless burgundy semi-formal gown she'd chosen because she'd had the vain thought that Clark would like it. As a bonus, it would blend very well with his jet-black tuxedo.

Then she realized that she couldn't zip it up all the way by herself. "Clark? Would you zip me up, please?"

She backed toward him and waited. After a long moment, she felt him tug the zipper northward, then he stopped. In a voice devoid of feeling, he said, "Could you lift your hair so I can find the hook at the top?"

She complied silently. He fastened the hook to the loop, then finished with the zipper. A part of her almost wished he'd pulled the zipper down and taken her in his arms.

The other part of her sternly reminded the first part that, while they might be legally married, it was a marriage made not in heaven but in the upper offices of the Daily Planet and made necessary by the requirements of the undercover assignment.

She dropped her hair over the top of the zipper and gritted her teeth. No tears, she told herself. Get something light to eat, rest, go over the order of the routines with Clark, then go onstage and knock them dead.

She already had the "dead" part down pat.

Chapter Eleven

It was Monday morning following their show for Mister Smith. It was time to put the jigsaw pieces together and make sure they fit the picture on the top of the box.

It was past time, actually. The stress of their marital pretense was getting to Lois. She'd started thinking of – and occasionally voicing – snide little comments about Clark's actions, or lack thereof, and his reasons for doing or not doing something. Carol King's song "It's Too Late, Baby" kept coming up in her mind, and she couldn't help but fear that the end of the assignment would be the end of their relationship.

As she and Clark stepped through the front door of the Daily Planet, Lois' pang of nostalgia and regret hit her harder and sooner than she thought it would. Harder because she recognized so many of the people around her but who now gave her a surprised nod or wave before hustling on their respective errands; sooner because she thought her emotions would give her the chance to get to the news floor before kicking her in the heart.

She must have hesitated, because Clark reached out and gripped her hand firmly but not tightly. A quick glance up at his face confirmed her assumption that he was feeling the impact of coming back to the Planet just as she was.

"Come on, let's go find Jimmy and Perry," he said aloud. "That interview won't write itself, and those turkey Super-Subs won't wait for us."

She forced a laugh. "Knowing Jimmy's appetite, he probably ordered extra sandwiches so he could eat them and not let them go to waste."

"At least, not to anyone else's waist."

Despite her apprehension, a small smile spread slowly over her features. If he could behave like a gentleman here, she could play the part of his lady. With the information they had now, the show the previous Saturday night for Mister Smith might pave their way back to deadlines and intrigues and shared bylines and

arguments over spelling.

Maybe they could eventually learn to share more than bylines. Of course, they'd have to learn to share bylines again first.

She desperately hoped it wasn't too late.

Clark allowed Lois to exit the elevator first, if only to keep her from knocking him down in her haste to find Perry. He was, of course, sitting at his desk, marking up the front page of the next morning's edition, frowning at it as if attempting to force it to conform to his exacting standards. Lois tapped on the glass in the door – the one installed after Franklin Stern had bought the paper and remodeled the entire building's interior – and opened it without waiting for a signal to enter.

Same old Lois, he thought.

"Hey, Chief, haven't you heard about this new thing called a computer?" she called out. "You can lay out the front page with a mouse instead of a blue pencil."

Perry redirected his frown from the paper on his desk to her. "Young lady, I'm gonna ignore that heinous and heretical statement in the interest of keeping my stomach settled and my blood pressure down."

She laughed more freely than she had for weeks. Even the tension in her stride seemed to have melted away. Being here at the Planet might be partly very difficult and partly a joyous occasion for Clark, but apparently Lois needed this place almost as much as she needed to breathe.

It was easy to see that she needed the laughter, given the stress and tension that was between them.

Perry stepped out from behind the desk and opened his arms. Lois flew into his embrace and returned it, even giving the gruff editor a kiss on the cheek.

"Hey! You better not do that when Alice is around!"

She almost giggled. "Don't worry, Perry, you're safe from me on that score. I'm just happy to see you!"

"You sure you're not just happy to be gettin' a free meal?"

She tapped him lightly on the upper arm. "Oh! You're a meanie!"

"Got to keep up my reputation as a hard case. Clark, it's good to see you too. I'll hug you if you promise not to kiss me."

All three of them laughed at that, and Clark gave Perry a quick man-hug, complete with two almost-simultaneous back-pats. As he stepped back, Clark said, "Not that I don't enjoy seeing you again, Chief, but I make it a matter of policy not to kiss other guys."

"Smart policy. Dagnabbit, where is that young Olsen? He's supposed to be back with those subs by now!"

Clark heard the elevator door open and he turned to look. "There he is now. Hey, is that Cat – it is! Cat's walking with him and laughing."

Lois gave Clark a long look, then said, "They're probably talking about the last show they saw us do and laughing at the jokes again."

He knew he shouldn't have been able to hear the elevator through the clamor of the newsroom and Perry's closed office door, so he tried to re-route her train of thought. "They're probably talking about how funny I was that night."

Her expression shifted into mild exasperation. "Right. I'm sure that's it. In fact, people all over the city are probably tripping over themselves because they're laughing so hard at your attempts to be funny."

He couldn't tell if it was friendly sarcasm or friendly fire. Either way, he was surprised to feel the sting in her words.

Cat opened the door for Jimmy, who was laden with food and unable to grab the doorknob. "Soup's on," he called. "Where do you want this, Chief?"

"Conference room, and I'd like for Cat to join us."

The redhead's eyebrows rose in surprise, then she smiled and

nodded. “Thanks, Perry. Come on, Jimmy, let’s get this feast arranged for our guests of honor.”

Lois held her smile as she watched them stride across the big room to the glass conference room door, then she turned back to the editor. “Perry?” she said, still smiling. “I thought we were going to sum up everything we had and figure out if it added up to a printable story.”

Perry stepped between Clark and Lois and loosely put an arm around their shoulders. “We are, Lois. But I want Cat in there with us when we do. She’s grabbed a bigger piece of this than I thought she would.”

Lois glanced up at Clark with real surprise. He didn’t know how much his expression gave away, but he too felt surprised. Maybe Cat was a far better reporter than he’d thought. And he’d never thought of her as a bad reporter, just one with misplaced professional priorities.

Cat tried not to show her excitement, but she could tell that Jimmy was very curious about her lunch with two former reporters and the paper’s general editor. She turned to him and, as calmly as she could, asked, “Are you going to join us?”

He shook his head. “Haven’t been invited. Besides, I’ve got a lot of work backed up in my inbox, so I’m just gonna eat at my desk. I’ll probably be here late tonight.”

“Okay. Hey, thanks for the research on that free clinic over on Barton Street.”

He paused at the door, a sub in one hand and a can of soda in the other. “No problem. Looks like you’ll get a nice feel-good story out of it.”

She smiled. “Yeah, I’m glad I was wrong about them.”

“Me too. You guys enjoy your lunch.” He pushed the door open with his hip. “Remember me as you chow down with the soon-to-be rich and famous.”

As the door opened, Clark pulled it from the outside and Jimmy nearly took a tumble. Lois grabbed his arm and held him upright. “Easy, Jimmy, I’ve got you.”

He regained his balance and blushed a little. “Isn’t the brave knight supposed to rescue the damsel in distress and not the other way around?”

Clark snorted a guffaw and Lois gave him a hard look. “What’s so funny?”

He grinned at her. “I just can’t see you as a damsel in distress, Lois. The role just doesn’t suit you.”

“Well, thanks, I think.” She turned and waved at Perry to precede her. “Come on, ex-boss, let’s eat. We have a meeting with our manager at two this afternoon.”

“Oh?” said Perry. “What about?”

Lois pulled the door shut behind her. “Our three-week gig in Gotham coming up. I think Louie wants to make sure Clark doesn’t sneak out on a Batman hunt after our late show.”

“Har and har. We’ve also got a show at a youth center tonight at seven. I don’t think we’ll need a code phrase for that venue.”

Perry and Cat both smiled. Perry moved to the seat Cat indicated and said, “Then let’s get this lunch started. I want to hear all about your new careers. Cat tells me that you two always leave the audience laughing and wanting more.”

“That’s the plan,” Lois answered.

Clark slurped the last of his soda and set the empty can down on the table. “Well, that hit the spot. I know I feel better.”

Lois pushed the last of her sandwich in her mouth. “Mph tmph.”

Cat frowned at her. “How rude, speaking with food in your mouth.”

“It’s okay, Cat,” said Clark. “At least this time she kept her mouth closed while chewing.”

He thought for a moment that he’d gone too far as Lois gave

him a glare, then she swallowed and finished her own soda. “Just remember whose meals I’ve been eating lately.”

Perry and Cat chuckled, then Perry leaned his elbows on the table. “Okay, people, we need to summarize what we’ve got on this story. And let’s not write anything down in here. I don’t think we have any loose lips in the newsroom, but it’s better not to take chances.”

The other three nodded. “Cat, let’s have your info first.”

She picked up a pencil and used it to play with her hair, then leaned back in her chair and behaved for any watcher to see as if she were flirting with Clark. “We’ve got the goods on Roberts and Benton, the guys who threatened Clark and Lois. We’ve tied them to their boss, the guy who calls himself ‘Mister Smith.’ His real name is Alberto Meucci, first generation Italian-American whose father was one of the top bosses in the Sicilian Cosa Nostra, and he’s bad news.”

Clark frowned at her. “Is he tied up with Intergang?”

“In Boy Scout merit badge-quality knots.” She spun in her chair and gave Clark a hooded look, one which under other circumstances Clark feared would make Lois doubt Cat’s intelligence and taste in men. “His latest wife is a Scots-Irish ex-hooker named Stephanie McCain, but she’s been calling herself Angelique Amato for the last few years. As Angelique, she ran a modeling and escort agency that’s a front for prostitution, gambling, running numbers, and a little bit of judicious blackmail to keep the doors open and the cash flowing in. Just let me clarify things a bit – she doesn’t run the agency directly any more, but she does drop in to check up on them from time to time.”

Clark sighed. “And she was so nice to Lois, too.”

“Yeah, but at least now we know how she knew about dirty bus station bathrooms.”

Perry’s eyebrows rose. “Say what?”

Lois waved him off. “Nothing important. Cat, what else do you have on Roberts and Benton?”

She shook the pencil at Lois as if admonishing her. “Roberts is, as lawyers and the talking heads on TV like to say, a ‘person of interest’ in five mob murders over the last three years. As far as I could find out, Benton hasn’t killed anyone, but he likes to beat up guys. And he’s very good at it. His opponents usually spend a few days as guests of their choice with a couple of broken bones and assorted contusions. And if they file a police report, nothing comes of it.”

Lois blinked. “Wow. Clark, I’m glad you flipped him as hard as you did.”

“I’m glad Roberts wasn’t armed. Cat, does Benton beat up women?”

“Only once that I found, and that was personal. She was his girlfriend at the time, refused to press charges and moved to Oregon, I think, as soon as she could travel.”

“Good. That’s one we won’t have to worry about coming after Lois.”

Lois sighed. “Sure. Then all we have to worry about is Roberts shooting me.”

“That’s not happening. Not ever.”

Clark’s iron tone startled the rest of the group for a moment, then Lois asked, “Do we have a line on the top boss?”

Cat said, “We have a couple of strong candidates. One is a slimy lawyer named Sheldon Bender, but I like the other guy for that role.”

Perry glared at her. “Cat, we don’t have proof—”

“Chief, Jimmy and I traced the money trail ourselves. It all leads back to the executive offices of Cost Mart.”

Lois’ eyes bulged slightly. “Are you talking about Bill Church?”

Clark put his hand out, palm down, and said, “Let’s keep the volume down, okay? Loose lips still sink ships.”

Perry shook his head. “I just can’t believe that Bill Church is

Intergang's top dog. I play golf with that man. He gives millions to any number of charities, and his companies pay good money to their employees."

Lois lowered her gaze to the table. "Lex Luthor did too, Perry."

No one spoke for a long moment, then Clark asked, "How strong is this proof, Cat?"

She sighed and tapped the pencil on the table. "It's not ironclad. We don't have any documents with his name on them, not even in the stuff you and Lois got over the weekend, and we can't get any of our snitches to roll over on him. Even Bobby Bigmouth isn't talking about this guy."

"You're working with Bobby?"

Cat smiled. "When I can, yes. And I found out that he likes my fried chicken with black-eyed peas."

Lois returned a half-smile. "Just think of the money I could have saved if I'd known how to cook."

Clark said, "We can still publish the story as long as we don't name Bill Church as head of Intergang, can't we?"

Perry nodded. "We can and we will. These guys are bad news, and this story is going to be bad for their business. With everything you and Lois brought back from Saturday night, we'll have to coordinate with Bill Henderson on this. It's gotten too big for just an exposé – the cops have to be informed."

"And Henderson will make sure nobody tips off the bad guys," added Cat. "Still, it's a big operation, and they won't have much time to plan it."

"The bad guys won't have much time to react, either," said Lois. "That's the most important part. If a few foot soldiers slip through the cracks, no big deal, but we've got to pick up as many of the thinkers and planners and bankers as we can."

Clark shook his head. It was a lot to learn, and he was once again very glad that he could protect Lois as no other person on the planet could. "I saw some really interesting people in the audience last Saturday, too," he said. "There's a list of their names in your email inbox. I know some of them were mobbed up, and there were even a few from our side of the street there. What I didn't learn is whether that last group is in on the illegal activities or not."

Perry tapped the table. "It wouldn't look good for, say, the Police Commissioner Thomas Prescott to attend that kind of function, but remember that Ronald Reagan palled around with Sinatra and some of that bunch before he was President Reagan. No one ever had any evidence that he was dirty, so just being there doesn't put anyone on the wrong side of the law."

"No," Lois said quietly, "but it could be politically damaging. You could use that inference to push them further away from the Dark Side if you needed to."

Clark blurted out, "The Dark Side has good cookies."

The other three looked at him as if he'd just suffered a psychotic break. "Sorry," he chuckled. "Lois' Dark Side reference reminded me of a poster I saw the other day. It had Darth Vader and Cookie Monster in the same shot, and the caption read, 'Come Over To the Dark Side – We Have Cookies.' I couldn't help it, honest."

The others grinned back at him. Lois patted his shoulder and said, "We understand, partner. You just don't have any self-control."

Clark deliberately didn't look at Lois as he thought, Partner, you have absolutely no idea how much self-control I have.

There was much more, and Perry began making cryptic notes in a small notebook. There was no way he'd remember all that they'd talked about. Not only the volume of data but the quality of it impressed him. He wished Franklin Stern were with them so he could hear in person just how good Lois and Clark – for that matter, his entire reporting team – really was.

But Perry was worried. They had a great story, a Kerth nominee for sure, maybe even a Pulitzer candidate. But it was the kind of story that had gotten people killed in the past, and he didn't want to attend any funerals any time soon.

"I wonder – look, you two need to tell me if we need to pull you back in now."

All three of the others looked at him as if he'd spoken in an obscure Martian tribal dialect. "Pull us back in?" hissed Lois. "Are you nuts? We're about to break the biggest story this paper has published since Stern bought it and you're talking about shutting us down?"

"I'm worried about you two being out there alone, no backup, no paper to lean on, no support staff on this end of things. I don't want to publish your obituaries."

"Perry, no! We're too close to the end to quit now!"

"Lois, honey, I just don't—"

"You can't cancel the assignment, Perry."

All three looked at Cat, amazed at her firm tone. It took Perry a moment to find his voice. "Since when do you make those decisions, young lady?"

Cat leaned forward and glared at her boss. "Do you really think Mr. Stern would hire them back if they stopped now? If you pull them out, it'll be like saying that you don't think they can hack it anymore, that they can't face real danger to dig out the truth! Who'd hire either one of them after that? What real newspaper would take on an investigative reporter who quits short of the finish line?"

"You know it's not like that!"

"Of course I do, but no one outside this room will know! And when you defend either of them – especially Lois – people will just say that Perry White has gone soft for a pretty face and ignore all she's done for this story! It'll look like you're covering for her! You'll destroy her reputation and her effectiveness as a reporter! Not to mention that it would do the same thing to Clark!"

"I don't want them hurt, Cat!"

She took a deep breath and continued with less volume but the same intensity. "They don't want to get hurt, Perry. But they'll risk that to get the story. You pull them back in now and no one will know if they'd do whatever was necessary to find the truth – and neither would they."

Cat let her last comment hang in the air for a moment, then added, "Lois taught me something she didn't know she was teaching me when I was here before. Half of doing this job is knowing that you can. You and I know they can, Chief, and intellectually so do they, but they must know that they actually will do it because they already have." She put her hand on Perry's and quietly begged, "Let them finish the course."

He opened his mouth to protest, but didn't speak. Cat was right – at least, she was right enough about Lois' prospects anywhere else. Maybe she could still make a go of it at the Planet, assuming he could convince Stern to hire her back, but it would be harder for her all around if he pulled her in now. And, he had to admit, Cat was right about what calling off the assignment might do to Lois' self-confidence.

It wouldn't devastate Clark to be pulled back in now, but it wouldn't do him any good, either. And both of them would forever wonder if Perry would trust them to finish a job.

He nodded and slumped forward. "Okay. This is against my better judgement, but we keep going."

Cat threw an unreadable glance at Lois, who said, "Thanks, Perry. We won't let you down."

"I know. Just be careful out there." Perry lifted his hands from the tabletop. "Anything else?"

Cat frowned at him. "Don't you think that's enough? We could cripple Intergang ourselves with just what we have in the newsroom."

He frowned back. "Yes, but we'd also be painting a bulls-eye

on every one of us, the Daily Planet, even Louie's pool hall. I want to round up every one of these clowns before anyone tries to get frisky."

Lois shook her head. "That's all we have, Chief, unless Clark hasn't shared everything."

Perry thought the young man's reply had more of a bite to it that was needed. "I'm not holding anything back, Lois. Besides, I thought that was your department."

Lois didn't say anything, but her brows drew together and she looked away from her partner. Perry sighed silently. He'd thought that their sham marriage would cause problems, and it appeared that he'd been right.

He would've preferred to be off on that prediction.

He sighed and pulled them all back to the task at hand. "Okay, folks, here's the plan. I'm going to write out everything we've talked about in longhand, and Cat is going to do the same. Then she and I are going to meet with Bill Henderson tonight and set up the mass arrests. Bill has to get all his warrants signed by honest judges, pull in the detectives he trusts, and get everything going at once. This won't happen tonight, but hopefully it won't take more than a couple of days. I know he has at least one judge who he's been teasing about all the positive press he'll get for this takedown. Same thing in Gotham City. They'll execute their warrants the same time as we do ours."

"I'm ready, Perry," said Lois. "Just keep us in the loop, okay?"

He grinned at her. "Don't sweat it, honey. After this story breaks, you can just about name your salary and benefits when you come back."

Her eyes lit up like chocolate traffic signals. "Thanks, Chief. We're both looking forward to getting our desks back."

Perry stood and stretched out his arms. "Okay, let's get back to work. Everybody laugh like Clark just accidentally said something funny."

The other three stood and the two women laughed. Clark threw him a "why me?" look and said, "You shouldn't pick on me, Perry. I don't work here."

He smiled, stepped up beside Clark, and put one hand on his shoulder. Then he lowered his voice and said, "I'm sure hoping to change that real soon, son. Now your two go out on stage tonight and make those kids laugh for real."

Clark reached out and touched Lois' hand. "You ready for this crowd?"

She nodded. "I sure am. Break a leg, partner."

He smiled, encouraged by her attitude. Maybe they could get past the last few days of this assignment without killing each other after all. "You too."

He listened as the Master of Ceremonies introduced them. Six months ago he wouldn't have believed that he'd be standing up in front of an audience, letting Lois score funny points off him on stage, but he found that he loved it. Anything that brought them together was a positive in his book, and the creative process of learning how to make people laugh was almost as satisfying as seeing any story he'd ever written in print.

The way things were going on the investigation, this might be one of the last shows they did together, if not the last one. They'd agreed to do their best and encourage these kids. For some of them, it would be the only chance they would have to laugh all week. They'd figure out how to tell Louie and Kim the truth later.

The audience of underprivileged junior high kids applauded wildly as they came out on stage. "Thank you, thank you all," Lois said. "Clark and I are both thrilled to be here at Frankie and Johnnie's Young Adults club."

"That's right, Lois, and we've got a terrific evening planned, but we've got to get this show over with first."

She turned and backhanded him on the shoulder as the kids cackled at them. "Clark! This is a family-friendly venue! You can't

use that kind of material here!"

His grin morphed into surprise. "Family-friendly? Really?" "Yes!"

"Excuse me!"

He turned and took a step before Lois grabbed his arm. "Wait a minute! Where do you think you're going?"

"You said family-friendly, right?"

"Of course I did!"

"Then I studied the wrong script for tonight!"

They waited for the laughter of early puberty to die down, then Lois kept going. "It's okay, Clark, you studied the right script."

"Oh, no, I don't think so. It said 'Adults Only' on the outside."

"That's because I switched the folders the scripts were in. I tricked you!"

"You did? Oh, so that's why the sneezing powder bit was in there."

"Oops! I forgot to mark that one out, so don't throw sneezing powder on me."

"Oh, it wasn't for you, Lois, it was for the girl second seat from the aisle end of the third row."

Lois pointed at the indicated person. "Her?"

Clark held his hand over his eyes to shield them from the lights, then nodded. "Yep. That's her. Don't be surprised if she has a sudden allergy attack in the middle of the show."

Lois put her hands on her hips and glared at him as the girl, who was now blushing furiously, tried to push her laughing friends away. With nearly the entire audience's attention on the young lady, one boy three rows behind her and a few seats toward the middle rose up and lifted a water balloon, which Clark quickly punctured with his heat vision so that he and the boys on either side of him were the only ones who got wet.

Lois snapped her focus to the drenched boy, who was now the object of the audience's attention because of the yell he'd let out, then looked back at Clark. He could see the wheels turning in her head, but he knew she'd save any questions until later.

Of course, that might make them harder to dodge.

They tried to take the show back from the audience. "Hey, Clark, you were raised in Kansas, weren't you?"

"I sure was. Smallville High. Go Fighting Crows!"

Most of the kids in the audience turned back to the stage and laughed. "The Fighting Crows?" Lois mocked.

"Of course! We were rough, tough, and used to hardships."

"Yeah, please don't tell that one or we'll be here all night."

"Okay, if you say so."

"Well, other than telling twenty-minute marathon jokes that weren't funny, what kinds of things did Kansas teens do for fun?"

"Oh, we were a rowdy bunch. Why, one Tuesday night, we went down to the soda shop and got nothing but glasses of water and sat on all six stools for an hour!"

"Wowzers!" Lois marveled. "All six stools?"

"That's right! And one Saturday night we covered the Methodist pastor's house with toilet paper."

"Unused paper, I hope."

"Of course it was unused paper! There was—" he waited for the boys to stop laughing and the girls to stop making gross-out noises. "Anyway, there was one guy, my buddy Pete, who had a four-pack of rolls, and he kept throwing it up in the tree in the front yard without taking the plastic off just so it would make noise when it fell on the driveway. He was trying to wake up the pastor."

"Uh-huh. Did it wake up the pastor? Or worse, his wife?"

"No. The last time he threw it, the four-pack got lodged in the crook of a limb and stayed, and the next morning during his sermon the pastor thanked whoever had given them that generous gift." Clark paused, then added, "He said it really came in handy."

Lois waited for the giggles to damp down. "Wow. It sounds

like you guys really lived dangerously out there.”

“We did, we did. And we liked to tell elephant jokes.”

The kids in the crowd groaned at them, but Lois was ready. “Are you telling me that elephants tell jokes?”

“Only to other elephants.”

The kids snorted with laughter. “Why don’t you give me an example of an elephant joke that humans can understand?”

“I’ll do my best, Lois, but these are somewhat intellectual. I hope you get them.”

She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. “Don’t worry, honeybunny, if I don’t get it on stage, you can explain it to me when we get to our hotel room.”

“Great! Okay, the first one – why are you glaring at me like that?”

The kids were all laughing as if they’d heard an off-color joke by accident. “Never mind!” barked Lois. “Tell us an elephant joke.”

He slowly took a half-step away from Lois before asking, “Do you know why elephants lie on their backs with their feet sticking up in the air?”

She gave him an I-don’t-believe-you glare. “No, Clark, why do elephants lie on their backs with their feet sticking up in the air?”

“So they can trip birds.”

The kids cracked up, so he kept going. “Do you know why elephants wear tennies?”

Wearily, Lois answered, “No, Clark, why do elephants wear tennies?”

“Because nineys are too small and elevenies are too big.”

Lois dropped her head into her hands as the kids exploded with hilarity. “Really, Clark? I mean, really? Elevenies?”

“Well, if you don’t like my humor, I’m sure one of these fine young people will!” He turned and pointed at a boy in the front row. “Hey, pal, do you know why elephants paint their toenails red?”

The boy lifted his hands to the side and shook his head. “So they can hide in cherry trees,” Clark informed him.

“Cherry trees?” the boy asked.

“Yep. You’ve never seen an elephant in a cherry tree, have you?”

He shook his head again. “No.”

“See how well it works?”

The boy waved one hand at Clark and fell back in his seat laughing.

“What a great crowd! Hey, Lois, how do you put eighty elephants in a Volkswagen?”

She lifted her hands as if pushing him away. “Eighty elephants? You can’t put eighty elephants in a Volkswagen!”

“Sure you can! Just put three in the front, three in the back, and seventy-four in the glove compartment!”

The kids roared with laughter as Clark stepped forward and gave them a quick bow.

Lois pulled him back. “Okay, smart guy, keep them coming.”

“Sure, Lois. Hey, did you hear about the two elephant seals on the iceberg?”

She gave him a how-crazy-are-you look. “Two elephant seals on an iceberg?”

“Absitively posolutely!”

She paused as some of the kids cackled. “Just where did this happen, anyway?”

“In Hob’s Bay.”

“There was an iceberg with two elephant seals on it floating in Hob’s Bay? You’re nuts!”

“No-no-no! Let me explain – no, is too much. I will sum up.”

“Stop quoting ‘Princess Bride’ in our shows! We’re gonna get hit with a copyright infringement lawsuit!”

“Lois, how many of these boys and girls know what copyright

infringement is?”

One fifth-grade boy in the second row wearing glasses and a pocket protector holding four pens and two automatic pencils jumped up and waved his hands. “I do! I know what it is!”

Lois turned to him. “How do you know what copyright infringement is?”

“My daddy’s a lawyer!”

Before he could say anything else, the girls on either side of him grabbed his arms and pulled him back down in his seat, shushing him firmly. Clark smiled and said to the boy, “Are you going to be a lawyer too?”

“Oh, no sir!” he called out. “I want to be an astronaut!”

As his classmates yelled at him to be quiet, Lois put her hands behind her back and leaned forward. “You keep your dream alive, young man. I want to hear about your trips to space when you’re old enough to go.”

The boy didn’t speak, but his face all but glowed under the positive reinforcement. Lois gave him a smile that made all the other boys jealous, then turned back to Clark and stalked toward him. “Okay, smart guy, tell me about the elephant seals on the iceberg in Hob’s Bay.”

“Well, it turns out that they were both male elephant seals, and one said to the other, ‘Bob, we’ve been on this iceberg for over a week now, and I just can’t get my mind around that fact that it’s already Tuesday.’”

Dead silence reigned for a moment, then one of the younger boys whooped with laughter. After a moment, it began to spread from him like a puddle, until nearly all the students were laughing. The teachers didn’t seem to get the joke, but they did appear to be pleased that the kids were enjoying themselves.

Clark’s hearing caught part of an exchange between two of the adults. “I’m just glad they’re laughing and not throwing things,” one man said.

A woman in front of him half-turned and answered. “Yes, but now they’ll expect us to be funny in class, and I don’t know how a Hope and Crosby routine would work in my geography course.”

“Doesn’t matter,” the man said. “Just show them any of their Road movies and be ready to explain the cultural references to them. Might even make some of them think a little, too.”

He refocused his attention when his partner tugged on his sleeve. “Clark,” said Lois, “that wasn’t a real joke, was it?”

“Of course it was! The audience laughed, didn’t they?”

“Yes, but you fooled them. That was a fake joke.” She turned and faced the kids. “You guys be careful, okay? He has some more fake jokes I’m sure he’ll use later on, and you don’t want to get caught laughing at a fake joke.”

They waited until the laughter died down a bit, then Lois crossed her arms and glared at him again. “I notice that you’re not carrying your bat and glove tonight.”

“I noticed that too.”

She sighed deeply. “Then how are we going to tell them about your new part-time job that you don’t have time for if you don’t have them in hand?”

“Uh – maybe I should step offstage and get them?”

“If we’re going to do the baseball routine for these folks, then yes, you should go get them.”

“Aw, they don’t want to hear that routine, do they?”

The kids clapped and screamed. After a moment, the clapping synchronized and they began chanting “Who’s on first! Who’s on first!” Lois tapped him on the shoulder and pointed offstage. Clark nodded, then slowly made his way to the side as the audience roared.

These were the moments he enjoyed the most, seeing young people respond positively to the two of them working in harmony. Maybe he and Lois really did have a future together, even if it wasn’t what he’d dreamed of for so long.

Even if it was just as friends.

Chapter Twelve

Clark was glad that they'd done the gig, but he was also glad it was over. He was surprised at how tired he felt after every show despite his super-metabolism. He'd never before realized how much energy entertainers of all kinds had to expend during a performance. He was glad Lois would have the bed tonight – she looked to be as wrung out as he was.

Frankie and Johnnie's manager, Velma McCready, opened the stage door for them and chuckled. "You two are probably the best comedy team we've ever had here. You were funny, engaging, and I don't think any of the parents would object to a single word of your entire show. Best of all, the kids loved you."

Lois smiled. "Thank you, Mrs. McCready. I'm glad we came across that way."

"So am I," she answered. "I hope you continue to do well. I've already sent the check to your manager, along with a request to have you back for the teacher's conference over spring break."

Clark shrugged. "Good timing. It'll give Lois a place to wear her new micro bikini."

Lois stiffened for a moment, then sent a coquettish smile his way. "And you can wear that red Speedo with the high hip cutouts and low waist."

Mrs. McCready laughed. "You two! Tell you what, if you do wear those outfits, I can guarantee a sellout with standing room only! None of the male or female teachers would miss that sight. And their spouses would be there, too, if only to keep track of their partners."

Clark lifted his eyebrows and said, "We'll have to discuss that one with Louie, I think."

The red-headed woman winked at him. "You two talk it over and I'll suggest it to your manager when I talk to him. Good night."

"Good night. And thanks again for inviting us."

"Thank you, Mr. Kent. Sleep well."

The door closed behind them and they climbed down the four wooden steps to the poorly lit alley. Lois shook her head and said, "Micro bikini? What were you thinking?"

"That you're an attractive young woman and that we'd have a good turnout. And speaking of revealing swimming apparel—"

"I know, I know! I think every straight woman in the city would love to see that sight." She took a few steps and chuckled. "And some of the not-so-straight ones, too."

"Oh, no, they'd be coming to see you, hoping that a strap would—"

"Hello again, you two."

Clark and Lois both lurched to an abrupt stop. "Hello, Roberts," Clark offered. "Were you here to catch the show?"

"Naw," replied his fireplug of a companion. "We're here to catch you two."

"What kind of bait are you using?" snarked Lois.

Roberts lifted his hands in front of him and they heard the distinctive "snick-snick" of a semi-automatic pistol's slide. "Nine-millimeter soft-nosed. They're guaranteed to cause internal damage before exiting."

"Why?" Clark demanded. "Weren't we funny enough the other night?"

"Oh, you was both hysterical," said Benton. "Especially when the little lady was snooping around the computer."

Lois frowned at him. "What computer?"

Roberts stepped closer, but still too far away for Clark to grab his weapon without risking a stray shot or revealing his powers. "While you were pretending to be ill, Ms. Lane, you sneaked into an office and accessed our accounting software."

"What? No! I was lying down at the time! It had to be someone else!"

"You missed the camera in the corner of the ceiling. You were

recorded photographing several screen displays and a number of documents. And you had no way of knowing this, but there is a keystroke recorder on that machine. It captures every key the user presses and adds a timestamp. We know it was you, and we know what records you examined and photographed."

"Yeah!" growled Benton. "And now we gotta take care of both o' you." He cracked his knuckles. "I'm gonna enjoy it, too." He sneered at Clark and took a step forward. "I'm startin' with you, mister fancy moves."

Before Clark could step in front of her, Lois screamed at the top of her lungs and lunged at Roberts. The man split his focus between Clark and Lois and froze for just long enough. Her front snap kick caught the startled hoodlum squarely in the crotch and he folded up like a wet cardboard box. The pistol fell from his hand and ended up under him, but Benton ignored his partner and reached for his initial target.

Clark snapped out his hand and shoved the bigger man's shoulder, spinning him around until he tripped on his partner and fell over him. Clark grabbed Lois' arm and pulled her toward the alley they'd just exited. She followed without hesitation.

Before they reached the short steps up to the stage door Roberts fired toward them twice. Neither bullet was very close, but they convinced Lois to skid to a halt and duck behind the dumpster. "One of us has to distract them!" she panted.

Clark nodded, then jumped across the alley and picked up a trash can lid from the ground and threw it like a Frisbee at their pursuers. As he intended, it sailed high and smashed the only light bulb in the alley, plunging it into darkness.

He leaped back as he heard the pistol fire twice more and felt a tick on the back of one leg. For Lois's sake, they couldn't stay here any longer.

He knelt behind the dumpster, between her and the pistol. "Lois! Look at me and grab my neck!"

"What? I'm not kissing you good-bye, Kent!"

"This isn't good-bye! Just do it!"

"Fine! I don't unders—"

He wrapped her in his arms and leaped for the sky.

The air whistling past her face robbed her of breath. She'd been shot and was dying or already dead and someone or something was taking her somewhere she hoped would be safer and she couldn't breathe and then her feet hit something solid and she stumbled and would have fallen had Clark not held her upright.

"Wha – Clark? What – what happened? Are we – are we both dead?"

He sighed. "No, but in a few seconds I may wish I were. Can you stand by yourself now?"

She tottered back two steps but maintained her balance. "Yes, I – I think so." She glanced around herself. "Hey! This is the roof of your building! How'd we – wait, did Superman bring us here?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes." He stepped back and said, "Please wait here and I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Back from – hah?"

Clark turned into a whirl of primary colors which resolved into Superman and he gave her a very human pleading look then he launched himself into the air and she wondered if a bullet had hit her in the head or if she'd fallen against the wall and gotten a concussion and then she sat down hard on the rough surface of the roof as she thought that Clark was Superman invaded her brain.

Or was it Superman who was Clark?

Did it even matter?

Superman grabbed Benton and Roberts from the middle of the alley and snatched the pistol away from Roberts. With the weapon tied to the corner of his cape, he secured a bad guy under each of his arms and flew them to Bill Henderson's downtown precinct.

He strode in with the two horizontal hoodlums and said imperiously, “I need to see Inspector William Henderson right now.”

The desk sergeant goggled at him for a moment, then picked up the phone and punched in a number. “Inspector? Superman’s here to see you. He brought presents, too.”

Roberts was silent, still battling the effects of Lois’ quick kick, but Benton squirmed and tried to yell, “This is entrapment! We was just huuuggghh!”

Superman pressed his arm against Benton’s diaphragm just enough to discourage him from speaking. A moment later Bill Henderson opened the side door. He blinked once, then said, “Sergeant Kane, send Detectives Thorpe and Buck to my office.” He waved to the hero to follow him.

Superman followed him down the hallway. Just as Henderson opened his office door, two determined men rounded the far corner of the hall and strode to join them.

Henderson waved to the men under Superman’s armpits. “Thorpe, Buck, take custody of these two and put them in separate cells. They’re part of the special haul we’re making later this week. And make sure you read them their rights.”

One of the detectives grinned. “Did you wish really hard, Bill? Or is this an early birthday gift for one of us?”

“Just do it, smart-aleck.”

The shorter man sketched a quick salute. “You got it, boss man.” He waited for Superman to put the two gangsters on their feet, then each detective grabbed a man with a come-along grip. “Let’s go, boys. Me and my partner have a special place for you.”

Benton took a deep breath, then yelled, “I wanna call my lawyer!”

The short detective patted him on the shoulder. “I hope he gets here quick. Most guys don’t last too long staked out over an anthill with honey glopped all over their tender regions.”

“Wh – anthill?! Hey, you guys are Indians!”

“Please,” the taller one said, “the politically correct term is ‘Native Americans.’ You have the right to remain silent, of course, which most of the people we interview give up very quickly, but we only have the one anthill, so which of you goes first?”

They rounded the corner and Benton’s inarticulate cries quickly faded. Henderson smiled thinly, then said, “Do you want to make a report now, Superman, or do you have someplace else to be?”

“I have one more gift for you.” Superman held up the edge of his cape where the pistol was tied and waited for Bill to pull out a latex glove and an evidence bag. When Bill had the bag sealed with the pistol inside, Superman said, “I’m afraid I need to be someplace else very soon. I’ll be back before morning to fill out my report. And Lois Lane and Clark Kent will come by to file a complaint. The weapon has been fired within the past fifteen minutes at most, so I’m certain those two were threatening Lois and Clark.”

Henderson sighed. “Of course they were. Lane can’t go a week without getting threatened or kidnapped or trapped in a burning building or something and pulling someone else in the middle with her.”

Superman echoed the sigh, though for reasons other than Henderson’s. “That’s true, Inspector. I’ll see you soon.”

Superman landed on the roof of his building and spun back into Clark clothes. “Lois?” he called out. “Where did you go?”

He heard her huff and followed the sound behind an air vent. “Lois? Are you okay?”

She didn’t look at him. “Sure. I’m fine. Somebody was trying to kill me but Superman rescued me. Again.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. “We need to talk.”

“We do? Oh, good, I’m glad you told me. I never would have

known.”

“Cut it out! We need to have a serious discussion and it won’t do either of us any good to put it off any longer.”

“No. We can’t put it off.” She levered herself to her feet and faced him, her eyes obsidian and her face granite. “First things first. You lied to me.”

“I never told you a lie.”

“So you just borrowed Superman’s powers for the night?”

“I left out some things—”

“No, Clark. Assuming that’s really your name. You lied to me.”

She wasn’t going to be the slightest bit reasonable.

So he wouldn’t either.

“Clark Kent is my real name,” he growled. “I masquerade as Superman so I can help people openly instead of sneaking around in the dead of night and in sewer tunnels and hoping no one notices that funny things happen when I’m around.”

“You mean like hearing elevator doors opening that you shouldn’t be able to hear? And leaving gel on hairbrushes when Clark doesn’t use any? And water balloons drenching the person throwing them instead of the intended targets? And you suddenly knowing martial arts without any lessons?”

“Yes, Lois, all that and more! I can’t afford for everyone to know that I wear that Suit!”

She took a step closer. “Did you have a good laugh at my expense?”

That was the last question he’d expected. “Did I – what?”

“I asked you if you had a good laugh. You know, do you go home and drink a beer and talk to yourself about how stupid I am and how you pulled the wool over my eyes for another day and toast yourself? Do you drink two beers at a time or one after the other or do you switch costumes and alternate bottles?”

He waved his hands between them. “I have never laughed at you. And I wasn’t doing this just to fool you.”

“But it was a really good perk, wasn’t it? ‘Wow, I sure tricked Lois again today. She still thinks I’m two people.’ Please! Cheese of the Month club? Forgot your dry cleaning? You’re returning an overdue library book?” She leaned closer and thrust her face at his. “You have to believe I’m galactically stupid!”

“Maybe I do,” he snarled.

“Oh, yeah? If I’m so stupid, why do you act like two people around me? I think *you’re* the stupid one!”

She’d pushed him too far this time and something in his mind snapped. “You bought it.”

She shook as if she’d been suddenly slapped. “Wh – what?”

“I said, ‘You bought it.’ You never called me on any of those lame excuses. You never suggested I was hiding something from you. Your little brain just couldn’t put it all together, could it?”

“Put it all together? Hah! That’s a laugh coming from you!”

“And don’t think I enjoyed all those comparisons!”

She frowned. “What comparisons?”

“The ones where Clark comes out on the short end and Superman gets put on the ivory pedestal! My favorite was where you said Superman was the highly advanced specimen and I was the throwaway piece of junk!”

“I never said—”

“‘Clark is the before and Superman is the after – the way, way after.’ Remember saying that? I’d just started at the Planet and Superman had just gone public and you were so in lust with him that you’d have stripped naked in front of City Hall and pole-danced for him if he’d asked you to!”

This time his head snapped to one side as she slapped him. “How dare you!”

“How dare I? How dare I what, tell the truth? You’re just jealous!”

“Jealous? Jealous of who?”

“Of me! Because I knew who Superman really was before you

did!”

“What? You’re Superman, you idiot!”

He knew his voice was getting too loud but he was too angry to hold back. “Superman is a cardboard cutout! He’s a red-and-blue puppet! He doesn’t feel anything on his own! He only does what I tell him to!”

“Oh really? Then why did he – you tell me that we couldn’t have a relationship?”

His fists clenched and he barely kept them at his sides. “If you recall, you had just told him that you’d love him even if he didn’t have any powers! If you can get past your own tarnished ego for ten seconds then just maybe you could imagine how much that hurt me!”

“Clark – I – I thought – you told me you loved me and – and —”

“Did you ever think that you could kill someone’s love for you with your actions? With your attitude? With your words?” He leaned back and crushed his hands into fists. “I’m here to tell you that it’s possible. It’s very possible.” He folded his arms across his chest to control them. “I won’t talk about what it turns into then.”

Her breath caught in her throat and she paled. Before he could weaken – before he could take her in his arms and beg her forgiveness – he spun on his heel and stalked toward the roof access door. “Come on. You can have the bedroom tonight unless you’d rather get a hotel. We need to go give some depositions in the morning so Roberts and Benton will stay locked up.”

He yanked the door open and waited until she slowly walked to catch up with him. Without a word she passed through the doorway and started down the stairs.

He almost told her that he was going on patrol but forced his mouth shut. He closed and locked the door, then spun back into the Suit and headed for Henderson’s precinct.

She didn’t know who the woman inside her skin was except that she really was the stupidest woman who’d ever lived.

That last shot that Clark had fired at her, the one about her vowing to love Superman even if he’d had no powers, had struck home and exploded with a vengeance. She marveled at how patient he’d been with her, how he’d opened his home to her even after she’d cast that spear into his heart. She quailed at his ability to dismiss her betrayal of him and marry her, even if it had been only for the undercover assignment. She didn’t understand how he’d allowed her to even touch him.

He had to be the most super man who’d ever lived.

She reached into her purse – not even mildly surprised that it was still draped over her shoulder – and pulled out her keyring. She started to put it in the lock, then stopped to look at it.

He’d given her the key to his apartment. Openly, freely, even gladly. And she’d accepted it.

He’d also given her the key to his heart.

And she’d stomped on it, set it on fire, and laughed as it melted into nothingness.

She was a fool. The best man in the world – Clark Kent, the only man who had ever lived who was better than Superman – had offered her the greatest gift he could have given any woman. He’d offered himself to her. She had declined that offer – no, she’d refused him brutally and viciously. It didn’t matter that he’d pushed her away when she would have taken him into her life. He’d rejected her because she hadn’t told him of her love for him.

This federal disaster was entirely her fault. She’d done it all by herself.

There wasn’t much she could do for him now. But she refused to be a burden to him, an anchor around his neck, an albatross weighing him down for the rest of his life. She’d give him the annulment. She’d tell the court whatever it took to get the judge to grant it. She’d confess how she’d led him on and been dishonest with him and free him to find a woman who’d give him everything

he deserved.

The key slipped into the lock for the last time. There were other places for her to stay for a few days until she got another apartment. And if Clark wasn’t comfortable with her in the newsroom with him, she’d leave without a whimper.

If he wouldn’t let her love him, at least she wouldn’t torture him.

Superman signed his statement, barely remembering not to do so as Clark Kent. Bill Henderson might keep his secret, but he doubted that the other three officers in the room would all be so accommodating.

He handed the pen back to the sergeant whose name he hadn’t had the energy to remember and thanked the man. The wide-eyed sergeant nodded dumbly and fumbled the pen back into his shirt pocket.

“Thanks, Superman,” Bill said. “With your statement and those from Lane and Kent – whenever they get here – the weapon they used and the other physical evidence, these guys are going away for a long, long time.”

“Thank you, Inspector. I’m just trying to help. Your job is the harder one.”

Bill’s eyes narrowed until the stare became almost uncomfortable to bear. Then Bill nodded. “I’m not so sure about that. Anyway, we’re good here. You probably have other places to go, more people to save, that kind of thing.”

Superman nodded back. “As a matter of fact, I do have a fairly important errand to run, and it can’t wait too long.”

“Then smooth flying to you.”

“Thank you again, Inspector.” He turned and walked out of the precinct station, then launched himself skyward as if he had an important mission to complete.

He actually did have an important mission. He just didn’t want to perform it.

Lois might be asleep by now, she could be in the bedroom crying, she might be sitting up waiting for him with hatred for him flaring in her heart, and if the last were true, there was no telling whether she wanted to continue their argument or just tell him off or maybe stare at him until she ran him off the couch. Predicting Lois’ moods and actions was harder than predicting the weather in the North Atlantic, where it could go from glassy smooth to the worst hurricane conditions in just a few short hours. And the results could be just as devastating.

Rather than risk seeing her in an undressed state – something he didn’t think he could handle, now or ever – he landed four blocks away on a deserted side street and whirled back into his civvies. The walk home would give him an excuse to delay the inevitable confrontation with her, maybe give her enough time to go to bed.

So he was surprised to see her on the couch, dressed in sweat pants and his long-sleeved KU jersey, her knees drawn up to her chin and her arms around her legs. Her eyes were pointing at the TV, muted and showing an infomercial about a new kind of food processor.

“Hi,” he ventured.

Her voice was flat and dry. “I called in the story of our encounter with Frick and Frack, put both our names on it. Also included a Superman quote. Hope you don’t mind.”

“No, that’s fine. I’m sure I would have said what you wrote.”

She didn’t smile or look at him or speak for a long moment, then without turning her head, said, “Do you want to go to Bill’s office together or separately tomorrow?”

“I think – maybe we should go in separately,” Clark replied.

She watched the TV for another long moment, then nodded.

“Me too. Should I set my alarm for nine in the morning?”

He looked at his wristwatch. “Sounds good. It’s one-thirty now.”

She nodded, then picked up the remote and turned off the TV. “Don’t worry about making breakfast for me. I’ll grab something on the way.” She stood and turned toward the bedroom, then stopped. “I’ll get a hotel or something tomorrow night and be out of your hair.”

The isolation from her was stifling. The wall between them was up again, fully reinforced with rebar in the concrete, and there were no doors or windows that he could see. But he couldn’t blame her this time. He was the one who’d wrecked their chances with his anger and recriminations. It was no wonder that she was behaving in this way.

If he could have come up with the words to soothe her heart, to bridge the chasm between them, he’d have traded his powers for them.

But there were none to be had.

He wouldn’t argue with her over the annulment. He owed her that and much more. And if she wanted to move out, he’d help her pack and would carry her bags wherever she was going.

She’d never argue with him over a script or how a news story was structured again. She’d never tease him about his wardrobe on stage again or hint that he needed another horrible tie as much as Perry needed another Elvis anecdote. She’d never again feed him a straight line or set up an interview subject for him with her hard questions so he could get the tough answers with his soft ones. She’d never again smile at him as he complimented her timing in a routine or brought her coffee to her desk in the morning. He’d miss all that and more.

The worst part was that he’d never be able to make her laugh again. That might be what he’d miss the most.

Lois woke up before her alarm went off the next morning. As soon as she was finished in the bathroom, she called Perry at work on Clark’s bedroom extension and asked him if he knew of any good apartments near the Planet she could afford. He told her that he didn’t, but that she could stay in his and Alice’s guest room until she found one, and that he’d ask Cat if she’d help Lois look for a place.

Lois thanked him and said she’d be over that evening if it was okay with him. He told her that the next night would be better, that it would give them a chance to tidy it up for her. She heard her boss’ concern in his voice, but he refrained from asking any tough questions. She thanked him again, then hung up the phone and sighed. The tough questions would come soon enough. And she could afford a mid-level hotel for one night.

She dressed casually and left the apartment. Clark was in the kitchen doing something, but he didn’t say anything to her. She was glad – any kindness from him would be more than she could possibly take right now.

She drove to the precinct and gave her statement. Bill looked at her with curiosity but didn’t ask where Clark was, and she volunteered nothing on the subject.

She drove away in the Jeep, and she thought she passed Clark walking to the station on the sidewalk. It was still too early for lunch, but she didn’t want to go back to the apartment yet. So her steering wheel all but guided her to the Daily Planet building.

The parking attendant greeted her by name – her maiden name – and Lois felt a jolt as she took the ticket. She wouldn’t be Lois Lane-Kent for much longer. And it was time to embark on her new-old life, one without Clark in it.

The elevator took her to the news floor and she went straight to Cat’s desk. The tall redhead glanced up at her, then gave her a classic double-take and leaped up to grab her around the shoulders.

“Lois!” Cat cried out. “It’s so good to see you! Are you okay? Those clowns didn’t hurt you, did they?”

Lois returned the embrace gently, hoping to avoid injury. “I’m fine, Cat. And I’m glad to see you too.”

Cat leaned back, her green eyes boring into Lois’ deep brown ones. “Perry tells me you’re looking for a new apartment. Is that true?”

“Yes. Do you know of anything available, preferably not too far from here?”

An impish grin appeared on her face. “Actually, I’m looking for a roommate. My last one called me a party pooper and announced that she was moving out this coming weekend.”

Despite her mood, Lois laughed. “You? A party pooper? Who was this crazy girl, a Playboy bunny?”

“Oh, just someone I met through a roommate service. I can’t tell you the number of times I got home and found Jamie’s clothes scattered all over the living room all mixed up with some guy’s stuff.”

“Really? Was she a clothing buyer for a retail store or running a laundry service on the side?”

Cat goggled at her for a moment, then laughed loud and free. “No-no-no! I doubt she was doing anything on her side.”

It took a moment for Lois to get the double entendre, but when she did she frowned at her friend. “You have a naughty mind, young lady. You’re lucky I’m here to rescue you from all that squalor.”

“Well, can we go to lunch and talk terms? Oh, wait, is Clark joining – no, he’s not, or you wouldn’t be – oh, Lois, I’m so sorry!”

Lois shook her head. “Wow. And I thought I shifted moods quickly. Sure, we can have lunch. And I don’t have to move in right away. Perry and Alice have offered me their guest room for a few days.”

“Oh, good, it’ll give me a chance to have the room fumigated and scrubbed. The crime scene cleanup guys offered to do the entire apartment, but I told them they only had to worry about the second bedroom and living room.” She made a face. “And – all the furniture in both rooms.”

“Oh, blech! Please don’t kill my appetite. Wait, you said – crime scene cleanup? Did she kill someone in there?”

Cat grinned. “No, of course not. She just – well, if sex were an Olympic sport, she’d be in the running for the national team.”

Lois put her hand over her stomach and grimaced. “That made me want to throw up a little and I haven’t eaten yet today.”

“Well, then, we simply must eliminate that problem.” She spun and called out, “Jimmy? Tell Perry I’m going to lunch early and I’m taking Lois, okay?”

Jimmy waved an acknowledgement but Ralph answered. “How come you don’t ever ask me to do stuff like that?”

“Because you’d tell him we were going to find a mud wrestling bar.”

“You mean you two ain’t gonna do that?”

“No, Ralph, we’re not going anywhere near 12th and Lexington. Jimmy, you will tell Perry, won’t you?”

The young man smiled and nodded. “Sure, Cat, I’ll relay the message. He’ll call you on your cell phone if he needs you for anything.” Jimmy shook his head. “Actually, he’ll probably have me call you.”

“Great! Come on, Lois, let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

As they strode up the ramp to the elevators, Lois whispered, “There’s a gas station, a pharmacy, a parking lot, and the South End soup kitchen on the corners of 12th and Lexington.”

Cat pushed the “down” button and grinned at her. “I know that, but I bet Ralph doesn’t. Not yet, anyway.”

Lois managed to hold in her guffaw until the elevator doors closed behind them. “Thanks, girlfriend. I think my appetite is back.”

Cat pushed the button for the garage level and patted Lois’ arm at the same time. “Good! We’ll chow down and you can tell me why you and that delicious man of yours are splitting up.”

Lois’ grin melted away. “I – uh – I’m afraid it’s my fault.”

“Really? Did he catch you in bed with some other man?”

“No, of course not.”

“Another woman?”

“No! He’s been totally faithful.”

“I meant *you* and another woman.”

Lois gave her a glare. “I don’t walk that side of the street and you know it.”

“Of course I do. So why isn’t this working out for you?”

Lois turned to stare at the control panel. “I – I learned something about him that – that I didn’t handle very well. If he’d told me without all the drama that was going on at the time, maybe I wouldn’t have reacted so badly.”

“So? Go apologize to him and see what happens.”

Lois shook her head and flicked a tear away from the corner of her eye. “I can’t. It’s too late.”

The elevator stopped and opened at the garage level and Cat led them out. “How do you know it’s too late? Maybe he’s desperately wishing that you’d open up to him and say what he’s been dreaming you’d say.”

“He’s not dreaming it. Not anymore.”

“Ah, I see. That’s too bad.”

Lois wiped both eyes quickly. “Your car or mine?”

“Mine, of course. We’ll get better responses in the Porsche than in your Jeep.”

Lois managed a small smile. “Okay. You pick the place and I’ll pretend I have a huge appetite. Just – let’s not talk about this anymore, okay?”

Cat nodded. “We’ll put a bookmark in it and pick it up again later.”

“What? No, I – wait a minute! What part of ‘not talk about it’ did you miss?”

Cat lifted her car fob and the Porsche beeped at her. “You need to resolve this, Lois, whether it’s now or twenty years from now. You won’t be whole until you do.” She climbed into the car and waited for Lois to buckle in. Without making eye contact, she muttered, “I know from personal experience that you don’t want this to go on too long. You’ll end up with a pothole in your life the size of Cleveland.” She cranked the ignition and revved the motor once. “And it will never go away.”

As Cat backed out of the slot and shifted into first gear, Lois wondered what she was talking about. But if that subject came up, Cat would all but demand that Lois talk about what was going on between her and Clark – or, rather, what wasn’t going on. And that was a patch of quicksand Lois wanted to give a wide berth.

Then again, maybe the Daily Planet’s resident sex kitten knew what she was talking about after all.

Chapter Thirteen

Despite Cat’s insistence on talking about Lois’ love life, the lunch was nice. Lois decided that she’d never given Cat the credit she deserved, either professionally or personally. It was nice having a good friend who was a woman, even if Cat’s idea of evening entertainment was stuffing the dancers’ G-strings at Chippendale’s with dollar bills.

In between the frequent bouts of laughter, though, Cat always came back to urging Lois to come clean with Clark. Give him a chance, she’d said. Let him make the call.

Lois didn’t know how to tell her that he’d already made that call. And, in Lois’ baseball double-talk, she was out, not in. She couldn’t even qualify for Clark’s class ‘Q’ league.

In her motel room – an inexpensive chain on the far side of the city from the airport – she sat on the bed and looked at her wedding band. It was simple, almost plain, with two small diamonds on either side of an engraved heart.

It was also the most beautiful thing she had ever owned.

She’d wear it for one more night. Before she took her clothes with her to Perry’s guest room, she’d give it back to Clark with a

wish that he’d find a good woman to spend his life with. It wouldn’t be her, of course, but surely there was someone out there for him, someone he could trust and love and cherish.

There was no one out there for her. She couldn’t imagine any man being as worthy of her trust and love as Clark, any man who she would cherish for the rest of her life except him.

They passed each other in silence the whole day until he asked her, “Have you seen the latest news?”

She shook her head in his general direction. “No, been too busy.”

Clark reached out and handed Lois the Planet’s latest afternoon edition as she closed the latch on her suitcase. “It’s done,” he said quietly. “MPD and the DA’s office served the warrants this morning. They got all the major players in the city. The ones across the river in Gotham, too.”

She took the paper and nodded without looking at him. “So Intergang is finished?”

“It is in Metropolis. There’s still some cleanup going on as far west as Iowa and as far south as Virginia, but everyone in the New Troy branch is either behind bars or on the run with no support. Bill and Perry both think that they won’t be back any time soon.”

She read the headline and scanned the first two paragraphs. “Anything firm on Bill Church’s possible involvement?”

He shook his head. “Not that I’ve heard, but the police and the DA’s office have just started putting pressure on the people they’ve arrested. Right now he’s not speaking on the record to anyone in the media, but if he’s dirty, we’ll know about it pretty soon.”

“I hope we know sooner than later. Have you talked to Louie yet?”

“Yes. Kim, too. Neither one of them was happy to be part of what Louie insisted was a sting operation. He’s concerned about the hit his reputation will take when he cancels our upcoming gigs. Kim eventually calmed down. She does want to talk to you soon, though. I think she’s upset that you didn’t trust her with the truth.”

The parallels between her situation with Clark – he didn’t tell her about being Superman – and the situation with Kim – Lois didn’t tell her the whole comedy team thing was an undercover assignment – stuck a knife in her heart. As uncomfortable and awkward as the conversations with Clark had been, they would be just as difficult with Kim. The similarity was that both deceptions were at least partially justified by the need to protect the innocent. The difference was that Lois would be the one confessing the deception, trying to justify it in the name of safety for Kim.

It was all true, too. But that didn’t mean she had to like it. Truth – at least, this truth – was a double-edged sword. It didn’t escape her that this particular blade would cut both ways. And it would be a most difficult lunch meeting. Surely Kim wouldn’t attack her either verbally or physically in public.

Or she might. With Kim, one never quite knew how mad she could get.

Lois sniffed and rubbed her nose on her sleeve. “I’m not looking forward to that conversation.”

He paused as if thinking about saying something unhelpful involving a shoe being worn on someone else’s foot, but he didn’t. Instead, he asked, “So, you’re all packed?”

She nodded again, still without looking at him. “Yes. I’ll be out of your hair for good after today. I’ve already checked out of the motel I was in last night. Perry told me I could use their guest room until Cat’s spare room is ready. My old apartment is rented out to someone else now.”

He sighed. “If that’s what you want.”

“That’s what needs to happen.” She hefted the suitcase with both hands and turned to look at him. “I hectored you into this fake marriage. Now that the assignment’s over and we both have our jobs back, we can – can get the annulment and go back to the

way it was before.”

She wished she hadn't made eye contact with him. He looked stricken, as if he'd just been told that his parents had died.

He held her gaze for a long moment, then softly said, “There’s at least one important thing that we can’t go back to.”

“What’s that?”

“You not knowing that I’m Superman.”

She dropped her chin to her chest and squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them again. “No. I can’t ever forget that. But you have to believe that I’ll never tell anyone. I won’t even hint about it.”

“The thought never crossed my mind, Lois.”

The ghost of a smile tickled her lips. “Never? Not even once?”

He shrugged. “Well, yeah, it did once, but I knocked it down, dragged it down an alley, and beat it to death with a big stick.”

She almost laughed, then forced herself once again not to cry. “I’m so sorry, Clark.”

“Sorry for what? I put you through some real hard times the last few weeks.”

“You didn’t deserve the lousy treatment I gave you. Or all those terrible accusations I threw at you.”

“But I—” He stopped, then lifted his hands as if surrendering to her. “Look, let’s just agree that neither of us deserves a good conduct medal for our behavior toward each other during this investigation and let it go at that. Okay?”

She pressed her lips together and nodded. “I’m still sorry.”

He moved closer, close enough to touch her, but his hands fell to his sides and stayed there. “I’m still sorry too. Can we stop there? No more mutual self-recrimination, please.”

She sniffed and tried for a grin. “Still trying to one-up each other, aren’t we?”

He shook his head and sighed. “I’ve resigned from that competition. I can’t beat you at that game.”

A little of the old Mad Dog Lane fire flared up. “Oh, thanks so much for that. You’re so kind and thoughtful.”

His lip twitched. “I aim to please, ma’am. Do you want me to take your suitcase to your car?”

The fire fizzled out and she put the suitcase down. “Sure. And – thanks.”

Cat’s repeated admonitions to tell him the complete and unvarnished truth rang in her mind again and she made a momentous decision. It was past time to come clean with Clark, and she would wager everything in her life on his reaction to the next five minutes.

If she won, it would be worth everything.

If she lost, it wouldn’t matter in the slightest.

He leaned over and gripped the handle, but she put her right hand on his left shoulder and stopped him. “Wait, please. I – I have some things I want to say – no, some things I need to tell you first.”

He released the grip and stood. Her hand slid down his arm to his hand where his wedding ring rested and she held on to it as if it were a lifeline. “Okay,” he whispered.

“You promise to listen and not interrupt me?”

“I promise. You talk, I’ll listen and hear what you have to say.”

“Good. I hope it’s good, anyway.” She squeezed his hand harder. “When we first – we first started this assignment – and you told me what was really going on – you tried to tell me something important and I stopped you. I thought you were going to tell me that you loved me but I understand now that you were trying to tell me that you were Superman. And I stopped you again just before we went to the courthouse for the wedding. You were going to tell me then, too.”

She paused and waited for him to correct her, but he remained silent. She took a deep breath and continued. “When you flew us out of that dead end alley I thought I’d been shot and killed and an

angel was taking me to – to wherever angels take newly dead people. Then when I realized you’d flown us out of there I got mad and scared all at the same time because I thought you’d lied to me but I understand now that you didn’t tell me when we first met because you didn’t know if I’d print the story or not. Then all that crap with Lex happened and you didn’t know if I’d tell him about you being Superman either accidentally or on purpose and right after he – after he jumped you didn’t tell me because you were afraid I was in a really bad place emotionally and you’d have been right. I don’t know how I would have reacted.”

She stopped and wiped her face with her free hand. “Then I didn’t want you to tell me that you loved me because I was afraid you’d be saying that just because you wanted me to feel confident and secure around you and I was stupid and scared and I pushed you away. Same thing when we got – when we went to the courthouse. I was scared you were going to say it just to make me feel better and then back out when we filed the story and I – I couldn’t face that.”

She looked into his eyes – his deep, compassionate, confused eyes – and decided to jump off the high wire without the safety net. Or maybe she was base jumping without the flying jumpsuit. Whichever metaphor fit the situation, she plowed on gamely. “I tried to hint to you how I really felt but you didn’t ever react like I thought you would and I was scared that you’d meant it when you’d told me that you loved me that day in the park but then the other day when you said that I’d driven that love out of you I got even more scared but Clark—” she held up her left hand and showed him her own wedding set “—I don’t want an annulment. I don’t want a divorce. I don’t want to move out and I can’t move on. I love you. I want to be with you. And please don’t think that I’m saying this because I know who else you are because Superman wouldn’t be the hero that he is if you weren’t inside him making the decisions for him and being his conscience and wearing the suit and carrying all the responsibility he carries – the responsibility you carry.”

She finally lost the battle to hold back her tears and her eyes overflowed. “So it doesn’t matter to me how you feel about me – well, that’s not really true, it does matter – but what I mean is that whether or not you love me I love you and I want to be a real wife to you and you to be a real husband to me. I want to keep these rings and wear them proudly and work with you to write about the bad guys and wait for you when you come back to me after a difficult rescue or bad crime scene and help you remember that all the good you do is all you can do and we’re all the better for it. I want to share bylines with you and come home with you and let you cook for me and I’ll do the dishes all the time.” She pulled his left hand toward her lips and gripped it with both of hers, then kissed his ring finger. “I love you, Clark Jerome Kent. If you don’t love me I’ll still love you. If you still want an annulment I won’t fight you but I’ll still love you. And if you think it’s best for me to leave the Planet or the city or the Eastern seaboard. I’ll go but I’ll still love you.”

Their joined hands slowly fell between them and her gaze dropped to follow them. “I’m an idiot, Clark. I’m the worst kind of fool, the kind who pushes away the best person in her life, the best friend she’s ever had or ever will have, just because of ego and pride and fear. If I could change anything in my past, I’d change the way I treated you and looked past you and ignored you just because I was so very stupid and scared. I only hope that someday you’ll find it in that big heart of yours to forgive me.”

She cast about in her mind for more to say, but for once she was talked out. A HALO jump stood for High Altitude Low Open, the kind of dangerous parachute jump military Special Forces made behind enemy lines. The jump she’d just made was a HANC – High Altitude No Chute jump, the kind of thing the Air Force euphemistically called a Zero Survivability Situation. There were only two choices – be saved by Superman or punch a deep hole in

the earth when she landed.

Actually, she realized, Superman couldn't save her this time. Clark was the only one who could keep her from shattering against the ground.

The moisture in her eyes clouded her vision and she felt rather than saw Clark step closer to her. His voice whispered into her ear, "Is it my turn to talk now?"

She nodded and braced herself. Here it was, the mortal blow from which she would not recover, could never recover. Her heart lay bare before the blade of his next few words.

"Good. I have a question for you."

She pressed her eyes shut. "What is it?"

He pulled her into his arms. "Why didn't you say any of this before? Why did you keep it from me?"

Her hands became fists against his back. "I – I didn't want to put any pressure on you to – to pretend that – pretend that you—"

He laughed softly. "You and I are both complete morons."

"What do – why would you say that?"

"Because there's no reason for me to pretend that I love you, Lois. I love you for real. And everything you just said goes double for me."

What?

Her head jerked up and her heart almost stopped beating. What did he say?

He must have read the confusion in her eyes. "I don't want an annulment either. We're married and I don't give a rat's patootie how it happened because I want us to stay married. Oh, Lois, I have loved you since I first saw you in Perry's office that first day at the Planet. If you leave Metropolis after saying what you just said I'll hunt you down wherever you go and beg on bended knee for you to come back to me. I'm so very sorry that I was such a stupid idiot and hurt you. I want you to forgive me and – and I love you."

His lips found hers and she melted into smoke. Her arms wrapped around his massive chest without any conscious decision on her part. Her heart started beating normally again, then accelerated.

His hands, free from constraint, snaked around her torso and enveloped her. She slipped as close to him as their clothing would allow as her eyes overflowed down her face.

She was determined never to let him go again.

At first, Clark was stunned as Lois told him that she loved him. Then he was ecstatic. Then he felt as full of love for her as he ever had in his life. Her sobs only bound his heart to hers more tightly than ever, and he knew she'd meant every syllable she'd spoken.

As they kissed, her hands began pulling his shirt up and rubbing the bare flesh on his back. He hadn't laid a single finger on her since she'd first moved in except to return a friendly embrace she'd begun, and he'd never tried to push the envelope a single millimeter. But this embrace was different for him – it was passionate, it was blazing hot, it was free and open and eager and hungry. He wanted her. Right now. On the floor, on the table, in the bed if they could make it that far. He didn't care.

It wasn't just him, either. Lois was responding to his touches as if she'd been waiting for him for years. It was time to take advantage of that. They were married, after all.

Take advantage—

No. He couldn't take advantage of her, not in this vulnerable state. She might not care afterward, but he would.

So he called on all of Superman's immense strength and power and managed to move her back about four inches.

"Lois, wait!" he panted. "I – I need to tell you something else."

Her eyes were unfocused and her lips were parted. "No," she muttered. "No more talking. I want you now." Her mouth opened

and she went for his throat.

She'd never wait for him to tell her again how sorry he was, but there was one thing he had to say before this got any more up close and personal than it already was. "Please! I promise – uhh! – I promise to be quick!"

Still panting, she leaned back slightly. "It better be real quick."

He gently took her left hand in both of his and knelt before her. "Lois Lane Kent, I love you more than I love my own life.

Will you stay married to me?"

She goggled at him for a moment, then threw back her head and laughed aloud. "Yes, you big lummoxx, I'll stay married to you!"

"Thank you." He stood and drew her close again. "Now where were we?"

Her face shone like the desert sun. "We were on our way to a much-delayed honeymoon."

"That's what I thought." Before she could speak or move, he lifted her in his arms and walked quickly to the bedroom door. She laughed again and reached out to twist the doorknob and push the barrier open.

"I hope you locked the front door, Clark. I don't want to be interrupted now. We've got a lot of catching up to do."

He tossed her five inches into the air, super-spined to the front door and locked it, then zipped back to catch her before she realized he was gone. "It's locked now."

As he carried her into the bedroom, she said sternly, "You'd better not do everything at that speed."

He grinned and kissed her softly. "I can be super-slow if I want to be."

"Good." He lowered her to the bed at a pace that wouldn't challenge an arthritic snail. She took advantage of the situation and unfastened his belt. "Maybe not quite that slow," she whispered.

He leaned down and kissed her again. "We have all the time we need to get the pace right. In fact, we have the rest of our lives to work on it."

Her smile lit her face again. "That sounds so wonderful. The rest of our lives."

"I love you, my beautiful bride."

Liquid filled her eyes again and she ran her hand through his hair. "And I love you, my darling husband." She kissed him deeply, then said, "I swear that I'll never keep anything from you again."

He smiled back. "I give you the same vow." As he bent to apply his lips to her neck, he muttered, "You know, I really did earn that green belt."

She chuckled. "You should find a teacher and keep going, then. I'd love to spar with someone – ohh, that feels so good – uh – someone I can't leave a bruise on."

He kicked off his shoes, then bent to remove hers. "Do you want me to call Cat for you and tell her you won't be moving in with her after all?"

"You touch that phone and I'll break it over your super-dense head! Now come here so we can mmmph!"

He didn't care what she had planned to say. And if her return kiss was any indication, neither did she.

Cat stood in the long evening shadows cast by the streetlights and frowned at Clark's front door. She was uncharacteristically unsure of her next move.

Find Lois, Perry had said. Call me as soon as you do and let me know how she is, he'd ordered. I haven't heard from her since this morning and I'm worried about her, he'd confessed.

Cat was worried too.

Lois' Jeep was still in the building's parking area, but there was no luggage inside. The hood was cool to the touch, so she knew it hadn't been driven recently. There was no sign of forced

entry to the apartment, no hint that anything was amiss inside. And the lights were all off, which might mean that they had been so exhausted that they were both asleep.

But she still had to find Lois.

Cat sighed and started hunting for Clark's spare key, something she knew about from Lois' rants about his unreasonable down-home Kansas trust. Her fingers found it above the door jamb, right where she'd expected.

At least the door was locked. That argued for Lois' presence. According to her, Clark would have left the door open for any bum off the street. A quick turn of the key and Cat slipped into the apartment, silently closing the door behind her.

She'd been here once before, with Jimmy and Lois, back when Clark had first joined the staff and had just rented the place, and the transformation was dramatic. The look had been early condemned rat-trap back then – now it was clean and fresh inside, from carpet to ceiling, and a deep sniff told her that someone was using cleanser on a regular basis. A quick glance toward the dining area let her know that Mr. Green Jeans was still also Mr. Clean Jeans. And she thought he'd had an open floor plan, but the bedroom had a door now, one that was open only an inch or two.

But she wasn't here to evaluate Clark's living conditions. She still had to find Lois. Maybe she was asleep on the couch?

Then came a clink of glass and a rush of water from the tap. Her quarry stepped out of the kitchen and dabbed at the corners of her mouth with one finger.

The brunette's face was scrubbed clean of makeup and her hair hung down to her shoulders, unbound and unkempt. The only garment Cat could see on her was one of Clark's KU jerseys, a sleeveless one which hung down just below her hips. Her eyes were at half-mast and her walk was slow and slightly erratic, and there was a preoccupied smile on her lips.

"Lois?!"

Lois tried to jump straight up and twist into a defensive crouch at the same time. She tugged the hem of her jersey lower on the way down from her jump and barely managed not to fall to the carpet. "Cat!" she hissed. "What the f— what are you doing here?"

Fighting laughter, she said, "P-Perry sent me to find you. What are you doing here?"

Lois crossed her arms, seemingly half in defiance and half in an attempt at modesty. "What do you think I'm doing here?"

The obvious conclusion came to her mind and slid out of her mouth before her mental filter had a chance to engage. "Clark."

"What?"

"I think you're doing Clark."

"Why you redheaded—"

"I guess you two made up, huh? Good thing you're already married."

"Will you be quiet!" Lois hissed again. "He's sleeping!"

"You wore him out already?"

Lois huffed and put her hands on her hips. "Cat, will you please just go? We're both fine!"

She couldn't help but sing, "Nothing could be fine-ah than to be with Lois Lane-ah in the mo-o-orning."

"It's not morn – that doesn't matter! Out! Now!"

"Lois and Clarkie, sittin' in a tree—"

"Will you please shut up!"

"I guess you listened to me after all," Cat giggled.

"Pretty smart conclusion, Cat."

Both women snapped their heads toward the bedroom door where Clark leaned against the jamb wearing only a pair of loose gym shorts, his glasses, and a satisfied smile. No shirt on his massive chest blocked Cat's view of the rest of him. "Now that you've found Lois," he said casually, "is there something else you need?"

Cat stared at him, totally mesmerized. She'd known from the

first day she'd met him that he had a really good physique, but even with the diffused light from outside she could see this – this nearsighted Adonis come to life before her. He was Michelangelo's depiction of David. He was Hercules without the beard he sometimes wore in the ancient statues. He was Perseus after putting down Medusa's snaky head. He was Apollo by Gian Bernini, although Lois didn't resemble the accompanying Daphne in the slightest. He was the envy of every body builder in the world, not to mention the living, walking dream of most of the women currently living.

He was incredible.

Or, maybe Lois was his Daphne after all. Except she certainly wasn't trying to get away from him. Clark could be her Apollo any time, Cat thought.

The room turned fuzzy for a moment, then Cat realized she'd forgotten to breathe. She pulled in several deep breaths and shook her head to clear her vision, then looked up at Lois again.

The little minx had moved next to Clark and had slipped under his arm. She grinned at Cat and said, "Okay, like Clark said, you've found me. Please tell the editorial worrywart that we're both fine and that we'll be back in the office sometime this week to finish up our paperwork for reinstatement to the Planet." The couple's heads turned toward each other as if telepathically locked. "Uh—" muttered Lois —"probably much later this week."

"Um – yeah. Sure. I'll tell him."

Their obvious love for each other, their shared desire laid immodestly bare and out in the open, made Cat jealous for a moment. It was probably why she thought of it.

She shouldn't ask. A rubber-armed robot in her head began chanting, "Danger, Cat Grant! Danger, Cat Grant!" It would be better if she didn't ask. It would be far healthier for her if she didn't ask. It was altogether a bad idea to ask. In fact, Lois would probably go completely ballistic on her if she asked.

So she asked anyway.

"Ah, Lois, sometime later, when the two of you aren't too – um, busy – can I – can I – you know – borrow Clark for a little while?"

Lois slid in front of Clark and her eyes stabbed at the intruder. With a voice full of razors and freshly-whetted knives, she asked, "You want to *borrow* my husband? Really? What do you think that I think about that idea?"

That was a full-bore, full-force Mad Dog Lane glare. It was one of the most frightening things Cat had ever experienced. The looks Lois had given her in the newsroom over the past years were pallid ghosts compared to this molten steel.

Cat backed up a step and raised her hands. "I – I think he's your guy and I want to keep on breathing and I'm sorry I said anything bye!"

She was out the door and halfway to her Porsche before she realized she had neither locked the door nor put the key back where she'd found it.

That would have to happen later. Much later. She wasn't about to get in range of Lois Lane today, not to return a key or do anything else. Cat was going home to call Perry and let him know that Lois was fine, just fine, that Clark was fine, just fine, and that they weren't faking the marriage any longer. Then she planned to take a long cold shower and think about glaciers.

She hoped it worked like it was supposed to. A cold shower was one thing with which she had precious little experience.

Epilogue

Jimmy slid the typed list onto the desk in front of his boss. "Okay, Chief, here's the schedule of performers for this year's talent show. We open with—"

"I can read, Jimmy."

"Just making allowances for your – ah, level of maturity."

"Don't try to be funny, Olsen. That's reserved for Clark and

Lois. And they're professionals."

"Hey, even Johnny Carson had a warm-up guy to get the audience smiling."

"And you think you're it?"

"Me? No way. I'm doing a stage magic act with Deidra from Human Resources as my lovely assistant. But no hypnotism, I promise."

"Good to know. Let's see here – you've got Cat Grant singing four songs right before the first intermission. You sure that's the best place to put her?"

"She's doing Shania Twain's 'Feel Like a Woman' to start her set and she's closing with 'My Heart Will Go On.' There's a duet with Lois, too, but we didn't get to hear it."

"Who is 'we'?"

"Clark and I went to her place last night to listen to her rehearse. She asked us to give her an unbiased evaluation, and we told her that she's very good."

"Then she won't embarrass us?"

"Perry, she could do those numbers in any club in the city and knock the audience out cold. I just hope we don't hold *her* back."

"Sounds great. I'm the Master of Ceremonies again this year?"

"That's what you ordered – I mean requested. Look, Chief, this year we're going to pull in a lot of money for the Police and Firefighters' dependents fund. I guarantee you we'll pack the house."

"I sure hope so. Eduardo's doing that solo standup routine, isn't he?"

"He didn't want to compete with Lois and Clark directly, so he's the second act in the first set."

"What's on after him?"

"Eduardo's on second."

"No, I mean what's on – now cut that out!"

"Sorry, Perry, but I don't get to yank your chain very often."

"Well, now that you have, consider that your annual allotment of chain-yanking. Hmm – Myerson, Penny Davis, the Leeson twins from accounting – Lane and Kent are closing the show, right?"

"Yep. They even promised not to make fun of Ralph's dancing."

"Ralph – is dancing?"

"Right there after the first intermission. He's got this Gene Kelly kind of thing he does, and he's surprisingly good at it. I think you'll be pleased."

"But that's all he's doing, right? Just dancing?"

"He wanted to do some jokes during his numbers. I wasn't getting anywhere trying to convince him not to try it, so Clark backed him up against the wall and stared at him until he swore up and down that he wouldn't say a word to a single or married person either on stage or in the audience that night. I seriously doubt he'll open his mouth for anything other than breathing."

"Good. mumble grumble management grumble nephews mumble—"

"Do what, Chief?"

"Uh – nothing, nothing at all. This looks good, Olsen. Make sure the print room runs off some extra copies of the program. I want every performer to have at least one to take home and put in a scrapbook."

"Will do. I also got the autograph book with pictures of everybody."

"Already? That was fast."

"Well, I already had a lot of the candid shots of the performers, but I also got at least one posed shot of each one in there too. My favorite one is Clark and Lois. It's a waist-up shot of them in business wear, standing almost back to back with their arms crossed, looking over their shoulders at the camera and smiling like they know something no one else does."

"Ha! That's probably true, too."

"I'm sure it is. Anything else you want me to do on this?"

"No, just keep going like you have been. You seem to be having a lot of fun with it."

"Oh, I am, Perry! This is the most fun I've had on any assignment since we reopened."

"Me too, but don't let that get around, okay? Oh, I almost forgot to ask you about security."

"Chief, the police commissioner, the city fire marshal, the chief of police, the mayor, four state senators, two state representatives, and your wife will be in the audience! Two SWAT teams will be on call all night and Bill Henderson has his plainclothes people set to wander around looking for any potential problems. I think the security aspect will be fully covered."

"Sounds like you have it under control. Good job, Jimmy. Make sure Eduardo has some of those photos for his story. We're running it in the Sunday supplement."

"Will do, Chief. Anything else? Cat's got me running down some research on nursing homes for a possible story."

"Then you'd best get going, son."

Jimmy nodded at his boss and turned to find Cat Grant. He needed to know if she wanted to refine the search terms for her story or keep them broad. Eduardo was digging for some dirt on a councilman who might or might not be selling building inspections. And Lois wanted him to track down some potential Superman sightings in the Pacific Northwest, a task that promised to take considerable time.

But he didn't care. The Planet had its heart back. The work was still hard, the hours were often long and always unpredictable, the assignments were always variable and sudden, the schedule often conflicted with his real life, and he still had competing priorities when finding time to make all the reporters happy with his research.

But it was fun. Clark and Lois were back, Cat was still there, Lois and Cat had made peace with each other and seemed like friends, and when Cat flirted with Clark, Lois made it clear to her where the lines were – but then the two women would go to lunch together and come back giggling like schoolgirls. Lois's friend Kim occasionally joined them, and Clark always smiled knowingly when he saw the three of them together.

He laughed to himself. Cat was still the only woman Lois would allow to play-flirt with Clark. Anyone else had to deal with both women, and at on one memorable occasion, Cat had held Lois back from actually attacking a woman who was making borderline obscene comments about her husband. That woman had decided to avoid Clark, apparently for the rest of her career, for the purpose of living to retirement age.

And boy, did that relationship take some getting used to. He'd been afraid that they'd end the marriage after the assignment was over, but judging by the way they couldn't keep their hands off each other, that wasn't happening any time soon – if ever. He'd been sworn to secrecy over Cat and Lois' actual duet closer, but he knew that Lois planned to surprise Clark with a Whitney Houston-style rendition of "I Will Always Love You." She hoped it would bring tears to his eyes to match the ones she'd shed every time she'd tried to rehearse it.

Jimmy had actually updated his résumé, but he hadn't sent it out to anyone. He couldn't imagine leaving the paper now. It was his home, his refuge, the place he belonged, and no one was going to pry this turtle out of his shell. There was no more talk overheard about anyone looking for a new position with another organization. Eduardo smiled all the time as he filed story after story. Myerson argued about college football with Clark or anyone else who'd give him ten seconds, then go out and bring back a scoop on some international relations thing that always made Lois frown for a moment, then smile. Perry growled good-naturedly at everyone and about everything, then went home to Alice and actually relaxed.

The Daily Planet was a happy family again. And everyone there was happy to belong to that family.

THE END