

Veterans of Foreign Wars

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Summary: This is a recapping of the beginning of the partnership between Clark Kent and Lois Lane, told with a radically different backstory for the three main characters in the story. There is a major character death and some other surprises along the way. For the most part, though, the favorite toys go back into the box at the end, barring a few minor scratches.

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Now let's dive into the tale and watch our favorite couple become our favorite couple.

Prologue

Then:

Clark Kent signed his name to the dotted line and became a member of the most recent freshman class at Metropolis University. His chosen major, journalism, would be a difficult row to hoe due to his growing-up time in a rural town in central Kansas, and he knew it. He wouldn't be competing against kids who were just trying to get by here, kids who only wanted to be "good enough for Smallville." He'd have to work hard to earn every success. His academic scholarship would help defray the cost of school, but a part-time job loomed in his future and he knew that too.

One of the big perks, of course, was the large number of pretty girls wandering around the quad. There were blondes, brunettes, and a few redheads, including the tall dynamite one in the next line. Purely by chance, he overheard her name, Margaret Mayfield. The double 'M' in her initials, her height, slim build, and hue of her hair made a nice contrast to the double 'L' of the short and not-slim blonde Lana Lang, his off-and-on high school sweetheart.

Right now they were "off," especially since Lana had chosen to attend the senior prom with Brad Parker, the point guard on the Smallville Crows' basketball team. Clark believed that Lana was with Brad because the young Iowa State freshman was being described as "the next Pete Maravich" on the court and had a real shot at being famous. Brad could out-dribble, out-pass, out-score, out-defend, and out-rebound any other guard in the state of Kansas. His six-foot-five-inch height also gave him multiple advantages, as did his thirty-eight-inch vertical jump and his rare speed on the court. Clark knew he could beat Brad six ways from Tuesday using his "special abilities" if he really wanted to, but doing so would give him way more press than he wanted, and the

wrong kind of press. Besides, unlike Brad, he didn't want to play in the NBA, and if that's what it took to win back Lana the superficial bimbo, she wasn't worth the effort.

So the tall redhead attracted him. She pulled her long hair back over her shoulder and gave him a good look at her very pretty face, frowned at her class schedule printout, and headed off. Clark still had two classes to get into before they filled up, so he sighed and watched her go her way. If they could meet and if she liked him, they might become a couple, or at least go out on a few dates together. If not, she'd just be another one that got away.

Cat Grant shook her head at her class schedule and headed toward the faculty office building. She was only three years out of high school herself, but she'd already forgotten how young incoming college freshmen could be. Three years as a part-time administrative assistant to a mid-level executive at the Daily Planet, while she earned an associate's degree in journalism at New Troy junior college, and on-the-job training as a feature writer had prepared her to be a cub reporter, but after only four months of flower shows and building dedications she'd been given an undercover assignment.

True, it wasn't all that dangerous – it wasn't exactly exposing the Teapot Dome scandal or digging up the Watergate cover-up – and she'd gotten the job largely because of her still-youthful appearance and because no one else who looked the part had wanted it. But it was an undercover role nonetheless, and there was a real story to dig up. She was on her way to being a real investigative reporter.

Her boss, Perry White, had set up her cover identity and background information, including the name Margaret Mayfield. She hadn't understood the pop music reference until Eduardo Friaz had giggled at it during the staff meeting, then pointed her to Rod Stewart's big hit "Maggie May" from about fifteen years before. She'd decided to let other people pick up the reference if they wanted to, then stare pointedly at whoever said anything until the subject was changed. That way, she could both set up a wall between others and her assumed name and establish a reputation as a tough cookie. It was the best protection the Chief could give her.

She mentally reviewed her backstory as a young divorcee with no children who had decided to go back to school and get her high school teaching certificate and write features for the school newspaper. If the rumors Perry had heard were true, it wouldn't be long before someone would try to recruit her for the student-run escort service at the school. Those rumors had implicated some of the junior and senior class leadership, and it could turn into a disastrous scandal in a Metropolis minute. She needed to work quickly because the paper couldn't let her function outside the office for more than half the semester.

Of course, if she did find hard evidence of an escort service, she might stay the entire semester to flesh out the story, get names and places and the organizational setup. Or she might just "drop out" and disappear. It would depend on the level of danger she encountered.

Either way, this would be good experience for her. Investigative reporting was something she really wanted to do, and this would be a good start for her – assuming she actually got the story.

The only real problem she had with the assignment was that her fiancé Mark Orton hated it. They wouldn't be able to meet on campus or at her apartment as long as she was undercover. Mark was a good man and she thought highly of him, but this forced separation would put a lot of pressure on their relationship. She only hoped it wasn't too much pressure – but then, if he couldn't handle her being on this assignment, he might not be able to take it if she became a full-time investigative reporter. He'd already dropped some barbed hints to the effect that he wanted her to be

his wife at home, not in the line of fire, and that he didn't mind her working as long as it was on his terms.

Perry didn't know about that extra bit of tension in her life. As much as he wanted her to meet her potential as a reporter, he'd bend over backward to help her in her private life. Cat desperately wanted to prove that she'd earned her job, that she belonged at the Daily Planet, that she wasn't the editor's pet, and that no one could stop her from being the best that she could possibly be.

Not even the man who said he loved her.

"Recruits! Raise your right hands and repeat after me. I – say your name."

"I, Lois Lane—"

She was doing it. She was really doing it.

"—do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States—"

Her father had flatly refused to pay the tuition for a journalism degree, still her dream career. He'd desperately wanted her to be a doctor.

"—against all enemies, foreign or domestic—"

Just as desperately, she didn't want to be a doctor. She wanted to actively campaign for truth and justice, and this way was her second choice.

"—that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same—"

So she came straight out of high school and went into the US Army. She'd actually enjoyed seeing his face turn that color when she'd told him of her decision. Oh, what she would have given to see his face today. She didn't, of course, tell him that she hoped the Army would be her inside track to a journalism career, given the availability of post-service benefits and in-service training.

"—and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States—"

Her blue belt in Tai-Kwando, her cross-country distance medals for the school track team, and the bylines she'd earned at her high school paper gave her confidence that she could face the physical and mental challenges. And every base had some kind of internal reporting organ, a newspaper or newsletter where she could practice and hone her writing skills.

"—and the orders of the officers appointed over me—"

She even had her MOS, or military occupational specialty – law enforcement – all picked out, and she planned to cross-train as a combat medic so she could qualify for armed combat duty if the opportunity arose. She could also write for the base newspaper once she landed at a permanent duty station. She could even publish a journal of her training experiences to help other recruits deal with the culture shock. The title would be "How To Become a Soldier and Live Through It." It would be a best-seller – at military boot camps and recruiting offices, anyway.

"—according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God."

She lowered her hand and came to attention as best she knew how. After all, she was now US Army Recruit Lois Lane, serial number 46218819-F. Next stop: twelve weeks of boot camp, then law enforcement school for 20 weeks followed by 16 weeks of field medic training. With her background, she ought to be able to ace both of them.

She'd show them all how it was really done, especially her father.

Chapter One

Now:

Clark Kent was thrilled. He was about to walk off the elevator and interview with Perry White of the Daily Planet in Metropolis, New Troy. It was the culmination of one of his dreams, and only two things might top it. The first was that he might actually get hired.

The other dream was that he might meet a woman with whom

he could spend the rest of his life, free from conflict and pressure and filled with love, each for the other. That one, though, was far less substantial than the other, and the one with which he'd had the least success. Only twenty-six, his adult life so far had been filled with failed romances and interpersonal strife. Only one of his girlfriend relationships had ever gone past the casual dating stage. He was so tired of the conflicts in his life that he never wanted to hear a man and woman argue about anything, no matter who they might be to each other.

He'd take that stress, though, if it meant earning a job with the Daily Planet.

He glanced around and stopped short for a moment when he saw the seated redhead from the back. She reminded him of Margaret, the first woman – and so far, the only woman – with whom he'd been intimate. Occasionally he still wondered what had happened to her, where she'd gone, why she'd lied to him, why she'd put his heart through a Veg-o-matic and left him wondering what had happened between the two of them and how much of it was really his fault.

But the past eight years had melted his emotional ties to her. He didn't know what he'd say or do if he were to meet her again, though he suspected that he'd never be able to trust her with his heart. Somehow, though, somewhere down the line, her ability to hurt him deeply had vanished in the wind. He no longer went to sleep thinking about her or woke up with her at the forefront of his mind.

Although he considered himself over her, she was still the third party beside any woman with whom he shared meal, a soft look, a kiss, a walk with linked hands, anything tender or romantic. Her presence all but haunted him on those occasions, and the wound in his soul still ached, still kept him awake occasionally, still tugged on his heart at the most unexpected times. Worst of all, he knew the problem was his, not Maggie's. And certainly not the women he'd met, liked, and been pulled up short of love with and commitment to by his persistent memories of Mags.

He gritted his teeth for a moment and once again pushed the memories away. Margaret Mayfield was his past, not his future. She was surely somewhere else, with someone else, maybe even in love with that someone else, and he once again put her out of his mind to focus on impressing Perry White.

Lois leaned back in her chair behind her desk and laughed softly at the punch line of Cat's story, then looked over her friend's shoulder, still smiling. "Looks like another poor little lamb has lost his way."

"Huh?"

"Good-looking guy alert, on your six and heading into Perry's office."

"Oh?" Cat turned in her chair and looked over her shoulder, then spun back and put her head down. "No! It can't be!"

Lois took in her friend's sudden panting, her bloodless face, and her arms wrapping around her belly and realized that something was seriously wrong. "Who is he? What did he do to you? Where do you want the body hidden?"

"What? No!" Cat reached out and grasped Lois' wrist with a trembling hand. "That's – he's the guy from Met U!"

"What guy from Met U?"

Cat took a forced shuddering breath and let it out quickly. "I met him on my first undercover job! He's the one I – the one I hooked up with!"

Lois' slow blink was the only thing that kept her eyeballs in their sockets. "I thought he was a farmer in Iowa or someplace like that!"

"He is! At least, he was! What's he doing here?"

Lois looked into the office. "He's showing samples to Perry. He's either selling something or applying for the opening Baker

left when he went to Chicago.”

Cat lurched to her feet. “He can’t see me! I can’t see him! Please, Lois, you have to cover for me!”

Lois stood beside Cat and walked her toward the ladies’ room, keeping herself in the line of sight between Cat and Perry’s office. “I will, don’t worry. He’ll never know you were ever here.”

As the redhead stumbled toward the bathroom door, she muttered, “Thank you, Lois. You’re a lifesaver.”

“And me without a hole in my middle.” Cat gave her a trembling smile, then Lois asked, “Do you want me to ask Perry not to hire him?”

Cat shook her head. “No. He and I – the whole thing between us was more my fault than his. This is Perry’s call. If he’s good enough he should get the job.”

“Okay, if that’s the way you want it.” They pushed through the door and into the front lounge, where Lois sat beside her friend on the couch. “I’ll tell Perry you need the rest of the day off.”

“But I have that theater—”

“Uh-uh. You need to go home and recover from this.” She gave her friend a crooked smile. “You’d help me hide the body if I had to shoot someone.”

Cat gave her a defeated look. “Yeah, I would at that. Hey, just let me know when the guy’s gone, okay? I’ll hide out in here until then.”

“Will do.” Lois stood and shook her head. “Cat, I have never known you to dodge any man for any reason. I’ve seen you run them off when you’re through with them, seen you make them slink away, but never the other way around. Just what happened on that assignment?”

Cat closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. “Come over for dinner tonight and I’ll tell you everything.” She looked at Lois for a moment, then turned her head away. “I’ve never told anyone else exactly what went down back then.” She hesitated, then added, “Not even my therapist. I guess – maybe I need to tell someone.”

Lois thought about asking another question but decided that she’d get the whole story tonight. “Want me to bring anything?”

Cat blew air through her lips and shook her head. “A hearty appetite, a listening ear, and an understanding heart.”

Lois nodded. “Will do. Nineteen hundred hours – I mean, seven o’clock okay?”

“As long as the pizza delivery guy is on time, sure.”

Clark took the folder back from Perry. “What do you think, sir?”

Perry shrugged noncommittally. “You can write, Kent, that’s for sure. This series on corruption in the Public Defender’s office in Boise is excellent. I just don’t know if your skills will translate to investigative reporting or features in the big city.”

“Mr. White—”

A knock interrupted him. “Sorry, Kent, this should only take a minute. Perils of a big-city paper.” To the person knocking, he called out, “Come in.”

An impressively beautiful brunette with short hair and a no-nonsense demeanor opened the door, leaned in, and snatched the breath from his lungs with just her face. “Perry, Cat needs to go home. She’s sick.”

“Oh? Will she be back in the morning?”

Clark tried to pull his eyes away from her but couldn’t. “I don’t know,” the woman answered. “She didn’t look very good to me when I left her in the bathroom.”

The editor sighed. “Can you do that theater closing piece for her?”

The woman’s brow knit with concentration. “I’ve got that EPRAD investigation going, Chief. I really don’t have an afternoon to shoehorn it in.”

“Okay. I’ll give it to someone else. Go take care of Cat, and I’ll see you in the morning and Cat whenever she’s better. And

bring me something good on the space program.”

“Thanks, Perry. Sorry to interrupt.” She turned away and pulled the door shut.

Clark was glad for the extended interruption. When he’d seen the brunette, he’d forgotten to inhale. The time she and Perry spent talking gave him the time to get himself under control again.

Now that he’d seen her, he couldn’t just walk away from her.

“There goes half of the second-best reporting team I’ve ever seen,” Perry said softly. “Let me see, Kent – oh, yes. I don’t know if I have a slot for you—”

“Then let me have that theater piece you just mentioned. If you like what I give you, it’ll be my first feature in the big city paper. Or you can look at it on spec.”

Perry leaned back and frowned in thought, then nodded. “Let’s do that. I’m out of people today, and if you can get this done I’ll consider it your audition. Think you can handle it?”

Clark stood and offered his hand. “If I didn’t think I could turn in a quality story, Mr. White, I wouldn’t have offered to do it.”

The editor laughed and took Clark’s hand. “You don’t lack for confidence, do you?”

“A man ought to know his abilities as well as his limitations.”

“Good enough for me. We’ll see if your written words equal your spoken ones.”

“I’ll do my best, sir.”

“You know, son, I think you will. In fact, unless you surprise me in a bad way, you ought to get used to calling me ‘Chief’.”

Clark smiled. “Maybe I should turn in the story first.”

He’d had to offer to do the story. He had to have this job, if only to find out why – unlike every other woman or girl he’d ever met, including Maggie – she affected him so.

As he walked across the newsroom to the steps leading to the elevator bank, he realized he hadn’t thought about Maggie from the time he entered Perry White’s office until just a moment ago.

The guy was seriously good-looking. Lois found herself hoping he could write half as good as he looked in that suit.

Then she shook her head. She hadn’t had a date in far too long.

Three days before, Lucy had told her – nervously and from the far side of the living room – that she didn’t have dates, just interviews. After thinking about what Lucy had said, Lois had decided that it wasn’t quite true.

After seeing the new applicant, though, Lois decided that it wasn’t quite false, either.

He was a bit over six feet tall, broad-shouldered, and walked with a light step almost as if he were a dancer. The glasses made him look a little dorky, as did the I’m-too-busy-for-the-barbershop hair, but those were easily fixed. He either spent significant time in the gym or he worked out like a fiend, which might mean that he thought quite highly of himself. Still, he’d make a good-looking escort to any party she chose to crash.

On the negative side of the ledger, though, was his uncertain status with her best friend. It was unlikely that he’d applied at the Planet just to find a certain redhead in a city nearly as stuffed with them as was Boston, but Cat’s reaction to him emphasized that at least one of them still held some strong feelings for the other. And Lois didn’t have so many close friends that she was willing to push one away because some random guy she’d never seen before looked good in a suit.

Lois didn’t particularly like waiting, but dinner with Cat wasn’t a bad way to find out more about the mysterious beefcake. And none of the details of the story would change before then.

Cat nervously arranged the place settings yet again. It was just dinner with Lois, something they’d shared many times before, but tonight she’d confess one of her most shameful secrets to her friend – perhaps her most shameful secret.

She glanced at the clock over the doorway. Four minutes to seven, which meant that Lois was due to arrive in three to five minutes. Cat had finally convinced her not to be twenty minutes early for social occasions, but Lois' military training still had priority in her life. She was the only person Cat had ever known who would be on time for an interview or for dinner or even for her own execution and act like she was late. Interestingly, she actually believed it.

Cat had just set out the glasses for their drinks when a knock sounded at the door. Another glance at the clock confirmed that Lois was one minute and forty seconds early and would probably apologize for making Cat wait for her.

And that's exactly what happened. As Cat opened the door, Lois breezed in, calling out, "Sorry, sorry, there was a lot of traffic on Schuster because of a fender bender so I had to take the Madigan bypass. How late am I?"

Cat managed a grin. "As usual, you're right on time." Another knock sounded. "And there's the delivery guy."

Cat sensed rather than saw Lois back up and put her hand inside her purse as Cat opened the door again. "Thanks, Mickey," she told the young man. "You want me to pay for this now or put it on my tab?"

The young man – boy, really – glanced at Lois, then returned his attention to Cat and said, "Naw, I'll put it on your tab, Ms. Grant. You can pay it all at the end of the month. Probably bankrupt you, especially when you include the generous tips you give me."

Cat laughed. "Okay. Thanks!"

"You're welcome. You ladies have a good dinner and don't eat the cardboard this time."

Cat laughed again and closed the door, then put the box on the table. "I keep telling you, Lois, you don't have to carry a gun everywhere you go."

"And I keep telling you, the correct nomenclature is weapon or firearm, not gun." Lois pulled her hand out of the purse and hung it over the back of her chair, which was facing the front door. "I've also told you that I'm not giving up my Beretta any time soon."

"Is that still the one you carried in the Middle East?"

"Same model, different item." She waved her left hand at the table. "Don't we have a dinner to eat?"

"Yes. And I'm sorry it doesn't have all four food groups."

Lois shrugged. "Oh, I don't know, it's pretty close. The cheese is dairy, the pepperoni and sausage are meats, the crust is grain, and three out of four ain't bad."

They both laughed at the old joke, then settled down to eat.

There were still three pieces left from the large pie when Cat leaned back and put her hands on her stomach. "I'm done," she announced. "That's all the room I have, and I'll be paying for it in the gym for the next two weeks."

Lois nodded. "Me too. You want some more Dew?"

"No thanks. I've had my innards tickled enough for one night."

Lois refilled her own glass, then leaned back and fixed her friend with a soft glare. "Are you ready to tell me about the hunk now?"

Cat picked up her glass and watched the ice fragments as she swirled them at the bottom. "Did you know he played football in high school?"

"Tight end, right?"

Cat didn't smile or lift her eyes. "No, running back and safety." She didn't speak for a moment, then said, "I did throw him a forward pass, though."

Lois knew the teasing was done and "the talk" had begun. "How forward?"

Cat put her glass down and kneaded her hands together.

"Very."

"Did he catch it?"

Cat nodded. "Like a pro. Cradled it like it was a baby. He couldn't help but catch it, though. I hit him right in the breadbasket with that pass." Then she shut up.

Lois waited for nearly a full minute – she knew because she could see the clock above Cat's front door – then gave up waiting and softly said, "You fell for him, didn't you?"

"Like a rotten tree in the forest."

Lois' voice softened even more. "Is he why you haven't found a steady guy yet?"

Cat looked up with surprise on her face, then lifted the glass again and slid a small piece of ice into her mouth. "Huh. Never thought about it like that. Maybe I need to change therapists, give you some of that money."

"We can talk about that later. Right now it would help for me to know a little more about this assignment you were working on."

Cat swallowed and all but dropped her glass onto the table. "I was supposed to find a student-led prostitution ring if there was one to find. There was one, and I did find it. He and I met at my dorm's Disco Mixer the second weekend of school, and we clicked. As friends."

"Disco Mixer, huh? Was he a regular John Travolta?"

"Not quite, but he was graceful and smooth and fun to dance with. Couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, though." They shared a chuckle, then Cat continued. "That's when I found out he was there to get a journalism degree. After that, Clark helped me by pretending to be a john, doing the legwork a woman couldn't do and getting answers from the guys that I couldn't get to, he made a great sounding board, and he got mad like a jealous boyfriend just because I was asked to charge for sex on dates, which I never did, of course. Have sex on any dates, I mean. I went on a lot of dates with him, a few as an escort to establish my cover plus several just because I wanted to, and I spent two nights in his dorm room with him working on my notes." Cat looked up at Lois' tilted eyebrows, then said, "No, really, we were working on the story those nights."

"Uh-huh. We had some names for guys like that in my platoon."

"You've got the wrong idea. Clark was always a perfect gentleman. Besides being a really nice guy and my unofficial bodyguard for about nine weeks, he helped me write the story. He'd been on his high school paper and did some pieces for the local twice-a-week rag back home, and he was a natural."

Lois watched Cat withdraw and almost shrink in on herself. "The night before Perry printed the story – it was just before semester finals – I invited him to my room to make him dinner. I had every intention of telling him everything and getting his permission to put his name under my byline. Somehow we never got that far. I was so excited – my first investigative piece was coming out and he'd helped a lot and he was just so – anyway, I put my arms around his neck and kissed him and he kissed me back and suddenly I was overcome with something I thought was love but now I know it was nervous energy and need and lack of confidence turned to lust and I kissed him again only this time I really meant it and he kissed me the same way and all I could think of was how beautiful he looked and how gentle and powerful he was and – and before I knew it we were in bed together and he called me Mags and he almost told me he thought he loved me and – and I suddenly realized how stupid I'd been."

Cat paused for breath and Lois asked, "Why did he call you Mags?"

"My undercover name was Margaret Mayfield – Maggie May as a general nickname, Mags as his pet name for me – and I tried to tell him I'd been looking for the escort service to expose it and I started to tell him the whole truth but he got the idea that Maggie – that I was just using him to get the story and he got furious and refused to listen. He stormed out of my room and I – I never saw

him again until today.” She sighed and rubbed her face with one hand. “Up to that night, I really dug being Mags when I was with him.”

“Are you telling me that you didn’t look for him? That’s hard to believe.”

“Oh, yeah, I did look. Hard. All this went down just before finals week and I went to his room after his last test but one of his neighbors said he’d taken his tests early and he’d moved out. I tried to find him through the registrar’s office, but they wouldn’t tell me a thing and he’d never told me what town he came from and I never knew how many high schools in the Midwest use ‘crow’ as their mascot. That’s all I knew about him. Somehow we just never talked very much about his hometown.”

Lois cocked one eye at her friend. “And he never bothered to look you up and try to fix things?”

Cat exhaled deeply. “I’ve gone over that night and the next morning in my mind so many times that I don’t trust my memories anymore, but I don’t think I ever told him my real name. He would’ve had a harder time finding me than I ever did trying to find him.”

“All this happened when I was in the Army, didn’t it?”

Cat nodded. “You probably would have been in boot camp then. Or maybe your first MOS school.” She wiped her face with one hand. “I tried looking up Clark Kent at the colleges in the Midwest using the Planet’s Internet resources until Perry told me to cut it out because I was spending so much time trying to find him. I did some searches for him on my own dime, but it was like he disappeared into thin air. I realized he was gone from my life, and I quit looking somewhere about April of the next year. Since then I’ve been both terrified and eager to see him again and try to explain what happened.”

Lois hesitated, then asked softly, “Is that why you ended your engagement to Mark?”

Cat sighed and nodded. “He couldn’t handle what I’d done. And I can’t blame him. I haven’t talked to him since the day he said goodbye forever. That assignment cost me a fiancé, a lover, and a lot of my self-respect.” She sat back and crossed her ankles. “It’s just as well. Looking back, I know Mark and I weren’t right for each other. I know I’m a terrible person for feeling this way, but even though I was engaged to Mark, I loved Clark way more than I ever loved Mark.”

Lois nodded slowly, trying not to let Cat know how important the next question was. “Do you want to see him now, talk to him?”

“You mean Clark?” Lois nodded. “Yes,” Cat sighed. “I feel like I need to explain what happened and why, whether he understands or not.”

Lois looked down at the glass in her hand. “Do you want to get together with him again? Romantically, I mean?”

“No.”

She glanced up. “No?”

Cat shook her head. “I never should have had sex with him in the first place. I didn’t really love him then – not the right way – and I don’t know him well enough to love him now. Back then, it was as much a celebration of getting published, of exposing a wrong and making it right as it was the natural progression of a relationship between us. I know you know that feeling.” Lois nodded again. “And there’s a lot more water under the bridge between me and Clark now. We’re talking about seven years – no, almost eight years since we’ve seen each other, and I can’t accept that he’s been pining for me all that time. I sure hope not, anyway.”

Lois chuckled. “Lucy would think it both tragic and romantic for Clark to be pining for you for eight whole years.”

Cat gave her friend a hooded glare. “Lucy would think that Godzilla’s backstory was a tragic romance. That’s hardly a recommendation for a guy to carry a torch for a woman for that long a time. Besides, I don’t know whether or not Perry’s planning

to hire him.”

“I think so. I read the theater closing piece Perry gave him as an audition.”

Cat stared. “Theater closing? That was my story!”

“You had me tell Perry you were sick, so Kent asked for it. Perry said okay and made it Kent’s audition piece, and the kid knocked it out of the park. Jimmy was impressed, too. It was way better than anything I would have turned in, and it was almost as good as anything you’ve had printed recently.”

“You mean he can still write?”

“I don’t know about ‘still’ because I didn’t know him then, but he wrote this one and did a great job. Read it tomorrow and let me know what you think. It’s the lead story in the Metro section. Personally, I think he’ll make a go of it at the Planet.” Lois drained her glass and smacked her lips in satisfaction. “Assuming, of course, you don’t run him off by the end of the week.”

Cat rocked in her chair a few times, then said, “I won’t run him off on purpose, and if he’s as good as you say he is he’ll be an asset to the paper. That’s the most I can promise without talking to him.”

Lois nodded. “Sounds fair to me. Hey, you want some of that ice cream in your freezer?”

Cat laughed. “You’re kidding, right? Strawberry ice cream on top of pizza?”

“Aren’t strawberries from that fourth food group that wasn’t on the pizza?”

The two women shared a laugh, relief in both voices. Cat spooned out two bowls of strawberry ice cream and handed one to Lois.

As they ate and joked together, Lois envisioned what might happen tomorrow. She wasn’t encouraged. But through gentle gibes and friendly touches and more than just a few tears, Lois finally got the detailed report of Cat’s breakup with Clark.

It was enough to put together a plan of action for the morning.

Then:

Clark had made some vague plans for the evening with Maggie, but he was more than willing to go with the flow and see where it led him. She was not only a good cook, a good writer, smart as a whip and beautiful, she was full of fire and determination to be her best. She could be anything or anyone she wanted to be. And Clark found himself hoping that they might come to some agreement about their future together.

Maggie had made spaghetti and meat sauce for dinner in her dorm room, which Clark had proclaimed “beyond excellent.” Her roommate had dropped out of school six weeks into the semester, citing exhaustion and a need to “find herself.” Clark knew that Maggie’s roommate had really left because she partied too much, refused to crack a book, and was about to flunk out anyway. It was too bad for her, but great for Clark and Maggie, who was now living alone. It gave them all the privacy they could desire to put the story together.

Or build on their relationship, something he’d been thinking about more often as the days went by.

He’d worked with her on crafting a real story from the information they had on the escort service, a story that was too big for the weekly Met Union on campus. He’d fantasized about seeing their shared byline on a real newspaper, one which actually paid them. They’d spent their spare time kissing, embracing, and telling each other stupid jokes. He didn’t know much about her past beyond what he’d learned the first two weeks they’d known each other, including her divorce and a recent painful breakup, but he told her that he didn’t care and she apparently took him at his word.

Clark walked up behind Maggie as she worked on the dirty dishes and kissed her once on the neck just below her ear. She sighed, then turned and wrapped her arms around his neck.

He nuzzled her neck again and asked, “Want me to do the dishes?”

She shook her head. “No, I’ll just set them in the sink and let them soak.”

Her smile, usually so bright, was muted, and that evening it didn’t light up her eyes as it normally did. He put his hands on either side of her waist and drew her closer to him. “Hey, Mags, what’s wrong?”

She didn’t look at him, but said, “I turned in the story today.”

“I know. You did a bang-up job, too.”

“You helped a lot. No telling what they might have done to me if they’d found out I was – ummmm, you taste really good.”

“It’s the spaghetti sauce.”

She gave him a wan laugh. “I don’t think so, Mr. Kent. I think it’s just you.”

He kissed her again and murmured against her lips, “You taste pretty good yourself.”

She pulled back a little. “Clark, we need to talk about – mmmph.”

She was a good kisser, he thought. And he really liked that about her. Maybe they really should have that talk – the one about him and his special skills. And about the “forever and a day” kind of love that he thought he wanted from her. He didn’t care that she’d been divorced – he believed that he loved her.

They kissed again, this time with more enthusiasm. Maybe they could talk later.

She put her hands on his shoulders. “Clark, I’m trying to have a conversation here.”

He grinned and caught her lips with his. “You aren’t trying all that hard.”

“I should be.” She pressed her mouth to his and slipped her tongue over his teeth. After a long moment, she muttered, “Maggie isn’t my name.”

“I know, it’s not Maggie, it’s really Margaret—” his lips slipped down to her throat “—but I like calling you Mags most of all.”

“No, I – I don’t – I’m not who – we need – need to – ohhh, you – you are so – so very – good at – at that—”

He felt her knees go weak. His weren’t doing so well either. And her sofa was right behind her, too.

The bed in the miniscule dorm room was just as close.

It was time for the next step in their relationship.

He had no idea that it would be the last step.

Cat drifted between asleep and awake for a time she couldn’t measure, then rolled toward the depression in the middle of the bed and reached out. Her hand found a firm young man beside her and she suddenly realized where she was and who was with her.

And what they’d done together.

Her eyes popped open and she saw Clark, wearing a satisfied grin and nothing else, propped up on his elbow and resting his head on the palm of his hand. “Hi, beautiful,” he whispered. His other hand gently stroked her hair.

The enormity of what she’d done hit her like a nine-pound hammer.

She’d been stupid, completely and totally and insanely stupid. She’d not only slept with Clark, she’d opened her heart to him. This was not the ending she’d envisioned for this assignment.

She might as well tell him everything now.

“Clark, I need to tell you something. Several things, actually.”

Instead of listening like she’d hoped he would, he leaned closer and lightly kissed her forehead. “I need to tell you something too. Mags, I’ve never felt like this before. It’s about what my parents call the ‘forever and a day’ kind of feeling. I’ve never even come close. I think—”

Her hand stopped his lips. “No, Clark, I need to go first.”

“But I want to tell you—”

“I mean it!” she snapped. “I have to tell you something very important.”

His grin evaporated and he raised himself on his elbow. “I’m listening.”

“Just – please listen to everything before you blow up at me. Okay?”

“This sounds serious.”

“It is. So let me just jump in head-first.” She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath, then opened her eyes and let it out. “My name isn’t Margaret Mayfield. I’m an undercover reporter. I was looking for the escort service we—”

He jerked back as she said her name wasn’t Margaret. “What? You what!”

“Clark, please, let me finish what I—”

“You’re a reporter? Now? Not just studying journalism?”

“My boss assigned me this story—”

“You were undercover?”

“Yes. My job—”

“You’re still undercover.”

“What do you—? No! This – last night had nothing to do with —”

He grabbed the sheet and pulled it back from her body, exposing both her nudity and her duplicity to her own eyes. “You’re undercover! What were we doing a few hours ago if you weren’t?”

She reached for his upper arm. “Clark, please listen to—”

“Why? So you can lie to me again? Or so you can lie with me again?”

The accusation hit her like a slap to the face and drove the air from her lungs. As she struggled to breathe, he lurched up out of the bed and pulled on his pants.

His teeth ground together and his nostrils flared. “Whoever you are, goodbye.”

“Please, Clark! Let me explain what—”

He yanked the pullover shirt over his powerful shoulders. “Oh, I think you’ve explained everything you need to explain.”

She tried to capture his wrist in her hands, but that shrouded strength in his arms effortlessly pulled away from her grip. “Clark, please,” she begged, “listen to me! Please let me explain!”

He bent down and picked up his shoes. “I don’t listen to liars.” He grabbed the doorknob and yanked the door open. “Goodbye, whoever you really are. Good luck with your next victim.”

The door slammed shut behind him. Cat struggled with the bedcovers attacking her legs, then grabbed her robe and threw it on. She ran into the hall to stop him and tell him everything, to tell him that she wasn’t the woman he thought she was, that the woman she really was really loved him.

But the hallway was empty. He was already gone.

She staggered back into the room and flopped onto the bed, her tears flooding her pillow.

She’d broken a cardinal rule and gotten personally, intimately involved with someone who was part of the story. And she’d slept with a man who had never known her real name. Worst of all, there was no one to blame for it but herself. It was the stupidest thing she’d ever done in her life.

It was a lesson Cat wasn’t sure she’d survive learning.

Chapter Two

Then:

Martha paused her sweeping on the front porch as a strange car pulled into their gravel driveway. Late morning was an odd time for unannounced visitors in a farm community, so she watched the man climb out of the car, smile, and walk toward her.

“Mrs. Kent? My name is Donald Porter. I’m the defensive backfield coach at the University of Kansas, and I’d like to speak to your son Clark.”

Martha frowned in puzzlement. “Did Clark contact you?”

Porter stopped just short of the porch steps. “No, ma’am, his father did. Seems he thinks Clark would be happier going to classes and playing defensive back for us than baling hay or fixing fences.”

“Well, they’re out in the barn this morning, working on the tractor. They should be back for lunch in the next half-hour or so. May I see your identification, please?”

Porter grinned and reached for his hip pocket. “Of course, Mrs. Kent. I’d want my mother to make sure some guy she’s never seen before was who he said he was.”

“Especially since late spring is not usually recruiting season. Especially for recruiting someone who hasn’t been on a football field for over a year.”

He chuckled and opened his wallet. “Here you go, ma’am, my driver’s license and Kansas U ID. I can also give you the number to Glen Mason’s office on campus. He’s the head coach. And because Clark is already a high school grad and isn’t enrolled in any college at the moment, we won’t be breaking any NCAA rules.”

“I’ll let my husband make that call to the school, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind at all, Mrs. Kent. I’ll wait in my car if you want me to.”

“No need, Mr. Porter. My husband and son are right behind you.”

Martha watched Porter’s face light up. It was another indication that he was who he said he was and had told her the truth about why he was there. He introduced himself to an enthusiastic Jonathan and a slightly taken aback Clark, then shared apple pie with them. When he left nearly an hour later, he smiled as if he’d put one over on every other defensive coach in the nation.

Jonathan smiled as Clark waved at Coach Porter as the man drove out of sight. Clark turned to his father and said, “I’m sure there’s an explanation for this that I don’t have but would very much like to have.”

Jonathan put his hand on his son’s shoulder. “You’re enthusiastic, son, and fun to work with. I really like having you here, and so does your mother. You always do the job you’re doing the right way and in record time.”

“Lana and Rachel like having you live with us too,” Martha added.

Clark’s mouth worked like he’d swallowed a truly disgusting bug. Before he could respond, Jonathan continued, “That’s true. But we can tell that you’re hiding out here. No, don’t interrupt, let me finish. Whatever happened at Met U to drive you back here was a bad thing, but you can’t let it define you. Son, there’s not one thing on this farm that you can’t do well. But we know this isn’t where you really want to be. We don’t want to push you away, but we do want to give you all the options you need to decide what you really do want to do.”

Clark stared at his father for a long moment, then shook his head. “Whatever happened to ‘don’t let them dissect you like a frog?’”

“Nothing happened to it. I still think you need to be careful. But both of us also think that you should explore the possibilities your abilities provide for you.”

Clark grinned. “How long did it take you to find all those three-dollar words?”

Martha sighed and lowered her gaze for a moment. “That was me, actually. But your father and I agree that you shouldn’t become a farmer just because something bad happened to you. We both think it was a girl, but whatever it was, you’re still who you were before.”

Clark frowned again. “I might have come back because of a girl who was already here. Ever think of that?”

“Yes, but if that were true, Maisie and Trixie wouldn’t have had to break up a fistfight between Lana and Rachel day before yesterday. A fight over you, if Maisie’s right.”

His eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. “Who did – what?”

“And Lana wouldn’t have gotten a black eye and bloody nose, and Rachel wouldn’t have been kicked in the groin.”

Jonathan crossed his arms and tried not to laugh. “I thought Rachel said she got punched in the stomach.”

“That’s what she’s been telling people. But since Lana’s so short and Rachel’s so tall, it’s more likely that Rachel was punching down on Lana’s head and Lana was kicking up at Rachel’s – er, lower regions. I believe what Maisie and Trixie told everyone.”

“That’s not funny, Dad! I don’t want girls fighting over me.”

“You can’t help it, son. Even if you’ve had a couple of dates with each of them, you obviously don’t love either of those girls – or any other girl in Smallville – in the forever and a day way. But you’re such a great catch that some of them will literally fight over you.”

Clark stared at his father, then at his mother, then lifted his hands and let them fall. “You’re telling me that I need to leave home just to keep the peace in Smallville?”

Martha surprised her son. “No, not just to keep the peace among the single girls of Smallville. Or the boys who’d like to date them but can’t because the girls are being totally unrealistic and holding out for you. You need to leave to have peace in your own heart.” She paused, then added, “Besides, a football scholarship won’t interfere with your journalism major, even if you start out as a walk-on.”

He glared at his mother for a long moment, then deflated. “Fine. I’ll think about it.”

Jonathan clapped his big hand on Clark’s shoulder. “That’s all we can ask. Now let’s see if that old tractor engine will turn over this time. Got to use you and your skills while you’re still here with us.”

Now:

Clark’s phone call home was buoyant and excited. He’d nailed a job at the Daily Planet on his first try, and his parents were almost as thrilled as he was. True, it was only guaranteed for three months, and he was on probation like any other newbie, but it was an excellent start.

After hanging up, he decided to take a walk around his hotel to start getting the lay of the land. And if he happened to find someone committing a crime, the darkness would help to shield him.

For some reason his mind kept going back to Maggie – or whatever her name really was. She’d told him she was from this part of the country, but he’d never been able to find her name anywhere at any school other than Metropolis University or in a phone directory or any professional listing. He finally decided that Mayfield had been her married name and that she’d gone back to using whatever her maiden name was. If that were true, he’d probably never see her again. Her maiden name was yet another detail he’d never bothered to learn about her.

Maybe seeing that redhead today had brought Maggie to the forefront of his mind. Maybe he’d never forgiven himself for acting like a spoiled brat that last morning with her. Maybe, on some level he couldn’t quite name, he needed to clear the air with her.

And he suddenly realized that he wanted to see her. He wanted to explain why he’d blown up at her and how wrong he’d been. He didn’t want this hanging over his head for the rest of his life, but unless she sought him out or they just happened to cross paths accidentally, there was nothing he could do but learn from the experience.

He didn't want to restart their relationship. But he didn't want her to hate him, either.

Half a world away, then:

Captain Thomas Lee addressed one of his recently-arrived subordinates. "Specialist Lane, are you ready for a combat mission?"

"Yes, sir! Ready and eager, sir, just like the last five times."

The captain shook his head. "Most of those missions were basically sentry duty, not much more than babysitting, but you did a good job spotting those infiltrators last week. Probably saved some lives."

The specialist straightened even more. "Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me yet. Some of these guys think I'm nuts to send a woman on a combat patrol, but I know you can do the job. You'll also be the field medic on this mission, so don't forget your medical kit."

"Yes sir!"

"Report to Staff Sergeant Yost at oh-nine hundred hours. You're dismissed."

Lane stepped back and nodded. "Yes sir!"

Captain Lee would have smiled had he been alone. Army brass had saddled him with the first women to be assigned to duty in a hot fire zone, and Lane seemed to be the best of the three. She'd already learned not to risk his life by saluting him where the enemy might see them, and he knew she was not only an expert shot with an M-16, she kept her weapon in fighting shape at all times and didn't waste ammo.

On her first day with his unit, just two months earlier, he'd tested her. "Specialist Lane," he'd demanded, "are you a practice target for the enemy, a token uniformed chick, or a real soldier?"

"Only one way to find out, sir," she'd replied with a straight face.

"Can you follow orders, Lane?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then you can sit sentry on the north wall from ten tonight to four in the morning. Got it?"

"Yes, sir, sentry duty, north wall, from twenty-two-hundred to oh-four-hundred."

"Good. Report to Corporal Zane for the rest of your briefing at twenty-one-hundred hours. You have six hours to unpack and settle in."

"Yes, sir!"

Zane had been impressed, too. She'd followed his instructions and asked intelligent questions. She hadn't raised her voice or shot at ghosts her entire shift. All that was lacking was seeing her in an actual firefight.

Sixteen nights later she'd passed that test with flying colors.

A force of perhaps twenty enemy combatants had rushed the wall she'd been guarding just after midnight. The recon patrol had reported no bodies in front of her position – there weren't any bodies to find, at least – but there had been nine small bloodstains further out. None of the infiltrators had gotten closer to her position than sixty meters. She wasn't the only one shooting back, of course, but she'd more than held her own without flinching.

And she'd only touched off twenty-four rounds, all on single-shot semi-automatic, slipping left or right after each short flurry of shots she'd fired. She was nearly as accurate as Annie Oakley and as deadly as John Wesley Hardin. Some of the others had called her Calamity Jane – but only once per man and then never to her face after that first time. He thought she was privately pleased with the nickname, but with Lane you could never be completely certain.

Captain Lee was happy he had Lane as a Specialist on his fire team, but not everyone else felt the same way. Despite a total of two years and eight months service time and all the accolades a non-commissioned officer could earn serving in a peace zone, she

was still earning the grudging acceptance, if not the respect, of her peers.

It was time to find out what she was really made of.

Lois didn't much care for the current mission.

Specialist Lane walked behind the Humvee, her rifle held at the ready and her eyes sweeping the right side of their formation. They'd received reports of a concentration of insurgents armed with RPGs and heavy automatic weapons lining their main supply route, and Lieutenant McAllister, the officer in charge of the column, didn't like that. The two armed and armored vehicles were tasked to clear the route and escort a supply convoy back to their headquarters in the fire zone.

It was not a popular assignment. They'd be moving slowly, a target for both IEDs and heavy weapons for nearly two miles each way. The three women in the detail were rumored to be special targets for the insurgents, who preferred that their own women not know how to drive so much as a moped, much less wield automatic weapons – they might take it into their heads to shoot the men who treated them like disposable personal possessions. And McAllister's request for a relief detail on the return trip was refused by the colonel in charge of personnel assignments. The only positive point was that they would exchange their Humvees for a pair upgraded with extra armor and armed with paired .50-caliber flexible mounts over the cabin instead of a single mounted .223-caliber M-249 SAW at the terminus of the patrol.

The journey going out was quiet. They swapped their older vehicles for the newer up-armored and more heavily armed ones. The walking details would flip sides and return down the same side of the street they'd traveled to meet the supply mission. Theoretically, it would give them a better chance to notice something threatening that wasn't there before.

Lane had walked the left side going out. Now she walked the right side coming back, both times beside the second Humvee.

And she was the first one to see the muzzle of the grenade launcher peek over the top of the building across the street from her as her Humvee drew even with it.

"Hostiles at nine o'clock high!" she shouted. Her M-16 muzzle swung up to fire at the threat as her safety flicked to the "off" position. She saw a man's head and body raise up and point the launcher at the Humvee beside her.

She pressed the butt plate of her rifle to her shoulder and touched off four rounds.

The body above the side of the roof went slack and fell backward. The weapon fell three stories to the street below and broke into several pieces.

And a hail of lead appeared from all around them.

Lane threw herself against the side of the Humvee and found another target, this one a machine gun on a bipod. She flicked another switch that put her weapon in three-round burst mode and raked the gun with a dozen more rounds. Both the gunner and the loader on that weapon fell to the ground and lay still.

She felt rather than saw or heard automatic weapon fire beat a drum solo against the roof of the Humvee. As she spun to check for wounded inside the vehicle, the soldier directly behind the Humvee cried out and fell forward. Lane opened the rear door to the Humvee and ran to the wounded soldier.

It was PFC Sarah Ferguson. She'd been hit in the back of both legs with what appeared to be AK47 rounds. Lane grabbed her by the collar with her left hand and dragged her into the Humvee as she simultaneously wielded her M-16 like a pistol with her right hand. Lane's weapon ran dry as she reached the rear door and pulled PFC Ferguson inside.

She looked up and saw the .50-cal gunner on the floor of the vehicle, his right hand putting pressure on his left upper arm.

Lane dropped her rifle and stepped into the gunner's frame, swiveled it to the rear, then opened up on their attackers. The big

slugs chewed holes through the concrete blocks behind which another bipod-mounted machine gun spat fire at them. The smaller machine gun went silent. Then Lane laid down covering fire on both sides of the street as their driver shifted to the far right side. She ignored the storm of fire from the other Humvee which ripped past her right shoulder and tore into the insurgents on the opposite side of the street. Her own guns traversed right and up and hit three other grenade launcher teams before they could fire on the column.

Someone slapped her on the leg and yelled, "I got the fifties!" Lane let go with one more short burst, then slipped out of the harness and went to work on Ferguson's legs. There was a lot of blood, but the bandages cut the flow down to a trickle by the time Lane switched to treat the original gunner with the arm wound. She bandaged it quickly and professionally, then patted him on the leg. "You'll need some doctor work, Corporal, but you'll be fine."

Corporal McKenzie – just a boy, really, given his still-childish appearance – nodded and relaxed as the morphine ampule kicked in. "Great. How's Sarah?"

Lane glanced at the other woman and wiped her face with one hand. "The surgeons will probably take her first, but I think she'll be fine. You just worry about you, okay?"

McKenzie nodded again, then lowered his head onto the Humvee's deck. "Good," he said. "Good."

Lois hoped she hadn't just lied to the young man.

Now:

Lois lurched up out of the half-dream half-memory with an audible grunt and found herself on Cat's couch, her legs and abdomen covered with Cat's favorite afghan. Sarah Ferguson had survived the journey back to the compound, the emergency surgeons there had performed a minor miracle in saving both of her legs and had promised that she'd walk again. And the evac chopper had flown her to the staging area where she was airlifted to Germany for more treatment and a lot of physical therapy.

Lois had always been sad that Sarah had been shot, but if she had to get hit, Lois was glad that it had been before she'd suffered her own wounds, the ones that had prematurely ended an eight-year-enlistment – maybe even a full twenty-year career – and sent her to follow in Sarah's wobbly footsteps. Sarah had been nominated for, and received, a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star, and the press coverage she'd received for being the first woman in the theater of operations to receive those honors took the edge off Lois' coverage – another reason Lois was grateful to Sarah. The medals for the two women had been rushed through the approval process in less time than their respective flights to Germany had taken.

Lois was glad she'd awakened before dreaming about her own Purple Heart. And about the Silver Star she'd received from her wheelchair. Remembering the details of that action always robbed her of sleep and put her in a foul mood all the next day.

Not that the dream she'd had was a bed of roses.

Her knee was aching from being in a bad position all night, and she knew from experience that her leg wouldn't really loosen up until after lunch. After awakening from the dream on someone else's couch, she wasn't up to being Mary Poppins just yet. It didn't help that Cat blew into the living room just twenty seconds later and abruptly announced, "Perry's called a brief staff meeting at eight-thirty to introduce the new—"

Cat froze in mid-step just inside the living room doorway. Her voice locked up on her and she went silent. Lois blinked, sighed, and reset the safety on her pistol. "Cat, one of these days I'm going to shoot you by accident and you won't be there to help me hide the body. Please stop sneaking up on me."

Cat released the breath she'd held since not finishing her sentence. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I don't know anyone else in Metropolis who draws her gun – sorry, her weapon – that fast

and without sufficient provocation."

"You snuck up on me." The Beretta slid back into Lois' purse holster. "That's sufficient provocation in my book."

"I didn't mean to sneak."

"I know." Lois leaned over and put her head in her hands. "I had the dream again. Not the really bad one, just the bad-enough one. It always puts me in a foul state of mind."

"You're forgiven. Besides, you listened to everything I told you about Clark last night."

"Yeah, well, despite your well-developed urban stealth mode, you're one of the very few people who will listen to me and be patient with my John Wesley Hardin impersonations."

"You want some breakfast? I have cantaloupe. Wasn't Hardin the guy who went to the OK Corral with Bat Masterson?"

Lois rolled her head and gave Cat a long-suffering wounded look. "You do that on purpose, don't you?"

Her face angelic and perfectly calm, Cat asked, "Do what on purpose?"

"You know very well 'what.' Scrambling Western history, wench. The Earp brothers and Doc Holliday went to the OK Corral to arrest the Clanton family and supporters for illegally carrying weapons in town and it turned into a bloodbath. Masterson was nowhere near Tombstone that whole month.

Hardin – who was also not in Tombstone then – was the guy who was supposed to have shot forty men, one for snoring too loudly."

Cat handed Lois a bowl with half a cantaloupe in it. "Did that really happen?"

Lois took a bite and chewed, then swallowed. "Hardin? I don't know. He was a stone-cold killer, but whether or not that's true is anyone's opinion. I guess when the legend gets bigger than the truth, you print the legend."

"Ha! Don't let Perry hear you say that."

"Or the new guy. Speaking of whom, is Clark the new guy Perry's introducing at such an unhealthy hour?"

Cat sipped a glass of orange juice. "Perry didn't tell me, but given what you said about his audition story and how eager he was, I don't know who else it could be. We haven't exactly been inundated with qualified applicants."

"That's because Perry expects the rookies to know a lot more than how to give their Pulitzer acceptance speeches. Me, I just hope he takes direction well and doesn't call you Mags in front of Ralph. All that idiot needs is another nickname for you so he can make it sound dirty somehow."

Lois checked her watch. She'd seen Cat slip into the supply room a few minutes before, so the plan to put Clark in there with her hadn't changed. Lois would be there too – with her Beretta. Just in case.

At eight-twenty-nine, Perry walked onto the bullpen floor and lifted both hands. "Hey. Hey! Listen up, people! I said LISTEN UP!"

The room noise finally faded into the background. Perry lowered his arms and waved for a guy most of the crew had never seen to step up beside him. "I know we're all busy, so I'll make this quick. Our newest member of the Daily Planet is – drum roll, please."

A young man with floppy teen-aged hair did a quick paraddle with his hands on the desk beside him, including sound effects, and finished with a cymbal crash. Clark smiled wide as Perry continued. "The author of the feature story about the Sarah Bernhardt Theater demolition, which we published in this morning's edition, is this solid young man standing beside me. His name is Clark Kent, and he's the newest member of our news crew."

Polite applause from most of the men and enthusiastic applause from most of the women burst out, the latter continuing until Perry gestured for it to cease. "Okay, okay, that's enough.

We're gonna throw him in the deep end of the pool and see if he can tread water, so don't any of you hand him an anchor. Uh – you can swim, can't you, Kent?"

Clark nodded and put one hand in his pants pocket and grinned as if he were about to grab a stalk of wheat to chew. "Like a fish, Perry."

Most of the group laughed. "That's good. Y'all come by and welcome him to our little family, and if he asks a reasonable question, you give him a reasonable answer. Can I get at least that level of cooperation from you sharks?"

More laughter. Karen called out, "At least from the lady sharks!"

Lois rolled her eyes. The comment wasn't surprising coming from Karen Wells. She'd been flirting with every man in the newsroom even before her divorce had become final almost a year before. She hoped Kent had better taste.

Apparently he did. Karen filed past him twice to shake his hand, making sure she was the last one in line the second time around. Clark deftly sidestepped her touch to his shoulder and slipped away from her grip, then turned and headed toward Jimmy's desk.

Lois stepped in front of him. "You're Clark Kent."

He smiled and nodded. "Guilty as charged, ma'am."

"The name is Lois Lane, Kent. Come with me."

She spun on her heel and began marching toward the supply room. Kent caught up and said at a volume only she could have heard, "Old injury or recent one?"

That was when Lois realized she was still limping slightly, her damaged knee still unwilling to stretch out to its full extension. Over her shoulder she muttered, "Old one. The damage is permanent but manageable."

He waited a couple of steps before muttering back. "You know I'm not a physical therapist, right?"

"I don't need you for that." She stopped in front of the supply room with her hand on the doorknob. "Come in here with me."

He frowned, but with amusement. "You know, I usually don't get supplies with anyone else on my first day of the job."

"That's not why we're here."

"Ah-ha. Now you have done gone and intrigued me."

She opened the door and gestured for him to precede her. "Inside, Farm Boy."

Clark stepped into the supply room, wondering why the stunning brunette had called him "Farm Boy." Did his rural upbringing show through that much? Was there straw in his waistband or stuck behind his ear? Had his syntax betrayed him?

Then he saw the tall redhead across the room and stopped thinking.

Maggie.

"Hi, Clark. How have you been?"

"Uh—"

He felt Lois' hand in the middle of his back and allowed her to push him forward a couple of steps. "Use your words, Farmer Brown," she snapped out.

The door closed behind them. Maggie stood stock-still, obviously waiting for him to say or do something. The problem was, he didn't know what to say or do. It was difficult for him to remember to breathe.

She looked good, really good. The years had been kind to her. She'd graduated from jeans, sweatshirt, ponytail, and sneakers to a stylish blouse-skirt combo with her red hair worn long and straight and no gray that he could see at a glance. And she was still as slender and shapely as the last time he'd seen her.

The redhead smiled tentatively and stepped closer, her velvet-soft voice barely reaching him. "Clark? Please say something. I need to know you'll let me explain what happened back at Met U."

Met U. Of course, he thought. She'd finally found him and – no, that made no sense. The brunette, Lois, worked here. Maybe Lois had found out Clark had been hired and had brought Maggie in to – no, that didn't track either.

He finally managed, "You're – you look good, Mags."

She shook her head. "That's part of what I tried to tell you that morning. My real name has never been Margaret Mayfield. It's Catharine Grant. I was undercover from the Daily Planet, looking for hard evidence of that escort ring you and I busted. Did you ever see the story in print?"

His brain was starting to come back on line, trying to process this new data. "Uh – no, I didn't. I guess that's why I – why you've always been Maggie in my memory." After a long moment, he added, "I'm sorry."

She tried to smile at him. "That's okay. You can look it up in the digital archives if you want to. I think Jimmy and Jack have managed to get to those issues. Anything from 1983 or earlier is going to stay on microfiche, though."

"No, I meant – the 'I'm sorry' was for the way I acted that day. I was wrong and it's bothered me ever since then." He took a tentative half-step toward her. When she didn't back away, he took another, close enough to touch her but not so close as to make her feel trapped. "I want to apologize right now for being such a moronic jerk that day. And I don't expect anything from back then to continue now. If you'll forgive me, I'd like to go kinda slow and have us try to become friends. How does that sound?"

Maggie's face – no, Catharine's face, he insisted to himself, have to remember that – relaxed visibly. "That's what I want, too. Lois and I both hope you'll be an asset to the Planet, and everything will be better if we're not suppressing anger or resentment against each other. Oh, Lois, he's doing fine! Put it away!"

Clark looked over his shoulder to see Lois slide a semi-auto pistol into her purse. "You're prepared for just about anything, aren't you, Miss Lane?"

She adjusted the purse strap and locked eyes with him. "Just call me Lois, and yes, I'm ready for just about anything." Her hand caressed her purse. "Don't make me think I made a bad call with you, Kent. Cat's my best friend, and as far as I'm concerned, you're just cannon fodder."

Clark stared for a moment, then turned back to Cat and asked, "She always like this?"

Cat shook her head without breaking eye contact. "Oh, no. This is one of her good days."

A half-smile crept onto his face. "Then I'll be careful."

Cat – or Catharine – giggled in the pixie manner he'd once loved so much. "Thank you, Clark. Will you – will you shake my hand?"

She put out those long fingers, still thin and soft and supple. "Of course," he said as he took her hand in both of his. "To a new friendship."

Cat's expression somehow conveyed relief and slight sadness at the same time. "To the beginning of a beautiful new friendship."

Her hands still felt good. But there was no spark between them, only a wisp of smoke wafting toward the ceiling. Maybe that's why there was a sad component to her expression.

Maybe that's why he felt that same slight sadness, a regret for what might have been but would almost surely never be now.

Their hands parted and he felt the need to ask what she wanted him to call her. "Uh – I'm guessing that calling you Margaret or any derivative of it isn't how I should address you."

"No, please, that's a bad association for me. Just call me Catharine for now. If that's okay, of course."

"It's your name, Catharine. I'll call you whatever you want me to."

"Catharine works for me. Maybe later you can call me Cat." She smiled again and he was once again reminded of that night.

Then she straightened and her eyes twinkled. “Hey, we need to get to work before Perry gets upset with all three of us.”

He stepped to the side and extended his arm toward the door. “I will follow you ladies and your lead. For now, at least.”

Chapter Three

Cat and Lois climbed into Cat’s Porsche and pointed it toward the EPRAD maintenance facilities. Ever since the shuttle had caught fire and burned on the launch pad five days earlier during an engine test, Lois had insisted that the slightly crazy Samuel Platt was more right than anyone would admit. Cat wasn’t as certain, but she did agree that there was probably a real story there somewhere. Just what it was, though, was drifting out of reach in the fuzzy fog of speculation.

Cat expertly spun the steering wheel and accelerated down the interstate. “Tell me again what Captain Letterman told you about Platt’s warning.”

“Hasn’t changed in the last week.”

“Please, refresh my memory. I don’t want to ask any stupid questions if I can avoid them.”

Lois sighed. “Fine. Letterman said that Platt came to him about five AM the morning of the engine test and warned him that the shuttle would catch fire at about thirty percent power. Letterman told him that the coolant bands wouldn’t let that happen, that it would take a static application of over seventy percent power to generate that much heat. Platt insisted that the shuttle was a deathtrap because the coolant bands weren’t installed correctly, that they’d retain the engine heat instead of conducting it away from the fuel tanks. Letterman sent Platt on his way, but got cold feet about being in the shuttle during the test and convinced the crew to stay on the ground with him while they ran the test using the remote controls. They did, the shuttle burned, and Platt gave me a copy of his notes to back up his story.”

“Which you can’t read because they’re basically gibberish.”

“The data is in those notes, Cat. I know it is. I had Jimmy take copies of them to a buddy of his at STAR Labs. They’ll back us up.”

Cat took the exit next to the EPRAD base and frowned. “I sure hope so. Assuming they can make some sense out of them.”

“I bet we get something from the project director. His name is Anthony Baines, isn’t it?”

“He’s not a he, he’s a she, and her name is Antoinette. Supposed to be a tough nut to crack.”

“I know I can—”

“No, Lois, you let me do the talking. She responds well to men or friendly women.”

“I can be friendly!”

“Only with a live grenade in your hand. See the sign? Government facility, no weapons allowed. You’ll have to deposit your firearm with the security officers at the entrance.”

Lois crossed her arms and huffed. “I won’t give it to them.”

Cat slowly reduced their speed as they approached the plant entrance. “I’m pretty sure they have your picture on the wall of the front gate shack from the last time you were armed and tried to enter the facility. They won’t let you in if you’re carrying your Beretta. Now be a good civilian and surrender your weapon. You’ll get it back when we leave.”

“I’m not carrying the Beretta.”

“Whatever weapon you have with you, then. I’m sure there aren’t any snipers on the grounds anywhere.”

“I sure hope not.”

“I doubt that we have any real cause to worry.” Cat pulled into a parking space and turned off the engine. “And if we hit a brick wall with Baines, I’ll let you take a crack at her. I’m pretty certain you could take her bare-handed.”

The gorilla at the front gate reluctantly handed Cat and Lois

over to EPRAD senior director Toni Baines just inside the fence line. The blonde with the plastic smile led the reporters to a small interview room beside her office and seated the two women. “Are either of you ladies thirsty? We have a plentiful assortment of carbonated beverages, or I can have some ice water brought in for you.”

Cat and Lois exchanged a glance, then Cat replied, “No, we’re both good, Dr. Baines. We’d just like to get this interview over with. We know you’re quite busy.”

The doctor’s return smile encompassed both women but focused on Cat. “In that case, ladies, let’s begin.”

Cat led out in the interview. “Dr. Baines, is it true that Captain Letterman was threatened with termination from the shuttle team and expulsion from the space program for refusing to board the shuttle for that last test?”

Baines’ smile made Lois want to drop her pen and notebook so she could reach for her weapon – which she had been forced to check at the main gate. “Ms. Grant, even if you were later justified by your actions, would your boss not be upset at you if you refused an assignment?”

“Are you admitting that Captain Letterman was disciplined for his actions?”

Baines’ smile dimmed slightly. “I am admitting nothing because there’s nothing to admit. Captain Neil Letterman was not fired, suspended, grounded, or reassigned. He will pilot the colonists’ transport when it launches for rendezvous with the space station next week.”

“Is there a similar danger of fire in the transport?”

“No, there’s no danger.”

“Don’t the shuttle and the transport use the same engine design, which would include the same engine flaw or flaws which caused the shuttle fire?”

The blonde’s smile vanished, then was obviously forced to return to her face. “That’s why we have the backup shuttle and its booster engines in our hanger, undergoing a full and complete inspection. The next time the shuttle launches – and when the transport launches – there will be no danger of fire, either on the launch pad or during the flight.”

“So what you’re saying now is that you did a static engine test on a flawed shuttle which you knew carried a dangerous fire risk?”

“No! I’m not saying anything like that!” Baines visibly forced herself to relax. “Please don’t put words in my mouth and then accuse me of being negligent.”

“Actually,” Lois said, “my associate was asking whether you were deliberately sabotaging the project or just criminally incompetent.”

Baines leaped to her feet and snarled, “This interview is over! I’ll have security escort you out. Ms. – Lane, is it?” Lois nodded silently. “Your weapon – which you do not need and will never need while at any EPRAD facility – will be returned to you outside the grounds. And the next time you come here, I strongly suggest that you leave your insinuations and slanders in your own office!”

They stood to follow Baines out the door. As they approached the hallway, Lois pulled her hair back above her ear on one side and tapped her earlobe to indicate that there might be a listening device in the car or on one of them. Cat saw it and licked her lips, which was their silent code for “message received.”

The stern-faced guard took back their visitors’ passes, gave Lois her weapon, and opened the gate for them. They were in the parking lot, about halfway to Cat’s Porsche, when Lois asked, “You want to go to lunch now or after the helicopter ride over the facility?”

Cat cut her eyes Lois’ way. They certainly did not have a copter ride planned, so Lois was still concerned about listening ears. “Let’s have an early lunch,” she said. “I can tolerate those low passes better when there’s something in my tummy.”

“Okay.” She hefted her weapon – which was her backup pistol, a .40-cal Glock Model 23 – and frowned at it. Cat tilted her head in a silent query, but Lois gave her back a tiny shake which meant that they’d talk about it later.

Lois climbed into the passenger seat and laid the weapon in her lap. Cat fired up the engine and put some rubber on the asphalt as they left.

Over the engine and wind noise, Lois shouted, “I think I need to go to the range and run a box of ammo through this weapon. You want to come with?”

Cat grinned back. “Sure. How about this evening after work? I’m free.”

“You’re free? You, the social butterfly?” She dropped the magazine into her hand and worked the slide to release the round in the chamber.

“Tuesday is not usually a great date night.”

Lois’s left hand pushed the cartridges from the fifteen-round magazine into her lap. “True. You want to rent a Colt Model 29 revolver like you did last time?”

“Ha! No way. That forty-four Magnum nearly broke my wrist and dislocated my shoulder. I’ll stick to my Smith & Wesson nine-millimeter, if you please.”

“Yeah, that .44 Mag is a whale of a cartridge.”

“You told me you can stop a car with it and I believe it.”

Lois moved one cartridge to her pocket and began loading the rest back into the magazine. “You can, but if the guys inside are armed or if the car’s full of C4 or Semtex, you want your sniper with the .50-caliber Barrett to hit it from a thousand yards away. You can’t shoot C4 and blow it up, but you can shoot the detonator and trigger it indirectly. A car full of explosives and ball bearings is like a really big shotgun, or a Civil War-era muzzle loading cannon firing grapeshot. It vaporizes people.”

“Yech. Lois, can we talk about something more pleasant? Like Ralph?”

They laughed together as they pulled into the nearest Denny’s parking lot.

Baines frowned at the technician, whose name she didn’t know or care to remember. “You mean they’re just talking about target shooting?”

The man shook his head and pulled his headphones back from his ears. “Shooting guns at a range and going to lunch. Not even gossiping about men.”

“What about the helicopter they mentioned?”

The man frowned. “I can’t be sure, of course, but I think they know we’re listening to them. The chopper probably doesn’t exist. And if they fire the round with the transmitter inside, it’ll disintegrate on impact. All we’d need to do then is send someone to retrieve the relay from under the car and no one will ever know about it.”

Baines crossed her arms and walked slowly around the room, thinking hard. She didn’t like the solution – mainly because they’d gained no real advantage by risking use of this new technology – but she also couldn’t see the downside of doing as the man suggested.

She turned to see him watching her. She nodded at him and said, “Shut down the bug and retrieve the relay. Make it happen.” “Yes, ma’am.”

At lunch, Lois held the round from her weapon up for Cat to see, then said, “Did you know that British scientist Michael Faraday is partly responsible for the invention of the solid-body electric guitar?”

More misdirection. Cat wanted the whole story now, not just little dribs and drabs delivered between the cracks of their cover discussion. But she still shook her head and asked, “How is that possible? I thought he lived in the early nineteenth century.”

“He did. But he theorized – and then proved – that if you passed a metal wire through a magnetic field and vibrated it, the changing magnetic field would produce a low-level electric current. That’s how guitar pickups work. The magnetic field from the pickup generates a low-level signal when the string is vibrated —” without stopping her narrative, she reached out and dropped the round into her glass of water “—and that should take care of that quite effectively.”

“Okay to talk?” Cat whispered.

“Sure. Our bug is drowning as we speak.”

“Finally. First of all, how do you know which bullet held the bug?”

“Well, first, the brass was a little too shiny for the make of ammo I use. And the round itself wasn’t balanced like the real ones. Plus there’s less powder in it. If I had fired it, it probably would have sounded and acted like a partial misfire or a slow detonation. And the projectile, which is where the mini transmitter is, would be destroyed. The big clue is that the weapon is a .40-cal and the cartridge is a nine-millimeter. If I had tried to fire it, best case is that the weapon wouldn’t have discharged. The cartridge wouldn’t quite fit in the breech.” She lifted her glass and swirled the round at the bottom. “I’ll help Jimmy disassemble it and let him try to track down the manufacturer, but I suspect it’s either a custom job or something someone very technical built just for this kind of thing.” She lifted her tea spoon and fished the cartridge out.

Cat frowned, thinking. “There can’t be that many places where you could get the parts for one of those. I mean, it’s not going to be hanging from a wall peg at Spies ‘R’ Us.”

“No. There’s LuthorTech, STAR Labs, the NSA, and maybe EPRAD.”

“What about that place where Jimmy’s dad works?”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot about the NIA. I’ll see if Jimmy has any contacts there. You know he doesn’t get along with his dad all that well.”

Cat grinned. “Why not have Jimmy pitch it to his dad as the beginning of a beautiful friendship?”

Lois grinned back. “That just might work. You know, you’re pretty good with the people stuff. Lots better than I am.”

Cat picked up her tea and held it in front of her. “And you’re really good with the hardware I don’t know much about. I didn’t even think about the possibility of a bug in your weapon until you pulled the magazine.”

Lois lifted her tea and reached to tap Cat’s glass. “To a continuingly productive symbiotic relationship.”

“Hear, hear.”

Jimmy checked his camera and decided he had enough shots for Perry to choose from. He turned and saw the new guy flipping through his notebook, apparently making the same decision. He’d done a good job covering the opening of the new shopping mall.

“Mr. Kent?” Jimmy called out. “You about ready to go?”

“Sure, Jim,” the new guy answered. “Just some last-minute checking. I want to make sure I have everything I need.”

“You got today’s date, of course.”

“Of course.”

“The number of stores already moved in and the names of the major ones?”

“Check and check.”

“The date the parking structure is supposed to be open for business?”

“Contractor says next Tuesday. We’ll see.”

“Quotes from store managers and excited customers?”

“Five of the first, eleven of the second.”

Jimmy nodded. “Sounds to me like you have it surrounded, Mr. Kent. You just need to write it up and hand it in.”

“Thanks. Hey, you know, I think our relationship would work

more smoothly if we were both on a first-name basis, not just me.”

Jimmy smiled. “Sounds fine to me. Mind if I call you CK instead of Clark?”

“Why CK?”

“Because those are your initials and because if someone leaves a note for CK on your desk you’ll know it was me. Besides, ‘Clark’ sounds a little bit dorky, and if anyone’s a dork, it’s not you.”

CK smiled back. “That sounds like a plan to me, Jim. Hey, is Jim okay or do you prefer JO?”

“Just ‘Jimmy’ if you don’t mind. Call me JO and it sounds like you’re spelling—”

“Help! Help us, somebody!”

The cry cut across the chaos on the ground floor. Both men snapped their eyes around to find the source of the cry, but by the time Jimmy lifted his camera to take the shot, CK was up on the mezzanine level holding to the leg of one boy of about ten and leaning out across the bannister to grab the other boy’s arm. They seemed to be about the same age, so their parents were probably nearby. Jimmy lowered his lens and took six quick crowd shots, then returned his and his camera’s focus to the panicked boys above him, still marveling at how quickly his new friend had moved.

He was surprised to see Clark leaning further out than Jimmy would have believed possible, one hand locked on each boy. Then he realized that two other men were holding CK still, one on his leg and one with a death grip on his suit coat. Together they rolled Clark back over the bannister, pulling the two boys with him. When the boys were both safe and wrapped up in what he assumed were their mothers’ embraces, Jimmy took three more crowd shots of the applause on the lower floor and emptied his film roll with five more of the two men holding CK’s hands with one arm each and hugging their families with the other. Clark seemed almost embarrassed by the attention, especially when one woman shoved the boy she was holding into the closest man’s arms and reached up to hug Clark.

As quickly as he could, Jimmy dropped in a fresh roll of film and took several more shots of the crowd above and below applauding Clark enthusiastically. Then he bounded up the escalator as quickly as the people-traffic jam would allow.

When he got within earshot of the kids and the adults he assumed were their parents, he heard one man say, “Sir, that was fantastic! You saved my son’s life. Let me do something for you.”

“Oh, no, that’s not necessary.”

“But it is! Here.” He fished a business card out of his shirt pocket and handed it to Clark. “I hope you can use this.”

The other man grinned and said, “Free advertising, Wally?”

The first man reached up and put his arm around Clark’s shoulders. “A ‘thank-you’ for a job well done, Press. He deserves it.”

Clark read the card and burst into laughter. “Thank you! Our newsroom practically runs on coffee and doughnuts, so someone will definitely be in contact with you soon.”

Press tilted his head to one side. “You’re a reporter?”

Clark nodded. “My photographer and I were here to cover the mall opening, and I’m glad we were.” He reached out and tousled both boys’ hair. “Now they’ll have a chance to find some other place to risk getting hurt.”

Wally’s boy ducked behind his mother, but Press’ son shook his head. “No, sir. No more stupid bets for us.”

Press dropped his left hand to his son’s shoulder. “We’ll have a long talk with each of them, just to make sure.” He lifted his right hand to Clark. “At least let me shake your hand, sir.”

“Of course. And the name is Clark Kent of the Daily Planet.”

Wally waited until Press released Clark’s hand, then shook it himself. “Will this be in the paper, Mr. Kent?”

“Well, it is news, and everything happened in public, so, yes.

But unless you give us explicit permission to print your names and likenesses, no one who wasn’t here will know who you are from what we use.” He looked up and pointed at Jimmy. “Isn’t that so, Jim?”

Jimmy had a choice to make. This was a public event, so it was fair game for any news outlet, including any photos where these people appeared. But Clark had just said that they wouldn’t identify them without the subject’s permission, a guarantee that Perry would not like but would stand behind.

He hesitated, then said, “That’s right. Just what CK said.”

At the puzzled expressions of the two families, Clark explained, “He calls me CK. They’re my initials, and he’s still into making up cool nicknames for people.”

Everyone but Press grinned. He laughed aloud. “Well, Mr. CK, do you want to interview us now?”

Clark smiled and nodded. “If I have everyone’s permission, yes.” He turned to the mothers. “Ladies?”

Both women smiled at him. Wally’s wife said, “You just saved my son’s life. You can ask me whatever you want to ask.”

The other woman lifted an index finger. “About this incident, mind you. I’m not discussing my sex life with you.”

Press’ son turned beet-red. “Mom! Please, not in public!”

Wally’s son shook his head and gave his own mother an exasperated huff. “How about not anywhere I can hear about it?”

Clark was a bit surprised at Jimmy’s silence during the cab ride back to the Planet. After trying to start conversations about their adventure that day and getting shut down three times, he finally asked, “What’s the matter, Jimmy? Did I do something wrong?”

Jimmy crossed his arms. “I don’t know how the chief is going to react to this.”

“To what? Me rescuing a couple of ten-year-olds?”

“The fact that you did it is fine. I mean, you couldn’t let those kids fall all that way if you could stop it. They could have been killed and you saved them. It’s just – look, reporters are supposed to report the news, not make the news. You made news today.”

Clark’s voice hardened. “There’s no way I could have done anything else. If I’m ever in that situation again or one like it, I’ll act.”

“I know, I know! And Perry won’t get mad about that – I don’t think. I don’t see how he could, anyway. But he might get mad about that promise you made not to use those folks’ names in the story.”

“I believe it should be their choice to have their names printed.”

“Yeah, well, we’re lucky they didn’t mind. Next time, though, you need to print their names unless they specifically state that they don’t want what they say on the record without you asking about it. There’s no law that says they have to tell you who they are, but what happened today is news, and the law doesn’t prevent us from printing the names of people who make the news.”

Clark sighed. “I guess it’s different in the big city.” He held up his notebook. “But won’t Perry be happy with what I write and what you photographed?”

“I’m pretty sure he’ll be thrilled. But you got lucky today. Everything worked out for the best. If something had gone wrong, though, like if one of those kids had panicked and fallen after you got there, the paper could be sued for all kinds of things. Just keep that in mind when Perry congratulates you about the story and then rips you a new one for letting your mouth write checks your job title can’t cash.”

After Perry’s quite thorough gluteus maximus-chewing, Clark sat at his desk to type up the story. The first pass was just a basic outline, and it gave him a chance to mull over what had happened and how it made him feel.

He'd saved two pre-teen boys from serious injury or possibly even death. He'd prevented their parents from agonizing over their injuries and blaming themselves. That was all to the good.

He'd also risked exposing his differences and special skills, the ones he labored to keep under wraps. He'd hazarded his job at the Planet by becoming the news instead of reporting the news. He'd put any possibility of establishing a home with close friends and a long-term place to lay his head in jeopardy. That was all to the bad.

Given the same set of circumstances, though, he knew he'd choose to save people over protecting himself. He'd done it before. Of course, that's why he'd left Borneo and the Ukraine and Bangladesh and South Africa. People had begun to look at him as if he were some other species of life-form, something that wasn't human, something to be feared or, in one case among the Aborigines of central Australia, something to be worshipped.

The choice to leave those places had been forced on him.

And he didn't want that to happen in Metropolis. He'd finally found a city he could call home, a place where he could put down roots and grow.

It was a place where he could actually belong.

The allusion to his parents' farm didn't escape him. Not only had they put down deep roots, they grew crops with deep roots that anchored them to the soil and nurtured them. Clark had never felt the love of the land that his parents knew, but he understood what it was and how much he yearned for it.

The thought both comforted him and pulled at him. How could he do both? How could he be both deeply rooted and an alien in the midst of humanity? It was almost as if he was being split in two.

Split in two—

Now that was something to consider.

The concept bounced around in his brain long enough to take root. He'd have to think about it more deeply, discuss it with his parents, and try to resolve the dilemma upon whose horns he was currently impaled.

His thoughts also distracted him from the story he was trying to write. It wasn't until his computer flashed on the screen saver that he realized how long he'd sat there with a dopey expression on his face.

His attack on the article took form quickly and was executed efficiently. Some twelve minutes later, he saved the file and sent it to the editor. Twenty-three minutes later, Perry walked out of his office wearing a satisfied smile and gave Clark a thumbs-up.

His feature had passed the editor test. Now he had time to think about the stern brunette – Lois Lane – and wonder why she'd had such an impact on him.

Chapter Four

As Cat stood up to visit the ladies' room, Jimmy hesitantly knocked on Perry's door. She wondered what that was about, but then shrugged and continued her errand. She'd learn the details later.

Cat returned to the news floor just as Clark went into Perry's office. She also saw him ten minutes later when he came out. His transformation was dramatic.

While he was otherwise occupied, she organized her notes for the next meeting with Platt, put fresh batteries in her new WayneTech digital micro-recorder, ran the daily file backup on her computer – growling about Jimmy the whole time for convincing Perry that everyone had to do it – and checked Lois' desk to see if she was coming back that evening. Lois's belief that Platt had something real on the shuttle fire had infected Cat, and she wanted to talk to him again.

Just not alone, not in that part of town, even in daylight. And since her partner was at her weekly therapist's visit, she finalized her decision to see if Clark was available. If not, it might indicate

that he still didn't trust her. If so, it would give her a chance to evaluate him, both professionally and personally.

But his shaky exit from the Chief's office might change those plans.

She sighed and stood. No time like the present to find out.

She stopped on the far side of his desk. "Hey, Clark, are you okay?"

He looked at her and leaned back in his chair. "I learned a valuable lesson this afternoon. Listen to Jimmy."

She half-grinned and nodded. "He may be a kid, but he's pretty sharp. What happened?"

He looked away. "I promised some interview subjects that I wouldn't use their names without their permission."

"Uh-oh. Were they part of the story? Did you not know that doing that was a bad thing?"

He frowned at her. "You've been talking to Jimmy? That's pretty much what he said to me, except it wasn't in the form of a question."

"Live and learn. And since you're not clearing out your desk, I assume that you're still employed here."

"I got the story. I also got chewed out. Had I not gotten the story, I assume that I would now be putting my personal items in a very small box."

"Like I said, live and learn. Um, do you want to go with me to see that EPRAD physicist? Lois can't make it today, and I've got a feeling that this is a time-critical thing."

"Time-critical, huh?" She nodded back. "Maybe a little bit dangerous, too?"

"Possible but not highly probable. It's just that I'm used to working with a partner."

"I'll go. Temporary partners, right?"

Her eyebrows drew down. "Why do you assume it's temporary?"

He shrugged and answered, "Sorry, I thought you and Lois were a fairly permanent team."

She relaxed and smiled. "We are. I'd go alone, but I'd feel better with a backup on this one."

"I can do that. Ready to go now?"

"Let me make sure it's okay with Perry. If it is, I'll follow you out the door."

Clark shoehorned himself into the passenger seat on the dinged-up brown Buick Century. "Don't you think your Porsche needs an upgrade?"

Cat snorted a laugh. "A Porsche wouldn't last ten minutes in Platt's neighborhood. It'd be stripped and up on blocks before you shut your door."

Clark couldn't help but grin back at her. "Good point. How far is Platt's place?"

"Travel time is about what it takes to get a red Corvette to the nearest chop shop."

They shared a chuckle, and he couldn't decide if their easy banter was a good thing or not. He still didn't want to be her enemy, if only because it would alienate him from Lois, but he also didn't want to get too close to her. He only knew the woman Cat had pretended to be eight years earlier, and neither one of them knew the current version of the other yet.

Friends, maybe. Lovers – not so much.

He felt a tap on his arm. "Hey, Mr. Green Jeans, we're here. If you're going to watch my six, you'll have to come in with me."

They opened the car doors and stepped out. He shook his head and said, "Sorry, I was woolgathering. And I'm supposed to watch your what?"

Their doors slammed shut at almost the same moment. "Sorry. Military term, means to check to see if anything is behind you."

"I didn't know you were in the military."

"I wasn't, but Lois was. I'll tell you about her medals

sometime when she's not around."

"The story is that fascinating?"

Cat looked off to one side for a moment, then said, "It's fascinating enough that she's seeing a shrink about how she got them. And before you ask, no, I don't know the whole story. She won't tell me about it."

Clark nodded, then said, "Then I won't bring it up with her. Platt's in apartment two-B, right?"

"Yes. Latrine two-B."

He grinned as he swept the area with his eyes. "Let me guess, Lois came up with that name."

"That's the polite version." She pushed the door open with one finger. "Dr. Platt? It's Cat Grant." No response. "Cat Grant from the Daily Planet? We're here to—"

The acrid odor, the quiet buzz and snap, the absence of life in the room, suddenly came together for him. "Cat!" he hissed. "Get back!"

"Don't be silly, you'll protect maaaaahhh!"

She lurched back against him, suddenly trembling. Clark held her upper arms and turned her to face him.

"He – he's – they – Platt – dead—"

"Shh, it's okay, it's okay."

"No!" she sobbed. "It's not okay! Platt is dead!" She took two deep breaths and let them out slowly. "He – they – it was electrocution, wasn't it?"

He looked closely at the scene, then nodded. "Yes."

She stepped closer and buried her face in his shoulder. "Oh, Clark! I can't believe it!"

"It's okay, I promise. We'll find out who did this and get justice for him."

She pushed back and glared at him with overflowing eyes. "What about his daughter?"

"What? He had a daughter?"

She turned and walked in a small circle in front of him. "Nine-year-old daughter, some kind of genetic disability that put her in a wheelchair, a wife who left him because he was trying to protect them both, research on the space station that might have fixed the girl's spinal cord. Won't happen now." She stopped in front of him. "Samuel Platt won't know about it, anyway."

"You don't know that."

She took a half-step backward and glared at him. "You're going to wake him up now? Maybe play like you're Dr. Frankenstein?"

"I believe that there's a life after this one, Cat. I believe that whatever happens to his family, he'll know about it."

"Oh, really? You think he'll be on the good side of the afterlife?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. That decision is above my pay grade. But I do believe there's an afterlife where people go."

She dashed the last of the moisture from her face and gestured at Platt's body. "Normally I'd scoff, but under the circumstances – well—"

"I understand," he almost whispered. At a normal volume, he said, "Shouldn't we call the police now?"

"Yeah. I know a detective who'll listen to us."

"Listen to us about what?"

Cat's face hardened and her hands clenched into fists. "Some people will say this was suicide. It wasn't. It was murder."

Henderson shook his head at Cat, whose frustration was mounting by the second. "You're telling me that you think Samuel Platt made these elaborate preparations just to off himself?" she fumed. "I don't believe what I'm hearing from you!"

The only thing the police had done so far was to unplug the wire Platt had held. The medical examiner was still taking measurements and pictures, and other officers were taking notes on the contents of the room and its general condition.

Henderson sighed and pointed at the body in the chair. "That man was a scientist, a really smart guy. His specialty was designing and installing the electrical connections between the space shuttle and the space station. He'd forgotten more about electricity and electronics than you and I together ever knew."

"He was murdered, Bill! And I can prove it!"

One of the officers taking notes chortled, then said, "Hey, if this dude was gonna barbecue himself, at least he coulda brought some sauce."

Two other officers chuckled and a third smiled. Then Clark stunned Cat by leaning into the first cop's face and growling, "That man was not just a sack of meat. He was a husband and a father, a man who people loved and who are going to miss him terribly for the rest of their lives. I strongly suggest you remember who these victims are and that you speak of the dead with respect from now on."

The silence that suddenly enveloped the room was broken a few seconds later when an EMT stuck her head through the doorway. "Detective, you guys about done here? We need to get this man to the coroner's office."

Cat turned and glared at her. "You guys doing an autopsy?"

She nodded. "Yes, ma'am, the law requires it for suicides or suspected homicides."

"Oh, this was definitely a homicide."

Henderson frowned at her. "That's not your call, Grant."

"You don't think so? Like I told you, I can prove it right now."

"If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, quacks like a duck, it's not an armadillo."

Cat half-grinned at him. "This is a homicide duck, Bill. I can prove it now and save you some embarrassment or I can make you look stupid in print."

Henderson added a frustrated hand-lift to his frown. "Fine! You have two minutes to prove your assertion before we take the body and write this up as a suicide."

She looked around and pointed to a chair across the room. "Can Clark sit there?"

Henderson's frown turned to puzzlement. "Yeah, sure, but I don't see what—"

"Clark, have a seat."

Clark shrugged at the detective and sat down.

Cat began describing the scene they'd found. "Okay, Clark is Platt. We have this imaginary electrical wire with a standard plug on the end. Platt pulls off his shoes and socks, then strips the insulation from the other end from the lamp cord down to bare wire and puts one strand in the bowl of water at his feet. Now the weight of the wire will pull it out of the water unless he puts his bare heel down on it. That's how we found him."

"As long as you didn't touch anything."

"We didn't, Inspector," Clark said.

Cat continued as if she hadn't been interrupted. "Second foot goes in the water. Now he grabs the other bare wire and holds it with his thumbs and forefingers."

Henderson nodded. "Sounds right so far."

Cat pointed at the wall. "Light socket would have to be about here because the wire is fairly short. Now Platt plugs in the – I see those eyebrows, Clark, I know you've figured it out, just hang on – Platt plugs the wire in and sits back to be electrocuted."

Henderson's eyes narrowed at Clark, whose eyebrows had lifted to Spock-like levels. "No. Nobody's got enough hands to do all that. He couldn't have moved with all that juice going through him. And he couldn't have plugged it in and then grabbed the wire without his body jerking all over the place. The wire's not long enough anyway. No way he would have ended up in the chair and held the wire at the same time." He turned and glared at Cat. "Leave it to a Planet reporter to show up the entire Metropolis police department."

Cat's mouth opened, but Clark's voice came out. "Inspector?"

“Yes, Mr. Bergen?”

“Ha, ha. I saw Charlie McCarthy and Edgar Bergen on the Ed Sullivan show reruns too.”

“I suppose you want to correct my conclusions also.”

Clark shook his head. “I just wanted to ask you what you were told before you got here.”

Henderson tipped his head to the right. “I got a call from the Chief of Detectives that I needed to cover a high-profile suicide, a former EPRAD employee.”

“That’s what I thought. You were led to think ‘suicide’ before you got here. It was definitely murder, and somebody’s trying to cover this up.”

“You think my boss is crooked?”

“Not necessarily. Someone might have told him that this was – quote – ‘a high-profile suicide’ – end quote – and he passed that description on to you. That doesn’t mean he came up with the description on his own.”

Henderson was quiet for a long moment, then said, “I’d like to think I would have figured it out before too long, but you’re right.” He turned to his team. “People, this is now a homicide investigation. Anybody tells you any different, you say that the verdict is still open, then come to me and tell me who told you that and how you were told. As of now, this is your only case. I’ll clear it with your precinct commanders.” He turned to Clark and said, “Kent, you’d make a good murder victim.”

He returned an exaggerated shudder. “I certainly hope not.”

“Me too, Bill,” Cat added. “He’s not quite housebroken yet.” She looked at her wristwatch and yawned. “We need to get some sleep and get this story written up for Perry in the morning.”

“Drive safely, you two. Oh, and when you write the story, just say Platt died under suspicious circumstances and the police are still investigating and we can’t comment on active cases. It’ll be safer all around.”

Cat nodded. “Clark and I understand, Bill. Don’t we, Clark?”

“Sure. We won’t disclose anything crucial until we have solid evidence that Platt was murdered.”

“You mean ‘when the police complete their investigation,’ don’t you, Kent?”

“Of course, Inspector.”

Clark guided Cat’s brown Buick against the curb and put it in Park. “You sure you want to do this? You trust me with your baby?”

Cat’s tired chuckle let him know she’d recovered from her shock. “This isn’t my baby, it’s my third cousin four times removed. The ugly one, and not the one with a good personality.”

He laughed softly. “Yeah, it’s kind of a wreck. Get some sleep, okay?”

She settled back against the passenger seat. “This feels good right here.”

He shook his head. “Don’t think so. You need to sleep in your own bed, not in the front seat of a crummy car. Do you want me to walk you to your front door?”

Her round brown eyes smiled back at him. “No, but thanks. I’m good from here.”

“I’m serious, Catharine. What floor are you on?”

“It’s a very safe building, Clark. You don’t need to treat me with kid gloves.”

His eyebrows almost came together and his voice hardened slightly. “After what we walked into tonight, I’m not taking any chances. Do you have a street view from your apartment?”

She sighed. “Yes, Daddy, my place is on the fourth floor, and I’ll wave to you from that window right there as soon as I lock my front door and turn on the light.”

“I’ll give you two minutes from the time you touch the building’s front door. Sleep fast. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She put her hand on the door handle, then paused. “Would you

talk to Lois like this?”

“Lois has military medals earned in what I assume was combat, and there’s a military-issue pistol in her purse. I’d be astounded if she weren’t an expert shot and well-versed in unarmed combat techniques. Anybody who goes after her deserves what he gets. You, on the other hand—” he reached across her and unlatched the door “—are tough and resilient, but unarmed. Now get going. And if you wait too long to signal me—”

“You’ll come charging to my rescue whether I need it or not. Fine, I’m going. You’ll pick me up at eight-thirty in the morning?”

He nodded. “I promise, provided you wait inside your apartment until you see the car. I’ll start the clock when you call my pager. Good night.”

She put one foot out, then stopped. “Clark?”

“Yes?”

“I’m really sorry all that happened and that we’re the ones who found him like that. It was hard to see, but I – I’m glad you were there with me. I felt safe.”

“Glad I could help,” he replied softly.

“I mean it. You’re making me – I guess ‘respect you’ would be a good term for it. You watched over me without putting pressure on me, and you’re still doing it. I’m impressed.” She hesitated, then said, “You’re at least as good a man as you were eight years ago. Maybe better.”

He gave her a half-smile. “Good night, Catharine.”

She smiled back, then slipped out and used her card key to enter her building. In less than two minutes, her light came on and she waved through the window at him.

Cat double-checked her lock and turned off the living room light. The night light in the bathroom, plugged in for just this kind of thing, enabled her to dodge her furniture and find the bedroom.

She smiled to herself and shook her head. Clark was such a Boy Scout. She was sure that if he hadn’t seen her at the window, he would’ve burst into her apartment ready to take on a team of Navy Seals to protect her.

The prospect didn’t irritate her like she’d thought it might. In fact, it might be nice to be watched over by Clark Kent.

She wondered if he thought about watching over her – and if the thought irritated him.

Dana Friskin saw a number of combat veterans in her practice, but in her experience Lois Lane was unique. She’d been awarded some high-profile recognition due to her service and sacrifice, and her company commander had actually recommended her for the Medal of Honor. Dana didn’t know if Lois’ brief combat time had tipped the scales toward a Silver Star and away from the higher award or if politics was somehow involved, but one quality Lois shared with most other vets was her sure and certain conviction that she was no hero, that all she’d done was her job, and that others were far more deserving of such accolades.

One thing that Lois didn’t share with other vets was her insistence on being armed at all times, whether in the city or in the suburbs or on the vanishingly rare occasions when she visited rural New Troy. Despite Lois’ control of her weapon and her apparent reluctance to use it, Dana worried that Lois would one day shoot someone she would regret shooting. Most returning vets didn’t even want to be in the same room as any firearm.

Still, Lois seemed to be making progress. She was far less likely to throw someone into a wall than she had been when their sessions began, and as far as Dana knew she hadn’t pointed her pistol at anyone for several weeks. The local homicide detectives were glad, too, since she was also less likely to kill anyone.

Of course, one bad experience could flush all the progress they’d made together in a moment if Lois wasn’t careful.

“Thank you for seeing me this early in the day, Dr. Friskin.”

“It’s not a bother or a problem, Lois. In fact, I’m glad we’re

having this session now instead of later. I have a late afternoon meeting scheduled with the Metropolitan Police Department, and I was chewing my fingernails off up to the elbow trying to figure out how to fit it into my schedule.”

Lois smiled. “Then I’m glad I was able to accommodate you.”

“Good. What do you want to talk about today?”

“I’m feeling pretty good right now. I think you should pick the subject.”

“If that’s what you want, okay. I understand that there’s a new reporter working with you.”

“What? How did you hear about him?”

“A good therapist never reveals her sources.”

“Very funny, Doc. Anyway, there is a new guy in the newsroom, and he seems to know what he’s doing. He has a lot of credits from out-of-the-way places around the world, and according to Cat he’s matured quite a bit.”

Dana frowned in surprise. “Cat already knew him? Is that how he got the job?”

Lois’ expression went flat. “No. Uh, I probably shouldn’t tell you too much about that – but you do need some context. Cat and Clark met on her first undercover assignment when she was new to the paper. She – um – they got more involved than they should have and Clark got mad and walked out when he found out she was already a reporter. He thought they were working on a story for the school paper, not the Daily Planet, and I guess he thought she was just using him to further her career. He disappeared and they lost touch, and they just accidentally reconnected in the last week. And as far as I know, neither one is without blame in the ‘losing touch’ sweepstakes.”

Dana smiled and nodded but didn’t say anything. It was an effective technique to get more information out of a reluctant subject, since most people felt the urge to continue the story or give more detail.

But Lois knew that little trick. She sat on the edge of the couch, waiting for Dana, who finally decided she had everything she was going to get on the subject. “Okay, Lois, I think I understand. What’s your personal impression of Clark?”

“My personal impression?”

“Yes.”

“Are you asking me if I trust him?”

“If that’s what you want to tell me.”

“Huh.” Lois pursed her lips in thought for a long moment, then said, “I don’t have any specific reason to withhold trust, but I don’t have much of a sample size for comparison, either. Cat seems to trust him, but I don’t know how much of that is remembering him from eight years ago or from her reading him very well now. What I’ve seen of him is positive, but I haven’t seen everything about him. There’s got to be more of him to know.”

“Are you sure, Lois? Maybe he’s one of those rare people where what you see is what you get.”

Lois shook her head. “We all have secrets, Doc. You taught me that.”

“I did do that, didn’t I? Well, then, let’s put a pin in that and move on. How do you feel about Clark?”

“Didn’t you just ask me if I trusted him?”

“Sorry. I meant to ask how you feel about Clark on a personal level.”

Lois frowned and partially turned her head to one side. “I don’t have any strong feelings about Clark, either positive or negative ones. I just think Cat likes him.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

Lois pulled back as if dodging a punch in slow motion. “Cat’s a big girl and she makes her own decisions. She doesn’t run her choices by me for my approval.”

“But the two of you have been partners for almost four years. You work very well together and your writing styles complement

each other – at least, that’s what Mr. White tells me.”

“Wait. You’re discussing my therapy with my boss?”

“Absolutely not. The only thing he knows from me is that you’re attending the sessions. I’m legally and ethically constrained from revealing your personal medical information to anyone who doesn’t have your specific permission to see it. And all he’s told me is that you’re supposed to receive VA-recommended psychological counseling for as long as you need it. That’s one of your veteran’s benefits and I’m almost offended that you haven’t kept that in mind. I explained all that to you in our very first session. Now, to redirect our conversation, can you tell me how you feel about Cat’s feelings for Clark?”

Lois’ nostrils flared and her eyes narrowed. The answer to this question would tell Dana a lot about Lois’ progress.

Slowly the younger woman calmed herself. After her breathing slowed, she leaned back against the couch and averted her gaze. “I – um – I don’t – if she really liked him I don’t know that I’d much like it.”

“Do you feel as if she might abandon you?”

Lois’ fingers found a loose thread on the cushion beside her and began picking at it. “Not ‘abandon,’ exactly. I just – I don’t want to be alone.”

“That’s a completely understandable reaction to a possible drastic change. Let me say one more thing about it and then we’ll move on. Okay?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Love isn’t a finite resource, Lois. For example, a woman can love her husband, her children, her parents, her friends, all in different ways and with different levels of intensity, but loving one person doesn’t reduce the amount of love she has for the other people in her life. If I really put others first, then my volume of love isn’t depleted by my loving others. It’s multiplied. So if Cat does end up loving Clark – or any other man – it doesn’t mean she’ll take that love from you. It just means that her love will grow and expand to encompass another person. Does that make sense?”

Lois put her hands in her lap and looked at Dana. “I think so. I’ll have to ponder on it for a while, though, before I really understand it.”

Dana nodded calmly, but inside she shouted for joy. This was close to a major breakthrough for Lois. She’d faced something that frightened her without using her weapon or running for cover, two reflexes drilled into her by her military training. It was a far more controlled reaction than she would have exhibited when she first began seeing Dana as a therapist. It boded very well for the younger woman’s continuing recovery.

Chapter Five

The first mention of Platt’s death in the media was on the front page of the Planet’s morning edition, nestled in a highlight box below the fold with a file photo of Platt and a teaser saying “Former EPRAD Scientist Dies Under Suspicious Circumstances” and accompanied by a promise of details in the evening edition. By nine-fifteen, Catharine and Clark’s story was in the editor’s inbox. By ten o’clock, Perry had badgered Bill Henderson into letting some of the details of the case go to print. By ten-ten that morning, three other editors, two major news network anchors, and five local anchors had called Perry to pull the story away from the Planet.

It didn’t work. With no hemming or hawing, no conditional promises, and no leaks, the Planet’s general editor stood firm without a hint of wavering. Only one of the local anchors, a talented woman new at the job but obviously on her way up the ladder, seemed to be surprised when she got nothing for her efforts. Clark was both surprised and impressed at his new boss’ forcefulness. He considered that maybe he’d gotten a better job than he’d known existed. If not for the Planet’s coverage of the “suspicious circumstances,” the story probably would have died

aborning.

Perry also called an emergency meeting at eleven o'clock to discuss the "Platt case," as he now called it. Before everyone entered the conference room, Clark glanced at Lois and thought she looked a little more determined than usual about something, which, judging from what he'd already seen, might be her normal appearance. Still, it bothered him enough to eavesdrop on her. In the interest of her own protection, of course, since Lois was hanging back in the parade to the meeting and also blocking Catharine's progress.

Just before the women entered the room, he heard Lois pull Cat aside and insist, "We don't have time for meetings. We've got to get this story while the evidence is still available."

"Where is this evidence?"

Lois' shoe brushed a trash can. She seemed to be moving toward the newsroom door. "It's in a hangar at the EPRAD base. I heard they're working on it to figure out which busted part goes where so they can correct the problem."

He heard Catharine huff back. "I'll go you one better. I've heard from the coroner about Platt. His death is going to be treated as a homicide. She says that Clark and I missed him, her, or them by less than an hour, probably a lot less. This is really getting dangerous, and I for one don't want my obituary out there just yet."

"Come on, Cat! Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I left it in Platt's apartment with his body and I'm not going back for it any time soon."

Clark suppressed a chuckle. The exchange between the two women told him a great deal about both of them. Catharine had learned discretion and self-deprecating humor over the past eight years, and Lois was as determined and single-minded as Catharine had told him she was. Working with them was going to be a challenge.

"Kent!"

His attention snapped back to the meeting. "Ah, yes, sir?"

"You want to participate in this meeting or just sit there with a goofy look on your face?"

"Oh. Sorry. I was waiting for my partners to join—"

He suddenly realized that he couldn't hear either of them any longer. They were out of his hearing, something which took some effort and planning – or distance.

"Perry? Cat and Lois may be in trouble. I think I should go look for them."

His boss stared at him for two long breaths, long enough for Clark to get even more antsy. Then Perry said, "Go. If they're in trouble – and they probably are – you need to get them to safety."

"Got it."

"And then you stay with them! The three of you can watch over each other."

He didn't bother answering this time. He was on the ground floor in the stairwell by the time the conference room door glided shut.

Lois seethed at Antoinette Baines for chaining them to the steel pipe. She seethed even more for letting Baines and her silent pet get the drop on them with her little Colt .25 caliber semi-auto and his – of all the modern weapons he could have used – German World War Two-era nine-millimeter MP-40 Machine Pistol, the one the GIs had inaccurately called a Schmeisser. Worst of all, the clown had dropped Cat to the concrete with a blow to the head with the butt of his deadly little machine pistol. If Cat had been mobile and alert, Lois would have tried for the MP-40, but the tall redhead was barely conscious. Baines had told Lois that she planned to take over the space program and "seize the high ground," which was so obvious to an infantry soldier that it was all but a cliché. Still, the ugly-colored and foul-smelling chemicals Baines was dumping on the floor would kill both herself and Cat

unless something close to miraculous happened, making clichés unimportant.

Baines and the blond gorilla hustled toward the far end of the building and out of the immediate area just before the miracle showed up.

Lois was tugging on her chair, trying for some kind of leverage, when a tall, bespectacled young man bent down over her. "Give me a few seconds and I'll—"

"Kent!"

"Got it right in one try."

"What are you doing here?"

"I was trying to follow you – but – that's got it!"

He moved to Cat and started in on her chain with the crowbar in his hands, then dropped it and pulled on her bonds. The chain fell to the floor. "We have to go, Lois."

"Where did you come from? How did you—"

He picked Cat up and tossed her over his shoulder.

"Explanations later! Run now!"

"Where?"

"Unlocked door at ten o'clock!"

She grabbed their purses, then turned to her left and sprinted to the door. She held it open as Clark carried Cat out into the yard. They'd run about thirty feet when the building turned into a giant MythBusters exploding toaster oven and threw them into a mud puddle.

Lois checked Cat over for obvious injuries, then splashed water on all three of them to make sure none of them were on fire. Clark noticed her movements and asked, "Are you a competitive swimmer along with being a reporter who likes standing in the crosshairs?"

She sent him a scolding glare, one which he dodged without moving. "No," she replied, "combat medic. Middle East."

"Is she okay?"

Cat chose that moment to groan and try to sit up, but Lois held her down. "Possible concussion, maybe first-degree flash burns on her back and lower legs, no broken bones, abrasions and bruising all over her body." She turned to Clark and snapped, "Your doing?"

Clark frowned and huffed at her. "Can we use complete sentences with all of our questions, please?"

She opened her mouth as if to snap at him again, then closed her eyes and nodded. "I'm sorry. Cat's my best friend. I don't want anything bad to happen to her."

His response was interrupted by a small helicopter taking flight over the inferno. For a moment he looked like he was going to jump up and grab it before it got away. "We'll call the FAA to watch for them as soon as we find a phone," she said. She dug in her purse and found her WayneTech micro-recorder. "They won't get away. Registration number November-Yankee-Tango—"

The next moment fit her prediction that "they" wouldn't get away as the chopper vanished in a ball of flame. Clark interposed his body between pieces of the falling chopper and the two women, but none of the fiery fragments came anywhere near them.

Lois glanced at his face and was surprised to see regret and sorrow there. Her voice lowered a register as she said, "You couldn't have saved them. They were both dead the instant the bomb in the chopper touched off."

He looked stricken, as if he would have flown up to save them. The next sound she heard, though, was an alto groan.

"Hey," Cat said. "Wanna give me a hand? Stuck in a mud puddle here."

Lois glanced around. Most of the ground around them was either grass or bare dirt. Either they were the luckiest trio in history, or Clark had aimed them at the muddy water. But that was impossible. Had to be dumb luck.

Cat tried to stand, but Lois made her sit on the dry ground next

to the puddle. “We need to get you checked out at a hospital, Red. Clark, how did you get here?”

Cat chuckled and moaned at the same time. “I must be hurt. You usually call me Red only when I’m bleeding.”

Clark pulled a set of keys out of his pocket. “I drove Cat’s Buick. And I don’t think we need transportation. We have sirens coming our way.”

Cat groaned again. “Ohh, my head. The entire city is spinning.”

“Told you she might have a concussion.”

Clark slipped in close behind her. “I’ve got you, Catharine. Lois and I will stay with you. The ambulance will be here soon.”

“Good. Hope at least one – uh – one of the EMTs is single.”

Clark and Lois both laughed with her. His voice was light, but his body language said he was more than concerned with her condition. It almost looked as if he were holding someone special to his heart.

Lois was surprised at how much she disliked that thought.

The ambulance attendants loaded Cat into the vehicle and transported her to Metro General Hospital. Clark and Lois spent the next few hours answering questions from Metro PD, from the FBI, from the FAA, from New Troy state troopers, from EPRAD security, and – she muttered under her breath – the local dogcatcher. A state trooper finally allowed Lois to phone in the story to rewrite, including the fake shuttle she and Cat had found and Baines’ part in trying to kill them. Perry promised to put a teaser story in the evening edition and a detailed account in the morning. First, though, they had to fight through the mass of media hounds trying to pry the story from them.

Clark hated being on the other side of the typewriter.

They finally made it to Cat’s Buick, which reluctantly agreed to start. As Clark guided them off the EPRAD grounds, he turned to Lois and asked, “Do you want me to take you home so you can clean up?”

“No. Head to the Planet. It’s closer.”

He frowned. “How are you going to clean up at the office?”

“I have spare clothes in my locker at work.”

“You really are prepared.”

She lifted both women’s purses and tilted her head to one side. “I figured you would be, too, seeing as how you’re a former Scout and all.”

“How did you know – never mind, it doesn’t matter. I’ll drop you off and go home, then. I probably should refill Cat’s gas tank, too, since I’ve been driving her car so much lately.”

“Good idea.”

“Hey, did I hear right? Cat’s staying in the hospital overnight?”

“Yes. Actually, that brings up a situation.”

“What’s that?”

“I know it’s late, but can you get a tuxedo by seven tonight? The White Orchid Ball is tonight, and since Cat’s out of commission for now, we have an extra ticket.”

“Huh. After this busy day, I’d planned to go home and rest.”

“Well, I know you don’t know this, Farm Boy, but this is the social event of the entire year. It’s hosted by Lex Luthor, and I’ve been angling for an interview with him for more than two months.”

Clark turned right toward the Planet and nodded. “Isn’t he famously interview-shy?”

“Yes, and that’s why I’m getting the exclusive.”

He glanced at her. “Catharine won’t mind if I use her ticket?”

“No. We’ve been friends for over five years, and I know her well. She’d rather you use it than let it go to waste.”

He glided to a stop near the paper’s front door. “So – this is like a date?”

Lois’ eyes lit up and she bounced in her seat. “A date?” She

gave out a girlish squeal. “Like, when you pick me up at my place and my mom acts so glad to know that I’m actually seeing a man and Daddy is cleaning his shotgun when you come in and my little sister flirts with you to see if you really like me and to make sure you’re not gay? That kind of date?”

Clark tried to suppress a smile and almost succeeded. “Well, yes, except for the sister flirting and the shotgun and your dad glaring at me and your mom hanging on my arm because she has a slim hope her daughter won’t be an old maid and I come pick you up in a car that may or may not run and whose interior has seen better months? Sure, it’ll be that kind of date.”

Lois stared at him for a long moment, then fished in Cat’s purse for a moment. “Here’s your ticket,” she said flatly. As he reached for it, she flicked it back and said in a sing-song voice, “No necking behind the Tastee-Freeze, okay? Daddy will still have the shotgun when you take me home.”

“I assume he’s a good shot?”

Using her normal no-nonsense voice, she replied, “He calls his shots like a billiards champion. And so do I. You keep your lips and hands to yourself, Farm Boy.”

“As you wish.”

Her dry expression would have drained a small river. “And no movie quotes. Seven o’clock. Be there on time. I’m not going doe.”

“Not going doe? What does that – oh, wait, it’s the feminine version of a guy going stag, isn’t it?”

She fought to contain the smile but didn’t quite succeed. “You’re not as dumb as you look, Kent.” She opened the passenger door and slid out.

He watched her stalk toward the Planet’s main entrance. She was a challenge to work with, but it was even more of a challenge for anyone to try to hide from her. If anyone could score that interview with Lex Luthor, it was the team of Lois Lane and Cat Grant.

He hoped he remembered the shop that claimed it could clean a suit in six hours.

Jimmy met Clark just inside the venue entrance. “Hey, CK! Glad you could make it after all.”

Clark shook his head in confusion. “After all what?”

“After the building exploded with Cat and Lois inside and you rescuing them and Baines’ helicopter blowing up and Cat going to the hospital – they’re probably going to release her tomorrow morning – and Lois chasing Lex Luthor for that interview, you made it.”

“I pretty much had to come. After all that, if I’d skipped this party, Lois probably would have emptied her weapon and one of her spare magazines at me.”

Jimmy’s laugh drew haughty looks from several of their fellow party-goers. “You’re probably right. Hey, have you met Luthor?”

Clark sipped his drink and looked away. “I don’t think we move in the same social circles.”

“Maybe not.” A flash of lightning threw jagged shadows onto the wall behind a man walking down the grand staircase. “That’s Lex Luthor right there.”

“Are you sure?”

“He’s glad-handing everyone he meets, most of the really rich dudes are smiling and bowing to him, he’s walking like he owns the place, he looks like the pictures in the Planet’s files on him, so yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s Lex Luthor.”

A woman’s voice rang out across the marble flooring. “Lex Luthor!”

Luthor stopped and searched for the voice’s source, then said, “I am he. Who are you?”

Ah, thought Clark, Lois has run her quarry to ground at last.

A thin, squeaky voice answered. “Oh, I’m real sorry, Mr.

Luthor. I didn't mean to yell like that." She walked through the crowd to him, then threaded her arm through his and snugged up against him like a teenager asking her father to borrow the family car. "I'm Lois Lane with the Daily Planet, and I'd like to ask you some questions. Is that, like, okay?"

Clark nearly dropped his drink in surprise. Beside him, he could see Jimmy's jaw fall open and his eyes bulge.

He half-turned to Jimmy and whispered, "That's Lois Lane, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"Thought so when I first saw her."

"That's who she looks like, anyway," Jimmy said.

"She sounds like a Valley Girl on speed to me."

"Me too. What's she up to?"

Clark shrugged. "Dunno. She didn't tell me her plans for the night."

Jimmy nodded slowly. "Maybe if we ignore her she'll go away and the real Lois will come in."

"I don't know. Whatever she's doing, it seems to be working."

"Whatever" seemed to include a slight bounce in her step and a vacuous grin on her face. It looked to everyone who knew her that Lois was suddenly channeling a less intelligent version of Paris Hilton.

Jimmy nudged Clark's elbow. "You want to rescue her?"

Clark turned to face his new friend. "I don't think this is the best time to tell her that I learned ballroom dancing from a Nigerian princess. If Luthor were still there, she might ask me if Nigeria was on the Canadian or American side of the falls."

"Well, that was less than satisfying," Lois grumbled.

"Would you rather have found a Tastee-Freeze to park behind?"

She huffed at him. "I would rather have gotten something newsworthy from him."

"You don't think LexCorp supporting the space station initiative is newsworthy?"

"I do. But I'd rather have the exclusive."

"Wouldn't we all."

She reached out and played with the heater controls for a moment, then gave up. "Nuts. This car is worse than my first VW."

He chuckled. "This car is worse than a moped that was run over by a steamroller."

She turned her head toward him and worked her mouth for an instant. He had the distinct impression that she'd nearly stuck her tongue out at him. It shot down a perfectly good comeback when she didn't.

But it gave him an opening. "Hey, while we're on the subject, how come you were acting like a total airhead when you first approached Luthor?"

She gave him a cutting frown. "How do the relative merits of various cars relate to my trying to score an exclusive interview with the third richest man in the U.S.?"

He shrugged. "It doesn't, really, but I still want an answer to my question."

She mirrored his shrug. "Simple. People see what they expect to see. Luthor sees a Betty Boop impersonator complete with squeaky voice and terrifyingly low brain volume, so that's how he deals with her. That's how I got the one valuable item from him."

"Oh? I didn't think you got anything from him."

"I got dinner and an exclusive interview on Saturday evening four weeks from this weekend. I can get more with a Mae West routine than by being a wanna-be Mayson Drake, at least until I start asking questions."

"Who's Mayson Drake?"

She stared at him. "You really are new here, aren't you?"

"Guilty as charged, ma'am. Can you please tell me who

Mayson Drake is?"

"Don't confess to being guilty of anything around her. She's Metropolis' District Attorney, and if she's after you for any reason, I suggest you leave town – no, leave the state – while you still can."

"That bad, huh?"

"Yes."

He paused for a long moment as he glided to a stop at the next traffic light, then asked, "Do you have any apt comparisons of her? Just to give me a reference point, you understand."

Lois' voice lowered close to a growl. "You want a comparison?"

"Please."

"General George Patton."

Clark's eyes widened and his head snapped around to face her. "Patton?"

"Yes, Patton. Without the famous compassion."

He tried to imagine Patton's identical twin sister as the city DA. It was a little bit scary.

As he stopped in front of Lois' apartment building, a thought took root in his head. She'd said that "people see what they expect to see." Catharine had told him much the same thing.

Maybe he could use that thought in his own life.

The next morning, he stood on the back porch of his parents' farmhouse with an idea that was either as brilliant as General Relativity or dumber than a box of rocks bouncing around in his mind. His father must have heard him scraping around, because the door opened before he knocked.

"Dad! Am I glad to see you. Is Mom up yet?"

His dad gave him an exasperated glare. "Do you know what time it is, son?"

Clark looked at his wrist watch. "Yes, it's about six-thirty Central time."

Jonathan opened the door and stepped aside. "Then yes, we're up. In fact, we just finished breakfast. Why? What's going on?"

"Thanks. How about I trade you a half-day's chores in exchange for two pair of listening ears and a response to an idea?"

"Now that's a deal I can shake hands on."

Martha was proud of her son. The best part was that he didn't have to have it spelled out. He knew how his parents felt about him.

Clark had lifted the combine so his father could adjust the tines poking out from the bottom of the vehicle, replaced the fence line on the south border of the property where about thirty posts were either rotted out or the next thing to it, and repaired the barn roof where the previous week's windstorm had blown half of it into the main yard before his mother called her two favorite men in for lunch.

Now she and Jonathan sat at the table contemplating their son's idea for helping without revealing himself to the world.

As she expected, her husband was not in favor of Clark's plan.

"Son, this is a bad idea. Someone's going to take a picture, that picture will get printed, someone at the Daily Planet will look at it and say, 'Look, it's Clark Kent!' You won't have a secret for very long."

"That's why I need Mom's help. I need her design skills to help me with an outfit that will draw attention away from my face until people get used to seeing me, and once they get used to seeing a flying man, people will see the details of what they want to see. Believe me, I don't want to get stuck in a cage or dissected like a frog any more than you two want me to be."

Martha expected her husband's next objection and wasn't disappointed. "But you're willing to put me and your mother in danger? If this doesn't work – if someone does put it together – what are we going to do? How will we live? I'm too old to start

over again somewhere else, and unless we're willing to abandon the farm completely, if anyone does recognize you and we sell out, someone could find us by following the money. No one's going to believe that we didn't know about your special abilities."

"I know that, Dad, and that's why I'm here now. If you two really don't want me to do this, I won't. All I know, though, is that my only alternative is to keep drifting through the world whenever someone notices that interesting things tend to happen around me. And I'm really tired of drifting." He sat back and sighed deeply. "I really don't want to leave Metropolis. I want to put down roots, to build something, some place I can call 'home' when I'm not here."

Jonathan's hesitation gave Martha the opportunity she was looking for. "I think we should go forward with this idea. I know I want to do it." She turned and focused on her husband. "I know that we'd be rolling the dice on this along with Clark, but he's going to keep helping people no matter where he lives or what we say about it. He can't stop doing good deeds that no one else can do any more than you could stop being the good man that you are, the good man you taught our son to be. I'd rather support him in this and give him a place to retreat to than fight him on it." She took both of his big hands in both of her small ones and gave him "those" eyes, the ones he'd so often told her melted his resolve. "What do you say, my husband?"

Jonathan hesitated a long time, then kissed her hands and looked at his son. "I hope you find a woman who loves you this much someday, son. She's one to ride the range with." He gave her one of "those" smiles, the ones she so often told him made her wriggle down low in her belly. They still did, too.

Still smiling, he said, "I have just one request for you, Martha. Please don't make him look like a giant popsicle."

Chapter Six

Clark wasn't sure about the deep blue contrasting with the bright red and exploding yellow touches, but he had to admit that it would draw attention away from his face. It would also look really good in flight. And, he admitted to his dad, it was better than the other suits his mother had made. He didn't look like a popsicle, nor did he resemble a rainbow protestor's banner or the mythological Mercury suffering from an attack of mucus clogs.

His mom leaned back and looked at him, then said, "Hair gel." He looked back, drew confused eyebrows down, and answered, "Nose piercings."

She chuckled. "No, I mean you should use hair gel when you wear this outfit. It'll help to differentiate Clark from whoever this guy is. By the way, do you know what you're going to be called?"

"Not yet. I may just let someone in the media name me."

His dad called out, "You mean someone like that redhead you've been talking about?"

Clark grimaced. "Not necessarily. And how did you know what Cat looks like, anyway?"

Jonathan leaned into the sewing room. "Your mom showed me the Planet's website. They have color pictures of a lot of the reporting staff. And I didn't know for sure about Cat until you just confirmed it. Y'all call her 'Cat' like 'meow-meow?' And is she the one who chased you away from Met U?"

"Cat is short for Catharine, Dad! And no one chased me away! I made a choice and it turned out pretty well, don't you think?"

Martha pulled an old trunk from under the spare bed in the room. "It did," she said, "but you were still running on hormones back then, and something happened with her that upset you enough to come home. We know it wasn't your grades, either. You were handling the workload just fine. Do you want to tell us just what went down back then?"

Clark's mouth moved but no sound came out. After an uncomfortable amount of time had passed, he sighed and said, "Okay, you've already guessed that it was a relationship gone bad. She wasn't totally honest with me, and I acted like a moron when

she tried to come clean about herself. She and I have already discussed the matter and agreed to behave like adults."

Jonathan crossed his arms and leaned against the door jamb. "Sounds good. And either she doesn't know about your extra talents or she does know and has never revealed that she knows. Either way, that's one worry I can cross off my list."

Martha reached out and tapped his chest. "This is too blank. You need something here, maybe an insignia of some kind. Let me dip into my bag of tricks and see what I have."

"Thanks, Mom. And Dad, I'm glad I can alleviate one of your concerns."

"Don't be too glad yet, Son. I have another concern to replace it. She obviously knows you very well. I wonder what she'll think when she sees you in that suit."

"It's been eight years, Dad. I'm sure we've both changed."

"You've been working with her for what, almost three months now?"

"Not quite. I'm due for my initial performance review in another month or so, and if I pass muster I'll be on permanent status."

"But what if—"

"Got it!" Martha cried out. "This will work perfectly."

She held a triangle of fabric against the suit. "It was on the blanket you were wrapped in when your ship landed. This looks like a stylized 'S' to us, but I'm sure it means something different to your people. If anyone asks you who you are, just point to your chest and smile like you know something about his or her sister."

"Mom! Come on!"

"No, Clark, you come on! No one's going to be looking at your face. That's why they call them tights. Now climb out of that suit so I can add the symbol."

Clark crossed his arms and frowned at his mother. As if on cue, they turned their heads to Jonathan as if silently asking him to intervene.

Jonathan lifted his hands as signaling that he refused to take sides in this fight. He did, however, say, "Why don't the two of you come watch the colonists' transport launch with me? It's sure to be exciting."

"As soon as I add this piece," Martha answered. "We'll be there in five minutes or less."

Each of the people in the slowly moving line of colonists was wearing an expression of bored excitement. Cat watched the TV, grinning like she'd just had a pigeon appetizer, when she fixated on a brunette who was wiggling like she needed a ladies' room.

It was Lois.

Cat grabbed Perry's arm and nearly pulled it off. "Chief!" she hissed. "Lois is in the loading queue for the colonists' shuttle!"

"What? Where?"

"Right there, third from the hatch!" Cat took a step forward and crumpled her hands into fists. "That idiot is going up to the space station with them!"

"Come on, Cat! You can't tell who that is from this distance. Besides, Lois has better sense than to pull a stunt like that. Taking off without an acceleration couch would cripple her if it doesn't kill her."

Cat turned and gritted her teeth at her boss. "You know I can read body language, Chief!" she hissed again. "I'm telling you that's Lois! I know her walk, the way she does that little hitching limp, the way she holds her shoulders when she's on a story! You know I'm right and you know how she is! If she can't write about it or shoot it she won't bother to remember anything about it!"

"So what do you want me to do, call them and tell them they have a stowaway? The cops would trace the call back here before you could put on your blue suede shoes. They'd be busy for the rest of the week processing the arrests. Who would believe me? And how could she dodge the security restrictions? It's gotta be

tighter than a pair of Priscilla's Secret undies over there, especially after all the stuff with Baines and Platt!"

"But we have to—"

"No, we don't have to. I'm not convinced that's really her, but if Lois is really that stupid, all we can do is make sure her obituary is up to date."

"Perry, please!" Cat's eyes grew damp. "She's my best friend. We've saved each other's lives more than once. I can't let her die like that!"

He put his hands on her shoulders. "You're not letting her do anything. At this point, there's nothing you could do. You'll have to watch the launch just like everyone else."

A tear made its way down her cheek. All she said – all she could manage to say – was, "She's my best friend."

He put one arm around her shoulders and gave her a hug. "I know, honey." He turned to watch the monitor with her. "It's a good thing EPRAD went over the booster engines with a fine-toothed comb and found that flaw Platt was talking about. It took 'em most of a month, but at least we know the shuttle won't burst into flames on the launch pad."

Cat wiped her face and barely held in her sob. "How do you do it, Perry? How do you keep going when you lose your friends?"

He squeezed a little harder for a few seconds, then released her. "I could tell you to just keep putting one foot in front of the other, but that's not the whole story. You just do it. If you hang around this business long enough, you're going to lose people. Good people. People you love and who love you. I wish that weren't so, honey, but it is. Besides, it might not be Lois after all."

It's Lois, thought Cat. I'm watching my best friend take her final steps and there's nothing I can do about it.

Jimmy turned to Eduardo and grabbed his arm. "Man, this is great! All those people going to space at once! It's gonna be bigger than the Mercury and Gemini and Apollo and the old shuttle missions all rolled into one!"

Cat's hands found her face. Then she pulled them down and forced herself to watch what she was sure were Lois' last moments on Earth.

Jonathan patted the couch next to his son. "You know, if the helping out thing doesn't work for you, there's probably a place who'll pay you to advertise their grape juice."

Martha tried not to chortle. Clark merely gave his dad a stern look and sat a foot above the couch, his cape draped over Jonathan's shoulder. Their game abruptly stopped as the TV announcer said, "We're being told now that there's a problem with the shuttle. Not only has the countdown been halted – and we emphasize that it has been halted, not paused – there's a report of a bomb threat aboard the craft. This report has not been verified. We repeat, there is a problem with the shuttle—"

Jonathan would have urged Clark to go help, but when he turned his head he realized that he would have been speaking to empty air.

Lex Luthor listened to the report with a thin smile on his lips. The destruction of the first EPRAD shuttle during the final engine test should have been enough to convince the Council of Nations to terminate the entire program, but thanks to Platt's interference the crew had survived. Once the colonists' transport went down, though, he'd have the leverage he needed to take over the entire space program. The money his companies would make producing and marketing the technological advances would fill his coffers many times over. It would have been better had the shuttle actually taken off, but an explosion on the launch pad would have nearly the same result.

Then the announcer mentioned the bomb threat.

He leaned forward, his eyes ablaze. "No one was supposed to find that," he muttered.

"No one should have been able to do so," added Asabi.

Asabi. He'd forgotten the Hindu servant was in the room with him. He'd find a way to blame the man from India if this didn't work. And if the bomb still destroyed the shuttle, he'd figure out how badly Asabi had screwed up.

He checked his watch. Only twenty-three seconds to go. Maybe the plan would work after all.

Lois pulled out the pocketknife she knew she wasn't supposed to have and started working on pulling the explosive material from the wall. It looked like a block of Semtex, a plastic explosive similar to C4 which would put a fairly large hole in the wall and destroy anything behind it.

She also knew that it would damage the transport badly enough to make it unusable. Her only options were to run from the danger – something she was trained not to do – or to try to remove the bomb from the vehicle. She didn't think she had enough time to throw it far enough to keep the transport safe, either. She'd have to carry it as far as she could.

She deliberately didn't think about what her body would look like when the bomb finally exploded – assuming they found enough of it to identify her.

Then she ran out of time.

The digital display counting down the seconds showed a big red "0:00:04" when some guy in a blue clown suit jumped into the compartment and stared at the clock timer for a moment. Then he did something completely idiotic and unbelievable.

He finished pulling the bomb – timer and explosive – off the wall and stuck it in his mouth.

She forced herself not to flinch. At that distance from the bomb, it would make strawberry pudding out of his entire upper body and kill her instantly. The transport vehicle wouldn't be destroyed, but it would be damaged, probably too badly to use any time soon.

Of course, neither she nor the clown would know about it.

Then he swallowed.

The bomb went off.

And his body contained the explosion.

She couldn't believe it. She wouldn't believe it. This was impossible. But all the guy did was burp and emit some smoke. He tapped his chest with one fist and said, "Pardon me."

And she still refused to believe it.

After ten of the longest seconds of her life, she reached out and put her hand on his shoulder. It was solid, muscular, and dense. He looked real. He'd spoken, so he sounded real. He'd swallowed the bomb – impossible, but apparently he'd really done it.

Either this was some kind of joke the angels were playing on the newly dead Lois Lane or this guy was real.

By the time she got enough air back in her lungs to speak, Commander Letterman was standing in the doorway with his hands on his hips. "What's going on here? Who are you people? What just happened?"

Her hand lifted as if on a marionette's string and pointed at the blue-and-red clown. "There was a bomb. He – ate it."

Letterman's gaze focused on Lois. "Not funny, Miss – who are you, anyway? You're not part of the crew or one of the passengers."

The question snapped her out of her fugue. "Lois Lane, Daily Planet. I'm here to cover the transport launch."

"Oh, really? How do we know you didn't plant that bomb?"

The blue clown lifted one hand. "Excuse me, Captain, but when I came in, she was trying to stop the detonation. She definitely wasn't acting like a terrorist."

"Oh, sure, now I'm supposed to believe you swallowed an explosive big enough to bring down the transport and it didn't hurt you."

The blue-clad man lifted his legs and sat cross-legged in the air. “I doubt many terrorists can do this, Captain.”

Letterman’s eyes widened and he blinked several times. “Uh – no, I guess they can’t.”

A little girl in a wheelchair rolled up to him and smiled. “Hi. My name’s Amy. I like your outfit. It’s pretty.”

He floated down beside her and smiled warmly. “Thank you, Amy. My mother made it for me.”

“Do you think I could learn to fly, too?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think you could fly. But walking is possible with the work these folks will be doing in space.”

A voice chose that moment to come over the intercom. “Attention. The engines have been deactivated. The launch is cancelled. I repeat, the engines have been deactivated and the launch is cancelled. Disembarkation will commence in thirty minutes. Once again—”

A woman – apparently the little girl’s mother – sighed deeply. “That’s it, then. It’s over.” Her shoulders slumped and she turned her face away from Amy.

“Why?” asked Lois. “Can’t you just restart the engines?”

Letterman shook his head. “Once they’re ignited, they can’t be restarted. They’re single-use units and would have to be replaced. And we don’t have any spares available. We’re done.”

“No. You’re not done.”

Everyone turned to look at the guy in blue. “There’s nothing wrong with the transport itself,” he said. “You just need to get up to the station. I can help you there.”

“How?” asked Lois.

He smiled and lit up the room. “Simple. I’ll give you a boost.”

Luthor paced through his office muttering about the failure of the bomb. He sent several glares of doom toward Asabi, who desperately wanted to flee the room but knew that doing so would surely mean his death. He might yet die if he stayed, but at least there was some chance to live. Perhaps he could shift the blame to the underling who had actually placed the bomb where it could be seen and possibly dealt with.

Then he looked at the monitor on the wall and said “yah kaise hua ?” in Hindi. Luthor stopped pacing and turned to see what had caught his minion’s attention.

Incredibly, the transport was lifting as if being levitated. Both master and servant were spellbound by the sight as it slowly rose from the launch pad. Asabi focused on the announcer’s voice and was dumbstruck.

“Allan, the story I’m getting from ground control is that some guy in a blue suit and – get this, a red cape and red boots – swallowed the bomb—”

“What! He did what?”

“I’m telling you what the controller told me. This guy swallowed the bomb and—”

“Swallowed the bomb? Bob, do you expect me—”

“You know, Allan, I can get through this report a lot faster if you don’t interrupt me.”

“Yes, of course, sorry, please carry on.”

Bob took a deep breath, which made him sound as if he were waiting for Allan to break in again, then continued. “Yes, well, the guy in the blue suit with red cape and boots pulled the bomb off the wall and swallowed it. After the ground crew deactivated the engines, he flew – I know it sounds insane, Allan! I’m telling you what I was told.”

“Didn’t say a word.”

“Then don’t look like you’re going to explode. Anyway, this blue-suited guy flew to the underside of the transport, and when they told him the hatches were all sealed, he lifted it up and is now flying it out into space.” Bob threw down a thin sheaf of paper. “If I wasn’t watching it myself, live and in person, I wouldn’t believe it. But that’s what we’ve been told, folks, and it appears to be the

truth.”

Luthor reached out and turned down the volume. “Well, Asabi, it appears that this was not your failure after all. We’ll have to work on handling this new player on the scene.”

Asabi bowed to keep his master from seeing his continued fear and sudden relief. “Very good, sir. Shall I begin by assembling a task force to look into this new character?”

Luthor bowed. “Yes. First, though, I want you to find out how long it takes him to lift the transport to the space station and then return to Earth.”

“Yes, sir. I shall make it my priority.”

Neither man saw the brunette figure at the bottom left corner of the screen, standing near the launch pad and watching the transport disappear from sight.

Cat paced across the news floor, muttering to herself. She’d already submitted a brief article about the abortive bomb attack which would probably end up as a sidebar on the flying man story. The only thing it lacked was a quote from either Lois or one of the EPRAD officials about just what happened to the bomb.

Perry tried to stop her and get her to sit down. “Come on, Cat, take a load off. Lois will be back when she gets back and not—”

“Look out the big window! There they are!”

Jimmy’s outburst galvanized everyone in the room. The man in blue carried Lois in his arms as gently as a mama cat with a new kitten, and Cat took an immediate dislike to the flying man just because of the simile that her mind had generated. He set Lois down beside her desk, and Cat got to see her friend’s face.

Lois’ jaw was hanging open and her eyes were saucers. She brushed back her hair with one hand and waved at her desk with the other. “How – how did you know it was mine?”

The flying man crossed his arms and inclined his head at the desk. “My first clue was the nameplate with ‘Lois Lane’ printed on it.”

Lois’ only reaction was a stammered “Ah – uh – ah—”

Cat didn’t need to see or hear any more. Lois was acting like a star-struck teen at her first live concert and Cat was infuriated. “Lois!” she snapped out.

“What? Oh, Cat this is – wait a minute, I didn’t catch y—”

Cat’s right cross struck Lois along the left side of her jaw and nearly knocked her down. Before Cat could hit her again, the blue man stepped in front of Cat and grabbed her upper arms, then held her back out of reach of anyone else.

Cat felt something oddly familiar in his grip. Somehow it reminded her of Clark cradling her when the helicopter had exploded. Then Hurricane Lois rounded the handsome blue impediment and leaned into Cat’s face.

“What is WRONG with you? Why did you slug me? What did I do to you?”

“You almost got yourself killed, that’s what’s wrong! You idiot! You don’t go anywhere without me and you know it! We’re supposed to be closer than Thelma and Louise, together all the way! I’ve got your back, remember?”

Instead of screaming back, Lois stepped away and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I was trying to get the scoop, Cat. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to risk you.”

Cat was back to fighting sobs instead of throwing punches. The man in blue and red released her and took a step back. “Risk me? Don’t you understand? We’re joined at the hip! We’re the next thing to sisters, two survivors in a lifeboat! We – Oh, Lois, what would I do without you?”

Cat lunged forward and grabbed Lois in the mother of all bear hugs and dropped her face onto her friend’s shoulder. They stayed that way for several long breaths, then Cat broke the clinch and swiped at her eyes. Jimmy put his camera on Lois’ desk and offered her a box of tissues. “Thanks, Jimmy.”

Lois wiped her own eyes once and turned back to the blue-

clad flying man. “I – uh – I’m sorry. We’re usually more professional than this.”

“That’s fine, Miss Lane. Everyone has interesting days on occasion.” He lifted into the air and floated toward the big window where he’d flown Lois into the room. “If you folks will excuse me, I have some things to take care of.”

“Hey, wait!” called Lois. “You owe me an exclusive interview.”

He turned to her and grinned almost playfully. “Is that the rule?”

“Well – yes, it is. When do you plan to pay off your debt?”

“As soon as I have something newsworthy to tell you.”

“Yeah – but – how will I find you?”

“Don’t worry,” he called over his shoulder. “I’ll be around.”

Cat watched the exchange with a smile on her face. “So did you get his phone number?”

Without turning her head, Lois answered, “What? Oh – uh – I don’t even know if he has a phone.”

Cat laughed softly. Lois slowly turned and put her fists on her hips. “What’s so funny?”

Cat shook her head, still chuckling. “It’s not exactly funny. It’s just – I never thought I’d see the day.”

“What, a flying man?”

“No. Lois Lane swept off her feet.” Cat paused, then added, “Literally.”

Perry stepped forward. “Olsen? Pictures?”

He smiled and nodded. “Several in the air and almost as many on the floor.”

“That’s a relief. Lois, honey, tell me you at least got this guy’s name!”

“Huh? No, we didn’t exchange – wait, the symbol on his chest looks like a big ‘S’ – Super!”

Jimmy goggled. “His name is Super?”

“No! The man is super – yes, that’s it! Superman!”

Cat tasted the name on her tongue and decided yes, Lois was right, his name should be Superman. But there was something else, some other name sharing her mouth. She just couldn’t form the words, couldn’t push the name out to hear it.

But she would. When it came to reporting the news, Lois had learned most of what she knew from Cat. One thing Cat had learned from Lois was a dogged determination to get the truth, no matter what it was.

Lex straightened his tie one last time as he heard Asabi open the door for his interviewer. Surely the delay in scheduling the interview would work to his advantage, making her over-eager and prone to mistakes on follow-up questions. He’d already planned to pout quite convincingly when she told him that he wouldn’t be the leading headline in the morning paper – an alien spacecraft would have had to land in the Council of Nations’ plaza to push the newly dubbed Superman and his feats off the front page this week.

He was not, however, prepared for the clear-eyed, square-jawed version of Lois Lane who stalked into his private dining room as if she were a cougar and he was a trapped pronghorn antelope.

She all but attacked her chair and pulled a digital recorder from her purse – WayneTech, he noted sourly. “Hope you don’t mind, Mr. Luthor, but I’d hate to misquote you.”

He tried to regain control. “What happened to calling me Lex?”

She fixed him with a scalpel-sharp glare. “Nothing ‘happened’ to it. If we were to meet socially or personally, I would call you Lex. But this is a professional setting, not a personal one. I’m here to interview you, nothing more.”

He nodded. “Very well. Would you prefer to eat and talk at the same time or place one activity before the other?”

Her expression softened half a millimeter. “I think we can do both at once. I know the time you can give the press is limited.”

Mentally he sighed in relief. It was the first sign of concession from her since she’d entered. He hoped it wouldn’t be the last.

Then he noticed the slight swelling at her jawline and pointed at the site. “What happened to you?”

She busied herself with the recorder, then said, “I got distracted and walked into a door.”

Lex’ eyes narrowed with honest concern. “Superman didn’t do that, did he?”

She hunted in her purse for a pencil as she replied, “I think that if Superman had punched me, my head would be in orbit around Mars, assuming it didn’t disintegrate immediately. No, he didn’t touch me without my express permission.”

He exhaled with relief. “Good.”

Lois fixed him with a sharp glare. “Why is that good, Mr. Luthor? Do you have any information about Superman’s intentions or character you’d like to share with my readers?”

He gave her his most charming smile. “No, I do not have any inside information on Superman at all. Everything I know about him at this point in time comes from the media.” He waved to Asabi. “Shall we begin our working dinner with the appetizer?”

That night, just before midnight, he was working at his desk when a tapping noise came from his glass balcony door. He lifted his gaze and was amazed to see the blue-clad, red-caped hero standing – no, floating just off the floor.

Lex walked to the door to open it, then said, “I do have a secretary, Superman. Perhaps you could call her for an appointment.”

Superman floated down to the balcony level. “I could, but then we couldn’t have a private conversation.”

“Ah. A private word with Superman. I feel quite privileged. Please, do come in.”

“Thank you, Mr. Luthor.” The hero glanced around the room and said, “Nice office. Roomy but functional.”

“Thank you.” Lex closed the balcony door and gestured for Superman to follow. “I can recommend an interior decorator if you’re in the market for one.”

Superman smiled and crossed his arms. “Perhaps another time. Right now I’d like to talk to you about your intentions.”

“My intentions toward someone? Perhaps the lovely Miss Lois Lane, whom you flew from the EPRAD launch field to the Daily Planet a few days ago?”

Superman chuckled. “Hardly. Miss Lane can more than take care of herself. If you haven’t already done so, you should check out her military service record. I assure you that she doesn’t need me as a nursemaid. Or as a bodyguard.”

Lex didn’t react visibly, but he was surprised. He’d known that she had been in the military, but that was an aspect of Lois’s life which he had not thought to investigate more deeply. He made a mental note to do so immediately. “I see,” was all he said.

“Actually, I wanted to ask you about your intentions toward the city of Metropolis. I’m thinking of making this my – my home base, for want of a better term, and I’d hate to see it dominated by someone who did not share my goals.”

“What goals might those be?”

Superman turned and slowly walked toward the desk. “I want to see a city which is run for the benefit of the entire populace, not just a few people or just one person. I want to see laws passed and enforced by the will of the entire city.”

Lex forced himself to remain where he was. There was nothing incriminating in the documents within this office. “It sounds almost as if you believe that I would oppose your stated goals.”

Superman turned and leaned on the desk, almost sitting on it. “I have no such belief. I have no evidence that you are anything

but a very successful businessman and philanthropist. It's just that I'd hate to have that impression proven false."

"Then you would take steps to force me – or, perhaps someone else – to conform to your stated goals?"

"Oh, no, nothing of the kind, I assure you. I'm here to help wherever I can. I have no intention of forcing my will on anyone, from the poorest individual on up to the richest, or on any portion of the population of the city, including the entire political entity. And so that we understand each other on this point, I have no intention of running for political office. My sole intent is to operate within the law, which means that I will be working with the police and the courts to prosecute accused criminals. I may, if the circumstances require it, also do some investigating on my own. And if I run into a situation I can't handle, well, I've made some friends at the Daily Planet, to name just one media outlet, who can help me dig out information. But I will not impose my will or my ethics on anyone. I intend to operate within the law or not at all."

"Hmm. Then you are not challenging me – or anyone else – in any way, shape, form or fashion?"

Superman shook his head. "No, Mr. Luthor, I am not. As I've already said, I have no evidence which is admissible in court which would incriminate you or anyone else. I'm telling you all this so that you may, if you choose to do so, pass on my assurances of good will to the others who move in your social circle."

"Interesting. And why would anyone believe what I have to say about you?"

"I'm afraid I'm using you as a short cut, or perhaps 'stalking horse' would be a more accurate term. You are the richest man in a city full of millionaires, and if you believe that I'm honest and sincere, you would tell your acquaintances, and not only would it help me to have people trust me, it would go a long way toward eliminating any attempt at bribery as a way to influence me."

"Ah. A pre-emptive strike, as it were."

"With the caveat that the only penalties to be suffered for any attempts at bribery would be enforced against the hypothetical person offering this potential bribe by the legal system and not by me personally."

"I understand. You do realize, of course, that were this hypothetical person an actual person who heard and understood your little speech here, he or she might declare that the games have begun."

Superman stood and lowered his hands. "I do understand. And I hope you realize that this hypothetical person and I would find no common ground anywhere." He leaned closer, looming slightly. "None at all, either low or high."

When Lex didn't answer after about fifteen seconds, Superman straightened and smiled. "I think I've taken enough of your time, Mr. Luthor. I'll let you get back to work." He walked to the balcony doors and opened them gently, then drifted upward. "And perhaps you could let our hypothetical opponent know that should he or she wish to see me, all that would be needed would be to look up." He looked down and smiled, then said, "Good night."

Lex watched the man drift up and out of sight. The comment about looking up concerned him, as did the veiled warning about an investigation by Superman, whose legal status had not yet been established by the city's court system. Perhaps a conversation with District Attorney Mayson Drake would not be out of order, provided that his argument against using Superman as some sort of super-policeman was presented with a gentle hand.

At any rate, this new adversary promised to present a true challenge to his dominance in the city. It would be an interesting contest, one he had no intention of losing.

Chapter Seven

Cat Grant walked down the steps to the lower floor of the newsroom and breathed in the atmosphere. It was a pleasing mix. Lois had recently made some small but noticeable progress in her therapy with Dr. Friskin, the outcome of which was a reporter who was just as focused and determined as she had been a few weeks ago but who smiled a little more easily and a little bit more often. Cat liked to think she'd helped lay the groundwork for those changes, but it was obvious that many of them were directly attributable to the new guy.

And speaking of the new guy, there he was at his desk.

In his brief few weeks on the job, Clark Kent had turned in quality work on time every time and on occasion had even gone beyond Perry's initial parameters. He and Cat had kept to their agreement to remain professional, and he never referred to their romantic history except for the rare times when Cat or Lois alluded to it first. Even then he was never bitter or snarky. He was honest, hard-working, knew both his job and his craft, and had either brought in a number of Superman exclusives himself or had pointed Lois or Cat at them.

Come to think of it, more of those had gone to Lois than anyone else, including himself. It wasn't as if he was tossing Cat bare bones, either. Lois was always positive about Superman in her stories but never quite openly worshipful. Cat liked to think she'd had a hand in that, too. Of course, the Superman stories Cat turned in were always high-quality work. Perry had told her so.

She sometimes wondered if the hero had anyone to whom he could unburden himself – and whether or not Cat was a candidate for the position. If things were to go that far, she might even rethink her choice not to be a mother to anyone's children.

But that was awfully far down a road that probably didn't exist, might never exist. Time to refocus.

She scanned the newsroom, looking for someone who needed a smile that morning. She had almost decided to go directly to Clark's desk when she saw Jimmy Olsen put a thick folder onto Lois' desk, then turn around and nearly run into the desk's inhabitant. "Wups! Sorry, Lois, just dropping off that research you asked for."

Lois reached out and lifted the folder. "Is this the water treatment plant, the garbage collectors' fuel and vehicle mileage logs, or the state senator's love nest?"

He frowned and put his hands on his hips. "It's notes and statistics on all three stories, all randomly mixed together, no index markings or identifiers on any of the pages, just the way you like them."

Before Lois could respond, Cat walked up behind her. "I saw the raw data, Lois. Jimbo did his usual good job, so don't jump down his throat. He's just yanking your chain."

Lois took a deep breath, then said, "Sorry, Jimmy. I'm sure it's all up to your usual standards of excellence."

"And if it's not you'll shoot me in the leg, right?"

Cat guffawed and walked over to Clark's desk, leaving Lois searching for a way to respond to Jimmy without shooting him or swearing at him. Cat had watched Lois' first two weeks at work as she'd filled the newsroom's cuss jar almost by herself until the redhead had taken the hard-edged rookie to lunch and explained that there were gentler ways of expressing herself without going bankrupt. The Army vet had used far fewer expensive words in her conversations ever since then.

It had been the beginning of a strong friendship.

As Cat walked away and drew the attention of nearly every man in the room, she heard Jimmy ask Lois if her sister Lucy Lane might go out on a date with him. Lois paused, then asked for the results of his last physical, a complete financial statement, tax returns for the last five years, and three positive references from former girlfriends. Cat glanced over her shoulder and almost laughed at his astonishment, then did laugh as Lois pointed an

index finger as his nose and said, “Gotcha!” Jimmy gave her an almost-grin as she continued. “Seriously, Lucy’s a big girl. She can make her own decisions on dating or not dating you. Just don’t tell her I encouraged you to talk to her. That would scare her off for sure.”

Jimmy’s reply was lost in the room’s crosstalk. Cat sat on the edge of Clark’s desk and saw that he was reading an article on why some parents gave up their children for adoption. His body language told her that this was not a time for joking with him. “Looking for yourself or for a friend?” she asked gently.

He looked up at her and picked up a pen. “For a feature article I asked Perry for. And for myself, I guess.”

She reached out and touched his wrist. “Want to talk about it?”

He fidgeted for a moment, then said, “Yeah, maybe, I think I do.” He leaned back in his chair and pulled off his glasses to rub his face, then quickly put them back on. “I’ve known adopted kids whose new parents treat them as separate from the natural ones. Most foster kids – at least the ones who make it all the way through the system to age eighteen – spend a lot of time wondering why their biological parents gave them up. Were the kids too hard to handle? Did they come along at an inconvenient time? Did the parents just not care enough to keep them? If they’re lucky and get adopted, they often wonder whether the adoptive parents are sincere or just trying to score brownie points with their neighbors. Questions like that are always in the backs of their minds.”

He turned to face her directly. “The Kents are my adoptive parents, and I’m an only child. When I was about twelve or thirteen, they told me that some unmarried cousin from way west of Smallville – I got the impression she was in Idaho, although if I remember correctly they never actually said so – had had an affair with a married man, and since they couldn’t have any kids of their own, they were thrilled to take me in and share their name with me.”

Cat gave him a soft smile. “I bet they’re still thrilled.”

“That’s what they say.”

She tilted her head to one side. “You sound like you don’t quite believe them.”

He frowned for a moment, then his face lit up. “Do I? I didn’t mean to send that message. I believe them without reservation. They’ve always supported me and treated me as well as any other kid I’ve ever met. In fact, I’m kind of spoiled in the family department.”

She smiled brightly. “That’s great. Sounds a lot like my relationship with my folks.”

Clark’s mouth opened, but before he could reply, an unfamiliar voice from the elevator bank cried out, “Listen up, people! I have a federal warrant authorizing me to confiscate all computers and digital storage media at the Daily Planet.”

Perry popped out of his office as if shot from a cannon. He stepped in front of the group of black-suited men and tried to bar their way. “Hang on a minute! You can’t just barge in here like a pack of wolves and start issuing orders! This is a major newspaper!”

The reference to the “pack of wolves” was a deliberate signal to certain Planet employees. Cat, Lois, Karen, Eduardo, and Myerson all joined Perry in yelling at the men in black as Jimmy slipped to one of the terminals and entered a code, then a double password combination. Cat knew that the contents of the paper’s hard disks and any floppies in drives would be backed up to a secure server offsite, and the same on-line disks would be purged of all files in specific Planet sub-folders. Those employees not in the know joined the ones who knew the drill just on general principles, and together they created a cacophony of confusion which blunted the agents’ advance and appeared to confuse them. They must not be used to this kind of opposition, Cat mused.

If the federal invaders knew about the special backups, they

would already have taken steps to block or terminate the process. If not, then they were either poorly prepared or poorly led, or both. It was even possible that they weren’t really Feds.

The man who seemed to be leading the agents tried yelling back at his tormenters to regain the upper hand, but when that didn’t work, he signaled to his men. They, in turn, spread out in a semicircle and pulled out their weapons. Each man jacked a shell into the breech of his pistol. The volume in the room decreased almost immediately.

Lois slowly reached for her purse – where her Beretta lay – but Jimmy intercepted her hand and held it. They engaged in a staring contest until Cat caught Lois’ eye and shook her head. Jimmy didn’t let go until Lois nodded microscopically and stepped away from her weapon.

The presumptive leader of the agents smiled condescendingly as the noise abated, then said, “Much better. As I was about to say, the alternative to our taking your computers and diskettes is for us to interview three of your people right here and right now.” He held out one hand, snapped his fingers, and a small piece of paper appeared in his hand. “I want to talk to Lois Lane, Catharine Grant, and Clark Kent.”

“Fine,” Perry said. “Just give me our copy of the warrant and we can get started.” Then other man glared at the editor, who finally shrugged. “That’s fine, too. No warrant, no search, no seizure, no interviews.” The man reached into his jacket again, and Perry barked out, “That’s not negotiable, mister! We get a copy or you get to ride the elevator back to the first floor!”

The man pulled another piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to Perry, who did a quick visual comparison of the two documents. Finally he said, “This better stand up in court, buster, or you’re in for a boatload of bad publicity.”

Cat lifted the Venetian blinds and peered into the newsroom from the conference room where they had been herded. “Nuts. I hate waiting.”

Clark had found a deck of playing cards in one of the desks and was flipping them one by one across the room into an otherwise empty trash can. “They also serve who only stand and wait.”

Cat slapped the blinds shut. “What the freak does that mean, anyway? Who said it?”

Lois surprised Cat by saying, “John Milton. It’s from a sonnet called ‘On His Blindness,’ refers to him having a legitimate function in the world despite losing his vision.”

Clark asked, “How did you know that?”

“Yeah, Lois, that’s not exactly common knowledge. Or the usual high school drivel.”

She settled back in her chair and smiled. “When I was taking my MOS security training, we had a private who hated waiting and doing nothing, just like you. One day the platoon sergeant ordered him to stand a twelve-hour guard post at a walk-in gate nobody used anymore. It was just his rotation, but he voiced his displeasure a little too loudly and the sergeant ordered him to memorize the sonnet by next day’s roll call.”

Cat waited for the rest of the story, and when Lois seemed disinclined to continue, she barked, “Don’t stop there! Did he recite the poem or not?”

Lois’ mouth twitched at the corners. “His alternative was to wash out of school, so yeah, he gave an impassioned performance the next morning.”

Cat chuckled with the other two, then turned to Clark. “Have you missed yet with any of those cards? Or are you using some kind of radar control to hit your target?”

He pulled a joker out of the deck and held it up for Cat and Lois to see. “Nah. Just showing off.” Then he flipped it at the trash can. The card hit the rim of the opening and fell to the floor. He smiled and shrugged.

Lois chuckled again, but Cat gave him a “You did that on purpose” glare. Before she could grill him on his accuracy with the cards or accuse him of showing off for Lois, the conference room door swung open and their boss slipped into the room.

Lois frowned at Perry. “Is that special job finished yet?”

He nodded. “About ten minutes ago. I’m sure glad Jimmy is on our side.”

Cat said, “Aside from that, what’s our legal status with these bozos?”

“Well, boys and girls, this guy – says his name is Jason Trask – tells me that what he really wants to do is polygraph the three of you.”

“All at once?”

Perry almost smiled. “I don’t think that would work, Clark. He says that if the three of you talk to him – individually, I’m sure – he won’t take our computers with him. As far as I’m concerned, it’s entirely your choice. I’ll back you no matter what you decide.”

Cat looked at Lois, who was wearing a grin which made her resemble a lioness guarding her kill. “Oh, I’ll talk to them, Perry,” Lois said.

Perry looked at her and shuddered. “I think we should let Cat go first. That is, if you’re willing.”

Cat crossed her arms, then nodded. “I’ll talk. They might not like what I say, though.”

“That’s up to you, too. How about you, Clark?”

He lifted one Spockian eyebrow. “You are making a logical error when you assume that either Catharine or Lois will leave them both willing and able to ask questions.”

Trask stalked behind Cat and snapped out instructions. “You will sit still and breathe normally. For calibration purposes, you will answer ‘yes’ to the first two questions. Do you understand these instructions?”

She arranged her features angelically. “Yes.”

“Good. Is your name Catharine Grant?”

“Yes.”

“Are you the queen of Florida?”

“No.”

Trask growled softly. “You are supposed to answer ‘yes’ to the first two questions.”

“I did. The one about Florida was your third question.”

He let out an exasperated sigh and spoke to the machine’s operator. “We’ll start over. Answer ‘yes’ to my next two questions. Is your name Catharine Grant?”

“Yes.”

“Are you Superman’s lover?”

A lascivious grin spread over her face. “Oh, yes.”

He looked at the operator, who nodded. “Very well. Are you able to contact Superman at any time?”

“Only at our secret lover’s hideaway.”

Trask spun and leaned into her face. “You will answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to all my questions!”

Cat didn’t respond verbally.

“Why didn’t you answer me?”

“You didn’t ask me a question, you gave me an order.”

He grabbed her chair and turned it to face him. “Then answer this one. Are you able to contact Superman at any time?”

“Yes or no.”

“What?”

“You told me to answer ‘yes or no’ to all of your questions. You left out a preposition in your most recent instructions, by the way.”

Trask stood slowly. “Your level of cooperation will be duly noted. You can leave now.”

She jumped up and nearly pulled the machine off the desk where it was resting. “Wait!” yelled the operator. “I have to disconnect you!”

She stopped and put her hands on her hips. “Men! Do you have any idea how difficult it is to deal with you? First you can’t count the questions you ask. Then I tell you where I meet Superman and you don’t believe me. Next you yell at me for not answering when you don’t ask a question. Then you tell me how to answer and get mad when I answer the way you told me to! You might as well have asked me to make a ham sandwich for you!” She frowned and crossed her arms. “Typical man, doesn’t know what he really wants.”

Trask had the appearance of someone trying very hard not to lose his temper. After a long moment chewing on his lower lip, he forced out, “Please ask Mr. Kent to come in when you leave.”

“Fine! You two should get along very well. He doesn’t know what he wants either!”

She opened the door, stepped through, slammed it shut, and flounced to the conference room.

Clark opened the office door and stepped into the office, then closed the door and stood where he was.

Trask pointed at the chair in front of the polygraph. “I hope you plan to be more cooperative than Ms. Grant was, Mr. Kent. Even if you don’t know what you want.”

Clark drew back. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Trask almost answered, then gritted his teeth and muttered, “Never mind. Just get in the chair.”

“No thank you.”

“What?”

“I believe that I was clear and succinct. I’ll repeat my response: No thank you.”

“What do you mean ‘no thank you?’ You don’t exactly have a choice!”

Clark crossed his arms. “Actually, I do. The results of a polygraph test can’t be admitted into any criminal court proceeding, only in some civil actions with lots of qualifications. I choose not to submit myself to this examination, especially without my attorney present.”

“You said you’d talk to me!”

“See me in front of you right now? This is me, talking. I did not say that I’d take a polygraph without my attorney present.”

“I’m with the government! You must obey any and all orders I give you!”

Clark lifted one index finger. “Only the lawful orders, Trask. And if I ask for my attorney to be present, you can’t question me further until my attorney arrives and we can have a private conversation. That one applies to both criminal and civil actions.”

“I’m only asking for information!”

“Fine. Ask away – when my attorney arrives.” Trask didn’t speak for a long breath, then he pointed to the chair. “Nope,” said Clark. “No attorney, no interview. You make the call.”

For a moment, Clark thought Trask might try to manhandle him into the chair. Fortunately the agent regained a semblance of control and yanked the door open instead. “Please send in Lois Lane.”

“Sure. Just be nice to her.”

Trask’s shoulder twitched and Clark thought he might throw a punch. Instead, he merely made a fist and stepped back stiffly.

Lois had watched Cat do her ‘dimwit redhead’ walk out of the room, then saw Clark stride out after less than a minute. She didn’t think he’d even sat down.

Things were going just right for her.

So when Trask growled at her to take the chair, she did so silently. She crossed her arms as the operator picked up the blood pressure cuff for her arm.

“Um – Ms. Lane – you have to lift your left arm so I can – oh – oh my.”

The operator stepped back as Lois lifted her right hand and

extended her middle finger at him. Trask, who was behind Lois and didn't see the motion, asked, "What's taking so long?"

"Ah – she – um – she – made a gesture at me."

Trask moved to her right side. "Miss Lane, are you going to ___"

When Lois extended her middle finger at him, Trask straightened and sighed. "That's just great," he snarled. "Why are you doing this?"

"See that glass jar on the file cabinet under the clock showing the time in Los Angeles?" Trask nodded. "That's the cuss jar. If one of us uses foul language, we put a dollar a word in it. Pays for coffee and donuts." She grinned at him. "I used to keep the coffee supplier in business. Couldn't afford it, so now I just—" her finger extended again.

"Okay, we'll play it your way. You wrote that Superman is a good guy, someone who wants to help."

"Yeah, I remember doing that."

"Is that what he told you?"

Up came the finger again.

He leaned closer. "How would you like for me to break that finger in three places?"

Lois' eyes almost glowed and she spoke through gritted teeth. "I'd love to see you try, you son of – you son of a promiscuous chimpanzee."

Before Trask could respond, another agent stepped into the room and blurted, "Perimeter is breached!"

Trask slapped the desk and snapped at the operator. "Pack up! We're leaving right now." To the agent who'd come in with the news about the perimeter, he snarled, "Get everyone together and get out as soon as you can. We'll regroup at the rendezvous point."

Lois sat still, wearing a thin smile, as the black-clad agents scrambled to leave. She noticed that not one computer was taken out of the newsroom, and she didn't think any floppies walked out the door, either. It was either the worst-executed law enforcement operation she'd ever seen or these guys were not who they'd claimed to be.

Her training and experience told her that these guys were pros, just not cops of any kind. Their actions were those of well-trained and disciplined operatives. There had to be at least one weak link, but she hadn't spotted him. And with the vocabulary they'd used, she strongly suspected that they were or had at some time been military personnel.

But there was no way they were following lawful orders.

Perry gathered his trio of investigators and led them over close to the vending machines, where a feature of the room would partially mask their voices. Clark might not know about that little trick yet, but of the three, he was the least likely to raise his voice.

"First of all, gang, good job on stonewalling those James Bond wannabees. I heard them talking among themselves before they left, and you cooperated just enough to give them hives." He allowed an evil grin to flash on his face. "And were they ever mad, all of them. You'll have to let me know exactly how each of you got under their skin."

Cat grinned. "As soon as we take them down, Chief."

"I look forward to it. Now for the not-so-good news. They—"

"Were total fakes," Lois finished for him. "I bet you don't have any real idea who they are, do you?"

Clark's eyes widened in respect. "How'd you know? Never mind, you'll tell me later. Is Lois right, Perry?"

"Yep. Nobody – not the FBI, CIA, NSA, or any other alphabet soup agency – had any idea these guys were coming to visit little ol' us. Or why they showed up at our door. I talked to one agency that doesn't have any letters to identify it, and even they were surprised. Usually nothing gets past those characters."

"So what does this mean for us?" Cat asked.

"Means the three of you are in various undetermined levels of

danger," Perry answered. "You've got to disappear for a while, maybe one day, maybe a week, until I get a better handle on these morons."

"How about Clark and Lois come stay with me? I have that spare bedroom and a foldout couch."

"No, Cat, that'd be puttin' all our fish in one barrel. All three of you can't stay in the same place. You'll have to split up. Keep your beepers in arm's reach, and you girls keep your guns handy but don't shoot anyone if you can possibly avoid it. Now go decide where you're gonna stay and don't tell anyone here where you are, me included. That way we can't lie about it."

With that, the editor abruptly spun and stalked away. Clark looked at Cat, who shrugged and said, "I guess I can stay with Mayson Drake for a few days. If she doesn't have room, she ought to have a safe house somewhere. And I think I left some of my clothes over there the last time we did something like this."

Lois nodded. "Good. Take your Glock with you, or borrow a weapon from Mayson. And I think you should drive the Buick tonight. The Porsche is too conspicuous."

"What about you?" asked Clark.

"I have an idea about that, assuming you think it's a good idea too."

Clark decided once again that he liked Lois' idea of hiding in plain sight, especially since they'd be hiding together.

He set her down just inside the Lexor's bridal suite. Wearing a stone-faced blank expression, the young bellhop asked, "Would you like for me to unpack your suitcases for you?"

Lois giggled and wrapped herself around Clark's right arm. "I wouldn't bother if I were you. We probably won't need everything we brought."

Clark's face colored and he stage-whispered, "Dear, I think we need to work on our boundaries, okay?"

The bellhop shook his head without changing expression. "Don't worry, sir. I'm Sergeant Schultz – I see nothing, I hear nothing, I know nothing. Oh, we usually present a complimentary bottle of champagne to newlywed couples. Would you like yours now, later this evening, or some time tomorrow afternoon?"

Clark extricated his arm from Lois' grip, then pulled out his wallet and extracted several dollar bills. "One of these has a buddy with the number twenty printed on it, along with Andrew Jackson's face. If you'll bring that bottle up here around two PM tomorrow, those friends can be reunited."

The bellhop nodded and took the bills Clark offered him without a flinch. "Yes, sir, two o'clock it is. The TV schedule and remote are in front of the screen, and there are complimentary terrycloth robes in the main closet. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon."

"And not before, right?" bubbled Lois.

"No, ma'am, not before." With that, he walked out of the suite and gently closed the door.

Lois grabbed her overnight bag and all but sprinted to the bathroom. She laughed and called out, "See you in a few minutes, honey. Don't start without me!"

Clark glanced through the door to see the bellhop enter the elevator at the far end of the hallway. For a moment, he thought about signaling Lois that the youth was still there, but his sense of self-preservation asserted itself and he knocked on the bathroom door. "We're alone now."

The door opened and Lois walked out wearing sweats. "Good. I was beginning to think he'd never get the hint."

"I don't think he – what are you doing?"

She pulled a black teddy out of her bag, crumpled it up between her hands, and threw it at an empty corner of the room. "Now if someone comes in unexpectedly, it'll look more like we're really newlyweds. Oh, you might want to toss a pair of pajamas on the floor."

"I'll throw mine on top of yours and they can make little thongs."

That almost-grin reappeared on her face. It was much smaller than the one she'd worn to fool the bellhop, but it was far more honest. "You do have a sense of humor, don't you, Kent?"

"Are you telling me that I'm trying too hard?"

She sat in an overstuffed chair and leaned back. "Who, me, the blushing bride?"

He decided it was time to change the subject before they wandered too far into unknown territory. "It's seven-twenty in the evening," Clark said. "If we turn on the TV after your earlier performance, we risk blowing our cover. No one would believe that you'd force your husband to wait to consummate the marriage. What would you like to talk about?"

"Hmm. I think – yes. I want to know a bit more about you. Specifically, I want to know about your travels overseas after you got your degree. And if you're comfortable telling me, I want to know why you wandered so much."

He sat on the end of the bed and looked at the floor. After a long minute, he said, "Okay. I'll tell you why I wandered so much, as long as you remember that, as Gandalf the Grey told Frodo, not all who wander are lost."

Her expression remained serious and she nodded. "Copy that."

He thought for a moment, then said, "It's because I never found a place I could call home. I know I'm always welcome in Smallville, but I wasn't comfortable as a farmer or a part-time editor-slash-reporter at the town paper. Most of my stories were about crops or emergencies like fires or floods. Once I got to report on a tornado that tore up a few fields and a barn, but it was always local stuff. I wanted – I still want to be a part of the important action and make a significant difference, not compare the number of goats born in April over the ones born over the same time period for the last five years."

Lois' voice softened. "So you went looking for a place to call your own." He looked up at her and nodded. "Have you found it yet?"

He tilted his head to one side. He felt his eyes brighten and he said, "I think so, yes."

She shifted in the chair and crossed her ankles. "Did you find it in a geographical place or a person?"

"A combination, I think. I enjoy working at the Planet, with almost everyone in the newsroom—"

"Almost everyone?"

He suddenly tasted spoiled lemon juice. "If Ralph has any redeeming features, I've yet to identify them."

They shared a chuckle. "Anyone in particular you enjoy working with?"

"Yes, actually. I really like investigating with you and Catharine. You're very good doing hard news, she's slippery and sneaky, and between the two of you, the bad guys don't stand much of a chance."

From her chair, Lois dipped her head in a very slight bow. "Thank you, sir. You know, you're not bad with the touchy-feely stuff. You find angles that I don't even consider and that Cat might skip over to get to the victim's throat. You're a good balance to the team, and so far you're pulling your weight without being all macho about it."

"I'm scared to try it around you. I might get beaten to a pulp."

Lois waved her hand dismissively. "I'm more bark than bite, Clark."

"Not sure that's true, but for the sake of my intact skin I'll let it pass."

"Smart move." She shifted position and said, "You haven't found a woman to share your life either, have you?"

His mouth opened in surprise and he looked away, then said, "No. Not yet."

"I'd guess that's one of the things you've been looking for."

"If she's out there, she hasn't let me know about her yet." He paused and took a deep breath, then exhaled through his nose and decided to open up to her a little. "I was a world traveler after I got my degree. I learned ballroom dancing from a Nigerian princess. I lived with a tribe of Australian aborigines for three months to get a story on them, and a girl from Melbourne who was working on her doctorate in native cultures stayed with me. I worked on a deep-sea fishing boat one fall with a woman in Massachusetts. I spent five months with a woman in Argentina who introduced me to a tribe who claimed to be direct descendants of the Mayans. And I got roped into living with a rich banking family in Mexico City who had a daughter they wanted me to marry."

Lois almost smiled. "You've had a hard life, Kent."

"Every one of those women wanted me to share their beds. I never slept with any of them."

"Excuse my curiosity, but – why not?"

"Simple. I didn't want to repopulate the planet."

This time she did smile. "Ever have any problems with those women or their families?"

He sighed. "Yes. Most of them accused me of disappointing them. At least two of them thought I was gay. One very delicately asked if I were impotent."

"I take it that you're neither gay nor impotent?"

"No. You can ask Catharine if you doubt me." He paused while she snorted daintily. "Oh, I forgot to mention the two young women in Smallville who had a fistfight over me in the middle of town."

They shared another soft laugh, then Clark asked, "May I ask you a question?"

"I reserve the right to decline to answer, but you can ask."

"Thank you. Please don't take offense at this, but I've been wondering how you injured your knee."

Lois went still and Clark opened his mouth to withdraw the question, but she lifted one hand, looked away, filled her lungs, then exhaled deeply.

"It's not a pretty story."

"I didn't expect it to be."

She looked at him, then away again. "Screwy as this may sound, I think I can trust you with this. Not many people know all the details." She shifted position, then added, "Cat knows most of it."

"I'm honored."

She turned and gave him a sharp glance, but seemed satisfied that he was sincere. "You know I was in the Army, right?" Clark nodded. "I was an E4 – a Specialist, something like a sergeant but in a different level in the chain of command – with dual training in security and field medicine. I was assigned to a forward fire base in the Middle East as support for the garrison stationed there. My CO tasked me to help provide security and medical support for a supply convoy. It was the same kind of mission I'd done a couple of weeks earlier, the one where Sarah Ferguson was shot."

Clark nodded again. "I interviewed her in Germany. She said the medic who treated her saved her life, but she couldn't remember the medic's name. Her doctor told me it was a kind of short-term traumatic amnesia, common in people who suffer life-threatening injuries."

"I didn't know she told anyone that. I'm just glad she made it." Lois closed her eyes in a long blink, then took another deep breath and continued. "Sarah came away from that action with a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star. The mission where she was wounded was a lot like the one where I – I got hit. Up to a point, anyway."

"Things were quiet for most of the trip until we got to the last turn. Then it seemed like every machine gun in the city started firing at us at once." Lois touched a spot on the outside of her right leg immediately above her knee. "As I was hauling people into our Hummer, I caught a round right here. It was a 5.56 NATO round,

about the same size as our .223 round in the M-16. I really shouldn't have moved once I got inside."

It was Clark's turn to speak gently. "But you did anyway."

"Yeah. I – uh – I looked up as someone fired through the windshield, I think it was a heavy machine gun, and I saw both drivers get hit at almost the same moment. I knew the main driver was already dead and the one in the other seat grabbed his chest and slumped forward. Everyone else was yelling or shooting or both, and we were the lead vehicle and we were blocking the road, so without thinking about it I gave myself a morphine shot and somehow got into the driver's seat. The engine was still running, so I threw it in gear and led the other two vehicles back to base.

"They told me I passed out as soon as we cleared the gate and I turned off the engine. I don't remember that part, though. My counselor says that I might never remember it, and if I don't that's okay. Might be the best thing for me. Another case of traumatic amnesia, I guess." She turned in the chair to face away from him. "My next memory is being on a C-130 flying over the Mediterranean and going straight to surgery after we landed in Germany. I started physical therapy the next day. Then I got my Purple Heart and a Silver Star." She dropped her chin onto both fists and trembled slightly, then said, "We lost five good men on that patrol, three dead and two badly wounded. I was lucky – I got to keep my leg. It was touch and go for a few days, but that bullet ended my military career. I have a really nice puckered scar on my leg, and I can only walk or run so far before my leg gives out. The three who died and the two others who were hit weren't so lucky."

He reached out and touched her wrist. "I'm sorry you went through that, Lois. It had to have been awful."

She waited for a few seconds, then leaned back out of reach. He didn't follow. "Thanks," she said. "Just – just don't try to fix me, okay? I have a pro working on that."

He shook his head. "First day we met, I told you I wasn't a physical therapist. I'm not a psychologist, either. I wouldn't have any idea how to fix somebody who's been through combat."

She nodded. "Good. I mean, good that you won't try to fix me."

"Promise. Hey, how did you get a job at the Planet? Given your educational background, I mean."

"I flirted with Perry at my interview." She grinned and shook her head. "Just kidding. In between and during my base assignments, I took enough college courses to earn an Associate's degree in journalism. I met the experience requirements with the pieces I got published in the Army papers and the ones I sold as a freelancer."

"Sounds a little like what I went through for my experience, just without the military service." He stood slowly. "I'll take the couch tonight. You take the bed, which I'm sure is much more comfortable."

"Thanks." She stood, then picked up her bag and moved toward the bedroom. "Thanks for not calling me a hero, too."

He tilted his head to one side. "Why is that? I mean, you sound like you don't want the label. But why not?"

She stopped near the doorway but didn't look back at him. "Because I was just doing my job. And because the damage that bullet did forced me out of the Army." She took a deep, shuddering breath, then said, "I wasn't planning on an appointment to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but I did want to leave the Army on my own terms. I didn't get that chance."

"And now you're a reporter. A very good one, too."

"I try." She gave him a hollow-eyed glance over her shoulder. "And even us very good reporters need rack time."

"Rack time?"

"Sleep. Good night, Clark."

"Sleep well, Lois."

Clark's pager went off the next morning just before eight

o'clock. He managed to turn it off before it woke Lois, but it didn't matter because hers went off before he knew where to look for it. He heard her talking to Perry on the cell phone.

She walked into the front room of the suite fully alert and holding the phone open. "It's Perry. He's got something for us."

He looked over her shoulder at the last number called display. "Same number as on mine. I'll call in while you get dressed."

She handed him the phone. "I'll be ready in five."

Clark dialed the number on the beeper display. "Chief? It's CK."

"Kent. Good. Did you and Lois stay at the same place last night?"

"Yes."

"Then come in to the paper with her. The warrant that idiot flashed at us yesterday was as phony as an Elvis impersonator. This guy has no idea how much hurt he's pullin' down on himself."

"Who would risk so much using a phony search warrant? And why?"

"It's your job to work that out, Kent. I've already called Cat. Be ready to start on this thing when you come in."

"Will do, Chief. We'll get there as soon as we can."

"Then stop jawin' and start gettin'!"

Lois opened the bathroom door as Clark closed the flip phone. "It's back to the salt mines for us."

"That's what he told me," she said. "Perry wants us in the office ten minutes ago."

"I'm sure glad we're on his side. I bet he's madder than a cat whose tail was just stepped on."

"Sounds like something he'd say. You hit the head while I pack our clothes."

"Do we charge the room to the Planet?"

"I've got a special credit card Perry lets us use if we need to stay off the grid. If anyone tries to track it back to the corporate owner, they'll end up finding a non-existent dummy corporation."

"Smart, especially if the story moves as fast as this one."

She gave him a hard stare. "You just finish getting dressed ASAP, Kent. And don't yell at me if your skivvies aren't folded on the crease. We've got work to do."

"Will do. Hey, what about our cover? Wouldn't the happy newlyweds be sleeping late?"

She paused in the bedroom doorway. "If anyone asks, you're a cheating louse and I'm getting an annulment."

He waited until she left the front room before calling to her and saying, "Why is it always my fault?"

Her voice echoed from the next room. "Ask all those women who went after you that question, Kent. I'm sure they'll each have a really good answer."

Chapter Eight

As soon as Clark and Lois walked onto the news floor, Jimmy handed Lois a file folder. She sat at her desk and opened it so both Cat and Clark could look at it over her shoulders.

She paged through the contents, looking for something to pop out at her, when Clark said, "Hold it!" and put his finger on a photo of nine men in Air Force uniforms. "Project Bluebook?" he muttered. "How old is this picture? And why is it here in the first place?"

Cat reached out and touched a different part of the photo. "See this guy? He was in charge yesterday, giving orders and asking questions. He was a lot younger when this photo was taken, but this guy's name is – where are the names—"

"Jason Trask," Clark read from the caption below the photo. "This lists his rank as staff sergeant. Lois, what does that rank represent? What kind of responsibilities would he have?"

"He was an E-6, basically an administrative assistant to a captain or major and/or squad leader. It's two pay grades above

my old slot with more responsibility than I had. Still, there's no way the Air Force would give a former E-6 the kind of authority he was throwing around yesterday. Whatever that was, it was definitely outside the normal chain of command." She lifted her head and found her target. "Jimmy!"

He pivoted on his toes and hustled to her desk. "You bellowed, milady?"

She frowned and said, "Be funny later and not around me." Then she indicated the photo. "You have anything else on these guys?"

He pointed to a slender white-haired man seated to one side. "This guy is Captain George Thompson. He retired as a full colonel in 1982." He pointed to a craggy-faced man wearing eagles on his collar. "Burton Newcomb, then a colonel, retired 1992 as a Major General. Highly decorated for both valor and leadership." He indicated the man who'd led the invasion the previous day. "This guy, Jason Trask, is a ghost. When Bluebook was terminated in 1969, he disappeared from the Air Force's ranks with no ceremony. Nobody seems to know where he lives or who he works for now."

"So he's our most likely suspect," Lois said. "Do the other six have any connection to Trask?"

Jimmy shook his head. "I haven't found anything connecting them yet. Two of these dudes are dead now. I can find cause and circumstances if you need them. The other four survivors are located out west in various places – two in Texas, one in Arizona, and one in Oregon. They don't seem to be linked to each other or to the government in any way. Thompson is a traveling troubleshooter for Bessolo Industries, basically a lobbying firm whose headquarters are in Washington D.C. If any of these guys are connected to Trask, it's one or both of those two."

Cat straightened and flexed her shoulders. "Do we know where Thompson and Newcomb are now?"

He nodded. "Newcomb lives here in Metropolis, does consulting on the side for the Air Force and the entertainment businesses here. Thompson lives in Chicago, but he's here this week on unspecified business."

"Business for the Air Force?"

"I haven't been able to pin that down yet, Cat, but it seems likely."

"Okay," said Cat. "I think Jimmy should keep digging while Lois and I go see George Thompson. That sound good to everyone?"

Clark said, "Why don't we try to get Thompson to come see us? It might be better if he's on our turf."

Lois stood. "I like it. Jimmy, can you get in touch with Thompson and try to get him down here?"

He nodded. "Will do. He's in the company's local office today, so I should be able to find him."

Jimmy left on his errand. Cat, Clark, and Lois all looked at each other for a couple of heartbeats, then Clark said, "You want to play good cop/bad cop with him? I can be the bad cop."

Cat shook her head in the negative. "Lois and I will play against type, with me as the bad cop. You sit at my desk next to us and do some real research while Lois and I whipsaw this guy. If he acts like he's seen Lois' airhead impersonation, he'll let us know in a hurry. If not, Lois can do her Betty Boop act while I get all up in his grill with a terrific Bogart. Either way, we can crack him like a peanut, and if he gets physical you can step in and shut him down."

"Wait just a danged minute!" Lois objected. "I can shut him down myself! There's no need for Clark to step into the crosshairs!"

"Hey," Clark broke in, "I can handle myself just fine. Thompson's got to be in his 60s by now, and I don't care how good he used to be in a fight. I know I can take him."

Lois spun on her toes as if executing a "right face" command.

"Put the testosterone back in the bottle, Kent!" she hissed. "We don't need you to come across like a nine-hundred-pound gorilla! In fact, I'm not sure we need you at all!"

"You need me for deli deliveries if nothing else."

"A lot of the time that's all you're good for!"

Clark's eyes narrowed and he crossed his arms. "Catharine was right. That day we met was one of your good days."

Lois took in a breath that threatened to become a full-throated yell, but Cat stepped between them and pushed them apart. It was harder to move either one of them than she'd thought it would be.

"That's enough, both of you!" she growled. "I'm still senior on this team and what I say goes! We go after Thompson like I outlined a minute ago! Got that?"

Neither Clark nor Lois answered her, but at least they were only staring at each other and not yelling. "Clark!" Cat demanded. "You got that?"

He took a deep breath and released it slowly, then nodded. "I got it."

"Good. Lois, how about you? You got it?"

Lois bared her teeth and sucked in a sharp breath, then said, "Copy that, command."

"Good. Jimmy's calling Thompson to get him down here. Clark, you get with Lois for as much information about Newcomb as you can find. Whatever we get from Thompson, we'll have to verify it with Newcomb. Worst case scenario, he admits nothing but gets spooked into letting us follow him." She clapped her hands twice. "Let's get to it, people."

Cat mentally sighed in relief as her teammates turned to work on their assigned tasks. For a moment, it had felt to her as if the two of them were going to come to blows over the interview. And not because of a byline or to score points with Perry, either. They had behaved like two people trying to protect each other.

Like two people who were starting to care deeply about each other but who were unwilling to admit it to each other – or even to themselves.

It was not a satisfying deduction.

Lois grabbed her purse, made sure she was carrying one of the Planet's new mobile phones, and sprinted down the stairway. Her last view of Cat and Clark showed her the two of them hunched over the computer on Lois' desk, looking for information on Thompson's current job responsibilities.

The interview had rattled the retired colonel but hadn't produced anything solid. He'd been pushed off-center by Lois' squeaky Marilyn Monroe airhead impersonation, then whipsawed by Cat's pile driver questioning style. But his most visible reaction – intimidation – had been to Clark's silence, especially when Clark stood, handed one of the women a printout, and pointed to the pertinent section. Even Lois, who believed that she was getting to know Clark well, had been startled once by his stare combined with narrowed eyes and crossed arms. Fortunately, Thompson hadn't seen her react.

On the street, Thompson – who, Lois was certain, was up to his neck in illegal activities – ignored Sherlock Holmes' admonition to ignore the first cab to stop for him. She climbed into the next taxi and said the magic words every driver longs to hear but very few ever do.

"Follow that cab!"

The dark-skinned driver tugged on his multi-colored watch cap and grinned at her. "Hey, lady, you hang on, okay, cause we gonna go like crazy fast now!"

Lois stopped counting the traffic laws the man bent long before he pulled up and stopped half a block away from the first cab's destination. "We gonna follow the cab now when it leave, yes?"

"I don't know yet." She dug in her purse for the mobile phone. "I'll let you know when I do."

“Okay, so long as you know de meter he gonna keep runnin’.”
 “I won’t hold you here for long.”

Cat leaned back in her chair and let out a long breath. “If I never hear about Project Bluebook again, I’ll die a happy woman.”

Clark began gathering the papers they’d been working on. “And here I thought I was the only one who had fits like that.”

“You’re not. I just hope Thompson leads Lois some place we can get into and learn something.”

Just then the phone rang and Cat answered. “Daily Planet, Cat Grant – Lois? Great! What have you got? Uh-huh.” She turned to Clark and mimed a pen and a notebook. “Hang on, I’m getting one – got it! Give me the address again – it’s a what? Bessolo Industries? Why would a consulting firm need a warehouse? Yeah, Clark’s here with me now. We’ll try to track it down – wait a minute, that building’s in Jimmy’s research under some other name.” She flipped open the folder and quickly found a printed sheet with written notes in Jimmy’s hand. “Yeah. When Bluebook shut down in 1969, they transferred a bunch of assets to something called Bureau 39. That warehouse was one of the properties. Let the cab go. We’ll be down there ASAP so we can all go in together.”

Cat hung up the phone and turned to Clark to fill him in, but stopped when she saw his face. “Clark?” she said. “You look pale all of a sudden. You okay?”

He leaned on the desk with both hands. “Not sure. Did you get a glimpse of the papers Thompson had with him when he came in?”

“No, he kept them turned away from me. Lois may have seen them. Why?”

He seemed to rally as he spoke. “There was a folder on top labeled ‘Smallville – 1969’ with the notation B39 stamped on the front. I’m sure it stood for Bureau 39. My parents told me that some government men came through Smallville just after they started taking care of me, asking questions about me and asking one of our neighbors for permission to dig up one of his fields. My folks tried to deflect the questions but they weren’t sure how successful they’d been. But I haven’t heard anything about these clowns since then.” He straightened and his voice turned hard. “I’ll have to talk to my parents about this tonight.”

Cat stood beside him and gently grasped his elbow. “The only thing we’re sure of right now is that these idiots are worried about finding Superman. We’ll stop them, I promise.”

Clark’s color was back, along with his determined expression. “Let’s go find Lois and keep that promise, Catharine.”

Individually, the three of them cased the warehouse for nearly half an hour, then met up at a coffee shop down the street to compare notes. Cat doodled on a legal pad while Clark and Lois talked through infiltrating the building.

“I wonder how long Bureau 39 has been there?” said Lois.

“At least five years,” Clark answered.

“How do you know?”

“The sign out front is untreated lumber, quality wood but weathered pretty well. It’s been there a while. And there’s no indication that it was mounted anywhere else.”

“It could have been artificially weathered.”

Cat took a sip of her lukewarm coffee. “Jimmy found the warehouse – same business name – in the business directory from six years ago. I think Clark’s right about how long they’ve been there.”

Lois nodded. “I’ll accept that as a working hypothesis. I couldn’t tell what kind of security they had. Either of you know?”

Cat shook her head, but Clark said, “There’s a card reader beside the front door. There are two side doors, but they look newer than the building itself. I’d guess they’re the kind that auto-locks from the outside and opens from the inside with a push bar,

basically just emergency exits.”

“So we’d need a card key to get in,” mused Lois. “Who would have one?”

Cat and Clark both brightened at the same time. Together, they said, “Newcomb.”

Lois flipped the folder shut. “Then he’s our next stop. Everybody hit the head and then let’s go see him.”

Clark was impressed once again with his co-worker’s efficiency and drive. Cat hadn’t lost a step since his freshman semester at Met U.

But that shouldn’t have been on his mind at the moment.

A quick call told them that Newcomb had gone home for the night and would be in his office in the morning. When Cat asked what the retired general did that required an office, the young man who answered the phone told them that he was a technical advisor for TV shows, movies, and books. The young man also divulged that he had a late morning appointment the next day on a Korean War history about the Pusan perimeter. Cat asked for and received a tentative appointment for two people the next morning at nine-thirty.

She hung up her phone and scowled at it. “I hate waiting. The universe is trying to teach me patience by making me wait and I hate it.”

Clark grinned at her. “You talk like the universe has a will and a memory.”

“Sometimes I think the universe actively dislikes me.”

He chuckled. “Stephen Crane, the author of *The Red Badge of Courage*, would disagree with you. In fact, he wrote a poem about it.”

Lois caught his eye and smiled slightly. “Really? How does it go?”

Clark straightened and declaimed the poem as if he were presenting an Emmy-winning speech on Broadway.

A man said to the universe, “Sir, I exist!”

“However,” replied the universe, “that fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation.”

As the two women stared at him, he resumed his folksy manner and said, “Crane was apparently something of a cynic and fatalist. His point was that the universe doesn’t care about the individual people living in it.”

Cat tilted her head and asked, “What do you think?”

“I think that there is someone out there who cares a great deal. It’s just not the universe.”

Lois crossed her arms and frowned. “You’re talking about God?”

“Maybe.”

Her voice turned brittle. “If that’s true, tell me where God was when my patrol was ambushed and we had three men killed and two crippled and I nearly lost my leg!”

Clark took in a breath, then let it out. “God didn’t do that, Lois. Bad people did that. They chose to attack your column. And if you think God should take away all the bad people in the world, you need to know where to start and where to stop.”

“So we’d need to know who’s bad enough to take out before they do their nasty worst?”

“Yes. And we’d need to know the good that person might do later in life, too. History is full of people who start out mean and selfish but end up helping others. I don’t know about you, but that knowledge is above my pay grade. On top of that, if you take the position that God should prevent the bad people from doing bad things, you’re telling God to force them to do good. Unless you’re also willing to be forced to do good, you can’t honestly and sincerely do that to someone else. It would eliminate freedom of choice from the human race.”

Both Cat and Lois looked like they were thinking unfamiliar

thoughts. And he felt like he'd shared enough philosophy for the evening. So he moved back a half-step and said, "Ladies, it's late, we can't get to Newcomb until tomorrow, and we've pretty much read the ink off Jimmy's notes. I suggest we each go home and get some sleep, then come back in the morning ready to hit it again."

Cat blinked once, then again, only slower, then said, "Sounds like a plan to me. We'll meet back at my desk at seven o'clock tomorrow morning and plan our assault on Bureau 39."

Martha watched her son play with his food. It was unusual for him not to eat, so her natural mother's curiosity got the better of her. "Clark, what's bothering you now?"

He looked up at her. "I need you to tell me all about the night you found me. I want to be certain I've got the details straight in my mind."

She sat up. "Your father and I were on our way back home just after dusk when we saw what we thought was a meteorite crash down in Schuster's Field. We walked up on it and found a long furrow in the ground. At the end of it was a small glowing pod with your Superman symbol on the front."

Jonathan took up the tale. "I was in front of your mother, so I saw it first. When we got about ten feet from it, the glow faded to nothing until a seal cracked open and a – I guess it was a door, or maybe a hatch – a door just above the red Superman crest opened upward and we could see a baby inside."

The only indicator of Clark's emotions was the metal fork he slowly folded in his hand. "So you don't really know where I came from. I might be a Russian baby or an American space experiment."

"Oh, honey," his mother said, "we didn't care if you were Russian or some science experiment or from Mars. All we knew was that we loved you the minute we saw you."

Jonathan nodded in agreement. "That's right, Clark. And that's why we cooked up that story about the cousin in Idaho. We didn't want anyone to take you away from us."

Clark suddenly noticed the bent fork. He put it on the table gently. "Sorry. Guess I – forgot what I was doing."

Martha squeezed his hand. "It's just a fork. We can get more."

He picked it up and his hands flashed and suddenly the fork was as good as new. He blew on it for a moment to cool it, then said, "There. All fixed."

"Thanks, honey."

He sat back and looked at his mother. "What happened to the ship?"

Her eyes dropped to her plate and she sighed. "I had your father destroy it. We were afraid that one of those men—"

"I didn't."

Clark and Martha both dropped their mouths open. Martha recovered first. "Jonathan, what do you mean? What didn't you do?"

His eyes met his wife's with something of a challenge in them. "I didn't destroy the ship. I – I couldn't! It was all we had of Clark's birthplace, his history, and I was sure he'd want to know everything he could about his original family." He turned to his son and put one hand on Clark's shoulder. "I especially wanted you to know that you weren't some science experiment that lost its way."

"How could you tell, Dad? How can you possibly know that?"

Jonathan lowered his hand. "I opened it up and looked at the instrument panel. None of the markings are in any Earth language that had space capabilities then. It's not English, Russian, French, or Chinese." He hesitated, then said, "I've never seen anything else that looked like those markings did."

"What did you do with it? Can we go look at it now?"

Jonathan gave him a half-smile and stood. "It's under the floor of the barn. It's late enough so that no one should see us."

But it wasn't there.

Clark watched his mother's face fall as they discovered the theft. "Oh, Jonathan, now what do we do? Those government men must have searched the farm when we were both away." She turned to her husband, anger painting her face. "I told you we should destroy it!"

Jonathan's voice was forceful but calm. "How was I supposed to do that? The thing survived a trip through the atmosphere and a crash landing in Schuster's Field without a ding or scratch that I could find. Even if I had been able to blow it up, it would have thrown debris all over the area. We had nothing that would burn hot enough to melt steel, much less whatever that thing was made of, and we didn't have anything heavy or powerful enough to crush it. I did the best I could. I'm just sorry it wasn't good enough."

Martha put her fists against her mouth and walked around the pit where the ship had once rested. "Okay, I guess when you put it that way, I agree with you. But why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you trust me?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Because you're the worst liar in the state, Martha. If anyone had asked you straight out if we had that ship or if we knew where it was, you would have tipped them off that you knew something. I was trying to protect you."

She closed her eyes and let out a long breath. "Okay, I agree with that too. But there better not be any more important secrets between us. Not ever."

Her husband lifted his right hand. "You have my word." He turned to Clark. "Son, someone's got that ship, and whoever it is has probably connected it with Superman. The symbol on your uniform is the same as the one on the front of the ship."

Clark leaned back in thought, then nodded in agreement. "You're probably right. And I may know where it is, Dad. I'll call you guys tomorrow and let you know if we find it." He moved between them and hugged them each with one arm. "Right now I need to go back to Metropolis. Cat, Lois, and I have an early appointment in the morning."

"To do what?"

His eyes narrowed and his voice hardened. "We're going hunting for a group of alien hunters."

At sixteen minutes till seven, thinking himself early, Clark exited the Planet's elevator to see Cat and Lois sitting at Lois' desk. Their body language was too glum for a simple break and enter. Something was very wrong. Their expressions reminded him of the subjects of a story he'd done about Columbian soldiers who had been getting set to attack a cocaine cartel's main camp.

A quick scan of the desks told him that they pretty much had the floor to themselves. Even Perry hadn't yet arrived.

Before he got to the desk, Cat threw down a notepad and rubbed her face with her hands. "Now what do we do?"

Lois put one hand on Cat's shoulder and squeezed. "We do what we were planning on doing. We have a chance to put these guys under the jail, Red. Let's keep our feet under us and aim for the finish line." She glanced up and saw Clark approaching. "Here comes the rookie," she whispered. "Let's see what he's got."

He slowed, then stopped about four feet away. "Whatever happened, it wasn't good."

Cat slowly turned in her chair. "No," she sighed, "it isn't. Thompson's body was fished out of Hob's Bay about four this morning. Henderson said he'd been shot twice in the back of his head with a small-caliber pistol, a .22 or .25." She leaned forward and put her elbows on her knees. "I don't mind telling you that I'm just a little bit scared."

Clark took a small step closer. "Anyone with any sense is scared sometimes, Catharine. That fear can make us back away from danger, but it can also push us away from doing right. The right thing to do is usually the hardest thing to do. It's why so few

people do the right thing consistently.”

Cat’s hands twisted into fists. “Lois isn’t afraid of anything.” When Clark didn’t respond, she lifted her pale face to his and said, “Tell me I’m wrong.”

Clark blinked. “I don’t speak for Lois, just for me. And I’m more than a little scared about the prospect of going up against guys who don’t mind killing people.”

“But she—”

“I’m scared, Cat.”

Lois’ quiet declaration broke the tension. Cat snorted and said, “No you’re not. I’ve never seen you scared of anything.”

Lois seemed to withdraw into herself. “I’m not all that afraid of getting hurt or even killed. But I am afraid of letting down the people I care about. I’m scared of letting Clark down, of not being the reporter Perry keeps telling me I can be, and I – I’m afraid of losing you.” She dug in her purse for a moment, then pulled out a tissue and dabbed at her nose. “You’re my best friend, the friend who helped me find my way when I came to work here, the friend who wasn’t afraid to correct me when everyone else was scared I’d go off like a pressure mine if someone said the wrong thing to me. I honestly don’t know how I’d deal with life without you beside me.”

Cat smiled and patted Lois’ knee. “You’d do just fine, Annie Oakley. You’d be fine.”

Lois sat up and crossed her arms, then sent Clark a glare of warning. “That’s all off the record, Kent. Now I think we should figure out how to get into that warehouse. Newcomb is the way in, so let’s go see him.”

The retired general arrived at his office just after seven-thirty, riding in a cab with his assistant. The younger man unlocked and opened the front door, then held it for the general.

Lois, who was standing in the alley across the street, muttered, “Please tell me you can read lips better than I can, Kent.”

“Not unless I can see their mouths. They’re both facing away from me. All I can tell you is that I can see their jaws moving, so they’re talking about something. I hope Catharine has better luck watching the warehouse.”

Lois fidgeted and obviously tried not to pace. “You think five minutes is enough time for them to get settled?”

He stifled a laugh. “Most people can barely get coffee in five minutes. Let’s allow ten.”

Exactly ten foot-shifting minutes later, Lois marched to the sidewalk with Clark trying to keep up. “This man is a decorated veteran, Kent,” she snapped out. “Show him the proper respect.”

“I won’t embarrass you, I promise.” They stopped at the curb to allow a bus and a half-dozen commuters to roll past. “Major General, that’s two stars, right?”

“Yes. It also means when he retired he was a plan designer and decision maker, not just somebody carrying out orders. He put together the battle force I was with overseas.”

He frowned as he skipped across the street behind her. “That conflict wasn’t exactly the country’s greatest military triumph.”

“It also wasn’t another Vietnam, in large part thanks to General Newcomb. It’s not his fault that some of his planning was rejected. Now hush and let me do most of the talking.”

The moment Lois crossed the threshold into Newcomb’s outer office, she transformed from a reporter ready to interview a source back to a non-com about to address a general officer. She looked at the young man sitting at the front desk and said, “Lois Lane and Clark Kent of the Daily Planet to see General Newcomb.”

The young man stood, smiled, and nodded. “I’d be glad to set up an appointment with the general. I believe he has a half-hour window open next week on—”

“It’s about Bureau 39,” Clark broke in.

And there it was, that moment of recognition, the moment that told her that this young man knew more than he wanted to let on.

The man hesitated a fraction of a second and his eyes widened slightly before he could regain control. “Let me ask the general if he has some time earlier than that.”

“Please thank the general,” Lois replied.

The man nodded and knocked on the inner office door. “Invite our guests in here, Robert,” came the reply.

Robert opened the door and stepped aside, then smiled at Lois and Clark as they entered the inner sanctum.

It was something of an anti-climax. The bookshelves around the room held histories of wars, descriptions of major battles, and accounts of small-unit actions on one wall. The next set of shelves held military biographies alongside models of jeeps, trucks, tanks, and aircraft. A large bizarre hybrid plane with swept-back wings, six propeller engines facing to the rear, and a pair of jet engines in pods near the wingtips was suspended from the ceiling. Lois recognized the B-36 as the first production bomber in history designed from the beginning to carry nuclear weapons. At first glance, the room looked like any other military history nerd’s basement.

But the man standing behind the desk was no nerd. He was Major General Burton Newcomb, one of the officers deeply involved in the initial formation of the US Air Force as a separate branch of military service. He was the man who’d been awarded the Silver Star for his heroism and service during both World War II and the Korean conflict. He’d received a bronze Oak Leaf cluster to go with the Silver Star at his retirement ceremony, presented to him personally by President Heston, for his commitment to ending the Middle East conflict as quickly as possible with the fewest number of casualties on either side.

Lois Lane, reporter, had stepped through the door. But Specialist Lois Lane had all but come to attention when she stopped in front of the desk.

Newcomb smiled at her. “Specialist Four Lois Lane, Silver Star, Purple Heart, Mideast conflict, right?”

She swelled with pride that he remembered her. “Yes, sir! You awarded me both honors, sir.”

“How’s the leg doing?”

She deflated a bit. To someone who didn’t know her, she’d looked as if she’d just been adjusting her stance for comfort. “I can function as a civilian, General, but I’m out of the service due to my disability.”

Newcomb sighed. “I’m sorry about that, but you are luckier than many others.” Then he chuckled. “Please sit down, both of you. We’re all just civilians here. Now what can I do for you?”

They sat. Lois found herself tongue-tied, so she looked at Clark and nodded once. “General,” he said, “you said we’re all just civilians, but I’m under the impression that I’m the only one who really is. Lois still respects you highly for your service and your former rank, and quite properly, I believe. But there are some questions to which we need answers, and we believe that you’re the best source for this information.”

Newcomb smiled and leaned back in his chair. “In that case, please, feel free to ask. As long as you know there are certain things I still can’t discuss for national security reasons.”

Clark nodded. “We understand, sir. The first thing we’d like to ask is what you know about Bureau 39.”

The general stiffened for a very brief moment, as if he’d expected them to sneak up on the subject. The moment came and went too briefly for an inattentive person to notice.

Lois saw that Clark also saw it.

Then Newcombe leaned forward and put his forearms on the desk. “Bureau 39 was a part of Project Bluebook until 1969. The project was searching for evidence of alien life on and in the vicinity of Earth. When Bluebook ended, Bureau 39 also shut down.”

“That’s the official story, sir,” Clark replied. “But we’ve got evidence that Bureau 39 is still active. Former Staff Sergeant

Jason Trask seems to be running the show now.”

“Hmm. I would have assumed that, if what you claim about Bureau 39 is accurate, George Thompson would be heading them. If it hadn’t been deactivated, that is.”

Lois frowned at him and said, “The police pulled George Thompson’s body out of the bay early this morning. He’d been shot in the head execution-style, still had his watch, wedding ring, and wallet.”

This time anyone would have seen the general’s reaction. “George Thompson is dead?” Lois nodded. “Well.” He opened a drawer and took out a folder, then opened it and laid it on his desk. “That does change things.” He looked at Lois again, then over at Clark. “I need to stand up and look for a book on the shelf behind me. I’ll be looking for a slow count of three. Because I’m older now, I’ll be counting aloud. I’d expect the two of you to be gone by the time I find that book.”

The former general slowly came to his feet. Lois looked down and saw the card key resting in the open folder.

“One.”

She glanced at Clark, who frowned back and jerked his head toward the folder.

“Two.”

Her hand shot out and palmed the card, then she followed Clark out of the office. She heard the general say “Three” as the door swung shut.

On the far curb near her Jeep, she tucked the card into her purse beside her weapon. “Warehouse?” he asked.

She nodded. “Warehouse. Best speed.”

She hoped Clark knew that meant sharp accelerations, sudden stops, and an angry determination to get to the truth while it could be found.

Chapter Nine

Cat couldn’t help but ask once more. “You’re saying Newcomb just gave you the card key?”

“For the nineteenth time, Cat, yes, he gave us the card key as soon as Clark told him that Thompson was dead.”

“I haven’t asked you about it nineteen times.”

“Just seventeen,” Clark quipped.

“Shut up, Kent,” Lois ordered. “Cat, do you have your weapon with you?”

Cat lifted her Smith and Wesson nine-millimeter and wiggled it at the sky. “Right here. Fully loaded and ready for bear – a small one, anyway.”

“Good,” said Lois. “I’ve got my Beretta ready. Kent, I know you’re not armed, so you lead us in. We’ll cover you on both sides, me on the right.” The women took up positions on either side of the warehouse entry door. “I’ll count us down from three-two-one-go, and you open the door with the card. Ready?”

Both Cat and Clark nodded. “Okay,” breathed Lois. “Three – two – one – go!”

Clark opened the door with the card key and charged in, looking ready to fight a platoon of world-dominating bad guys. Cat followed and went left while Lois went right. They raised their weapons and sought targets.

They found none.

The door behind them slid shut. Across the room was another door.

Great, thought Cat, we’re shut down before we start.

She noticed the red LED display on the far wall next to the exit door. It was ticking down by seconds, and she watched it roll from twenty-seven to twenty-six before she could say, “Got a problem.”

By the time Lois asked what was wrong, Clark was in front of the touch-key panel with his glasses pulled down on his nose. The display read twenty-two seconds when he started touching buttons.

“Clark?” asked Cat.

“Touch pad opens the door,” he replied, “and turns off the vent. Keys with the most wear are 1, 4, 7, and 8. Looks like an old data center halon fire suppression system.”

The display clicked to 16. Lois reached out to grab him. “How do you know—”

Cat pulled her back and whispered in her ear. “Let him work. That halon system, if that’s what this is, would suck all the oxygen out of the air and suffocate us.”

“The General didn’t mention a code for a second door. He must not have known about it.”

Cat lifted one eyebrow. “Or maybe he did.”

Lois gave Cat a hard look, then shrugged and stepped back.

Clark tapped buttons furiously as the display rolled down to 11 – to 8 – to 3 – and then the door swooshed open and the counter reset itself to 30.

Clark leaned in and listened for a long moment, then quietly said, “I don’t think anyone’s home. But let’s not dawdle.”

Lois hustled after him as he slipped inside. Cat, though, took a quick moment to check out the touch key panel. Her eyesight was better than 20/20. She should have seen any wear on the keys larger than a human hair.

She saw nothing. Clark had either seen something very few other humans could have noticed or—

There was no ‘or’ about it. He’d seen something that Cat couldn’t detect. The proof was that they were still breathing good old slightly filtered Metropolis smog. She lowered her weapon and stepped through the door.

There was no one inside. All they saw was a huge room full of indefinite shapes covered by clear plastic sheeting. They might as well have walked into a paint contractor’s work area, except it was as clean and sterile as an operating room.

Lois holstered her weapon as they walked deeper into the room, followed closely by Cat, who also holstered her weapon. She still followed Lois’ lead on anything related to firearms. The room looked like Salvador Dali had gotten drunk with Pablo Picasso and the two of them had challenged Leroy Neiman to a draw-the-spaceship contest.

Cat reached out and put her hand on a craft off to one side. “If I hadn’t seen this with my own eyes, I wouldn’t believe it. Look at this. I think it’s some kind of metal, but it’s smoother than anything I’ve ever seen before. I’m not even sure I’m touching it.”

Lois walked in the opposite direction. “I’ve got what looks like a small saucer tethered to the floor.” She ducked down and looked under it, then stood and pushed it lightly. “It sways.” She turned to Clark. “This thing is either full of compressed helium or it has a negative weight, like a submarine with positive buoyancy. I think it would float away if I were to unstrap it.” She stepped back and put her hands on her hips. “This is either a very expensive Hollywood special effects storage building, a building full of convincing fakes, or – could they possibly be real?”

Neither of the other two answered. Cat was busy watching Clark, and what she saw concerned her. He’d found a relatively small wedged-shaped craft sitting on a wooden rack that looked made for it, and he was staring at it as if it held the secrets of the universe. As she watched, he took something out of the little ship’s open cockpit that seemed to fit in his hand and put it in his jacket pocket.

He looked far too interested in whatever he’d found.

Lois glanced around again – always watching for danger, that one, thought Cat – and slid across the floor to Clark’s side.

“Wow,” she breathed. “This one has the same stylized ‘S’ in the triangle that Superman’s uniform has. I wonder if it’s his?”

Cat took a step toward them when Clark snapped his head up and hissed, “Take cover!” Cat pulled out her pistol and ducked behind the monolith from 2001: A Space Odyssey. She saw Lois scramble under an almost-arrowhead-shaped shiny silver craft that appeared to produce its own light. She cut her eyes toward Clark,

but he'd disappeared.

She started to back away from the middle of the room, but something she assumed was a metal tube in her lower back convinced her to stop where she was. She slowly turned her head, and behind her she saw two of the goons from the day of the fake warrant, one with his weapon in her spine and one about six feet away with his pistol held at the ready. Cat sighed and let her S&W dangle from her trigger finger.

The nearer thug took her weapon, then pointed to guide her back the way she'd come. Trask stood in the middle of the open central area, surrounded by four more hard-faced thugs with their pistols held at the ready.

"Good morning, Miss Grant," he said. "So glad you could join us. How are things with you?"

Cat slowly looked to either side at her guards. "I've had better starts to the day."

Trask chuckled. "Let's see if this one improves." He raised his voice. "Miss Lane, I'm relatively certain that Miss Grant would prefer that you come to me. If my men need to come and find you, it could get messy."

Silence reigned for a long breath. On the one hand, if Lois came in, Trask would have both of them in his power, and they both might end up dead. On the other hand, if Lois didn't come in, Cat could easily end up dead, and Lois would have little chance to overcome the odds she faced. It was not fun to contemplate either choice.

Clark was the only wild card. Maybe he could—

No. Even as she thought about it, one of Trask's men shoved Clark to the floor in front of the former staff sergeant turned into whatever he was now. Before Cat could go to Clark's aid, he'd climbed to his feet and brushed off his suit – a practically meaningless gesture, since the building and its contents were all but dust-free.

Clark glared at Trask and said, "You're interfering with a Daily Planet investigation, Staff Sergeant. You have no idea how much pain you've just bought yourself."

Trask meandered to Clark and smiled. "I'm no longer a non-com, Mr. Kent. I'm de facto director of Bureau 39 operating under a U.S. government mandate. And your threats mean nothing to me." He turned and spoke loudly to the building at large. "Miss Lane, I now have both Miss Grant and Mr. Kent. If you don't surrender to me, I'll start shooting at their knees." He drew his sidearm and racked a round into the chamber. "I believe you know how painful and damaging that can be."

A tense moment fell over the group. "All right," called out Trask, "we'll start with Miss Grant. The right kneecap would be best for our purposes, I think."

Clark snapped his hand out of the grasp of the man behind him and took a step closer. "Is that what you did with George Thompson?"

"You won't get out of this by invoking him, Kent."

"Why did you kill him, Trask? What kind of threat could he be to you?"

The man behind Clark said, "What? Colonel Thompson is dead?"

Another man barked out, "You said you were going to hold him, not kill him!"

Trask stepped back and lifted one hand. "Colonel Thompson was going to take over Bureau 39. He would have arrested all of us, made us face courts martial. Worst of all, he was going to allow the alien free rein over the entire country!"

"And that would be bad how, Trask?"

Lois had taken advantage of the distraction over Thompson and silently walked up on the entire group. Her question seemed to snap Trask into his paranoia all over again. "Because we can't control him!" he shouted. "If he went rogue, we couldn't stop him, not now, maybe not ever! He's probably the advance scout for an

alien invasion! We have to discover his weaknesses, his vulnerabilities, and end him before he takes over the country!"

"What has he done to make you think he'd do that, Trask?" asked Cat.

Trask waved his hand at the collection of spaceships around them. "Why wouldn't he? Every one of the occupants of these craft had evil intent aimed at either the United States or the entire globe. They wanted our natural resources, our valuable metals, our industry, our population to use as slaves. We stopped all of them before they could execute their nefarious plans. We and the others who came before us saved the world!"

"So you killed all of them?" Clark snarled. "Without talking to them, without giving them a chance to explain themselves, without finding out whether or not they were here to conquer or share, without asking if they wanted to be trading partners or even friends?"

Trask's face was getting redder almost by the word. "Enough! Get them into the VTOL craft. We've still got a mission." He turned to Lois. "Hand me your weapon, very carefully, and don't let your trigger finger get itchy. Oh, by the way, whichever one of you has a mobile phone, hand it over now."

Cat thought that Lois would have won the staring contest if there hadn't been so many firearms pointed at them. As it was, Lois waited until Trask flinched ever so slightly before she let out a deep breath and handed him her pistol and the phone.

Jimmy knocked on the door, but no one responded. There was some kind of rhythmic percussion coming from the apartment, and he thought he heard regular grunts as if someone were exercising, but the door remained closed. He hammered on the door several times and called out, "Lois! The Chief needs to talk to you!"

The room went silent, then the door flew open to reveal a young woman standing away from the door. She was slightly shorter than Lois, had a face covered in sweat, and her hair was imperfectly contained in a damp ponytail. Her breathing was deep and almost rapid. Her raised hand held a spray container. "Start talking sense or it's pepper spray time."

He laughed and raised his hands in mock surrender. "Peace, okay? I'm looking for Lois. She and I work together." He lowered his hands and gave her what he thought was his most suave smile. "You must be her sister Lucy."

Lucy lowered the canister in her hand and nodded. "That's me. What did you say your name was?"

"I don't think I said. I'm Jimmy Olsen. I work with Lois at the Daily Planet."

"She's mentioned your name a couple of times." She shook her head. "Lois isn't here. I thought she was on a story assignment."

"She is, but we've lost track of her. No problem, though – this isn't the first time she's gone off the reservation. And she's always popped up with a great story when she came back."

She held the door open for a long moment, then asked, "Is that all you wanted?"

"Yeah – no, actually, it's not. Um – would you consider going out with me?"

"Me."

"Yes, you."

"Going out with you."

"Yes, with me."

"Just me and you, no Lois."

"Nope. No big sister to get in the way."

"Go out together, like on a date."

"Not just like a date. An actual, real, functional date."

Lucy tilted her head at him. "So, Jimmy – it is Jimmy, right?" He nodded. "So, Jimmy, you came here looking for my sister, but you're willing to settle for me?"

He felt his eyes widen and he stammered, "No! I – Lois and I

don't – we're not—"

Her smile grew and she said, "Okay."

"No, we don't – okay?" This time she nodded. "Just to make sure I understand, could you tell me what we're agreeing to?"

"I'll go on a date with you, Jimmy Olsen."

He felt happy and relieved at the same time. "Great! That's great. I'll call you here if that's okay."

"That's more than okay."

"Smooth. I'll give you a call once Lois checks out my medical records."

"What? When Lois – what?" Her voice rose and took on that piercing quality he associated with her sister. "What did she do this time?"

He laughed again. "Nothing except tell me that you were a big girl and made your own decisions on who you dated. The part about the medical records was a joke she made." He turned and headed down the hall toward the elevator. "I'll call later today and we can go out tonight. If that's okay with you, of course. And thanks for giving me a shot."

The last thing he heard as the elevator door closed was her silver laugh.

Trask's men herded the reporters to a V-22 Osprey, a propeller-driven plane whose twin engines could point upward for vertical takeoff or landing – hence the acronym VTOL – and whose wings could rotate forward to the traditional configuration and fly like a cargo plane. This one lifted off from an enclosed area behind the warehouse with walls three stories high. Lois didn't understand how the plane could be hidden from the neighboring businesses until she realized that they probably flew only at night when no one was around except a few homeless people, and what cop would believe a homeless addict's story about a weird helicopter in the neighborhood?

And since they'd taken off in daylight, Trask apparently wasn't planning on keeping the warehouse as an active B39 location.

Trask walked to the head of the ramp in the rear of the plane as the pilot reconfigured the wings to fly forward. Trask's men pushed the reporters to the back near him. "I think at least one of you three knows how to contact Superman. Maybe all of you know how. You wouldn't answer my questions when we tried to interview you at the newspaper, so I'm going to ask each of you once more. Can you contact the alien?"

Lois thought about jumping him, but she knew that none of the reporters were armed and all of Trask's party were. "And why would we cooperate, Staff Sergeant?"

He glared at her for a moment, then pulled his face into a half-smile. "I've been promoted since you saw that picture of me in Project Bluebook, Miss Lane. I'm now the equivalent of an Air Force lieutenant colonel." He reached out and pushed a large red button and the rear ramp of the plane began descending. "And I still want an answer to my question. Let's see – I think we'll start with Miss Grant."

One of the other thugs pushed Cat toward Trask, who caught her by the arm and held on tight. "Miss Grant, I want to know and I want to know now. Can you contact the alien?"

Cat's face paled as the wind from the open ramp blew her hair into her face. She gripped Trask's arm with all her strength. "No – no I can't contact him! I just – he shows up and helps and then flies away!"

"But you've interviewed him, haven't you?"

"Yes – but only for quotes on whatever he's just done. I don't know how to call him!"

Trask lifted a headset from the wall and held it against his head. "This is the colonel. What's our altitude? How long until we're over the target at angels fourteen? Good. Yes, maintain course and speed."

"Trask!" Lois shouted. "You'd better let her go now!"

"Why, Miss Lane? Do you know how to contact Superman?"

"None of us do! As far as I know, Superman doesn't have a phone!"

"Ah, but what about telepathy? Or some sensory organ in his chest that homes in on you? Is that how he finds you so easily?"

"You – I am so going to fill up that cuss jar with your money when we land!"

"That won't be my problem, Miss Lane." He looked at Cat. "But I think Miss Grant should lead that landing parade."

The handset Trask held buzzed for a moment and he lifted it to his head again. "We're over the target? Angels fourteen? Good." He hung the headset on the wall. "Mister Kent may not know that 'angels fourteen' means fourteen thousand feet of altitude. We're ready now."

Clark spread his feet and braced himself. "What are you ready for?"

Trask smiled like a werewolf about to get a snack. "This."

He turned and threw Cat down the ramp. There was nothing for her to grab before she tumbled out the back.

Lois threw herself on Trask with a scream and went for his throat. As he tried to fight her off, Clark pretended to stumble and rolled off the end of the ramp, then dove out of sight.

He'd never spun into the Suit while diving that fast, but it worked. He caught up with Cat and zoomed to the ground with her in the woods north of Metropolis.

"Miss Grant! Miss Grant, are you all right?"

Cat stood for a few seconds, then her eyes glazed over and she would have fallen prone instead of just to her knees had he not caught her. He lifted her head with a finger under her chin. "Miss Grant! I need to save Lois. Will you be all right here?"

Cat's eyes cleared and she nodded. "Y – yes. Go – go save them."

"Are you sure you—"

Her voice hardened. "Go now! Save them!"

He nodded and stepped back, leaving her kneeling on the dirt where she'd landed. Before she could take another breath to tell him to go, he was gone.

Lois landed a knife hand blow to the side of Trask's throat, then drew back for another strike. But two more men grabbed her by the arms and pulled her away while a third punched her in the back between the shoulder blades. Stunned, she fell to the aircraft's floor, unable to get up.

Trask coughed hard twice and allowed another man to help him stand. He stumbled to a display in the side of the compartment which Lois hadn't noticed before.

"Target – *cough-cough* – target below us at angels eight and coming fast. Give me – target lock!"

Another man stepped to a second display and fiddled with the controls for a moment, then yelled, "Target acquired! Nuts! Too close to fire!"

Lois tried to sit up and demand what they were going to fire – whatever it was, they had to be aiming at Superman – but she couldn't do either yet. Trask pointed at her and said, "Out! Distract – alien!"

The two men who'd pulled her off Trask grabbed her arms and shoved her onto the ramp, where she slid down to the bottom and fell out into nothing. Her last sight of the Osprey showed her a missile tube mounted under the fuselage as the plane banked and turned back the way it had come.

She tried to shout for help but she couldn't catch her breath. Suddenly two powerful arms enveloped her and she settled into them.

It was Superman, obviously, and he was saving her life.

For years, both in the military and in civilian life, Lois had led

men by example. She'd set the bar as high as she could, and anyone who wanted to follow her had to meet or exceed her standards. She'd been independent, firm, unyielding, and hadn't truly needed any man.

Now she needed a man to save her life. Without his assistance, she'd be dead in seconds.

Somehow she didn't care. She wanted someone to save her, to take care of her, to be with her and go through life with her. She wanted to need someone.

She wanted to need the man in whose arms she now rested.

Too quickly they touched down in the woods. She thought about kissing Superman, but then remembered Trask talking about shooting at the hero. "Superman! Trask is – he wants to shoot you down! The plane has at least one missile!"

Cat chose that moment to limp close enough to hear them. "Go get Clark!" she yelled. "He's still up there!"

Lois' mouth dropped open. She looked stricken for moment, then said, "Cat's right! Save Clark and dodge the missile! Go!"

He took off over the nearby lake at an angle, and that's when Lois saw the exhaust trail pointing at their position. It changed course as soon as Superman took off.

"Come on, Cat! We need to get closer!"

"Why, so Trask can drop a nuke on us?"

"No! So we can help!"

"How are you going to help Superman? There's nothing we ___"

The explosion drew their attention.

Lois estimated that the missile detonated at least seven thousand feet up and over Lake Chichimway, and that the debris should fall in the lake at least two miles from their position. She turned to Cat and cried out, "If that idiot hurt Superman—" Then a horrible thought struck her. "What about Clark? Where is he?"

Just then Clark ran over a rise a little beyond them. "There you are!" he shouted. "Are you two okay?"

He skidded to a stop between them, a step closer to Lois than to Cat. Lois grabbed him around the neck and whispered, "I thought you were dead."

He returned the embrace gently. "Superman caught me right after he caught Cat."

He slipped from Lois' arms – something she realized she wished he wouldn't do – and gave Cat a hug. She started to return it, then grabbed his upper arms and moved a half-step back. Lois was surprised – Cat looked like she'd seen a ghost as she stared into Clark's eyes.

Cat shook her head, then hooked one arm through Clark's. "Come on, you two, let's try to find a phone. I've heard these woods get cold at night, and I want my nice warm bed and comforter tonight. Lois, are you good to lead us? I still feel a little shaky."

"Sure, Cat. You just let me know if you need to stop and rest, okay?"

"That goes for you, too, Lois," Clark said. "If you need to rest your knee, just say so."

Lois gave him a direct look. Normally a reminder like that would get a sharp comeback from her, but she held back from snapping at him. She thought about it for a moment, then decided that she did so because she could see that Clark was sincere and would never say anything snarky about her needing to rest, nor would he discuss it with anyone except maybe Cat. It was yet another piece of the puzzle that was Clark Kent – with everything else she already knew about him, he was a gentleman.

They'd been walking for almost an hour when Cat surprised Lois and called for a ten-minute rest break, claiming that her stylish shoes were hurting her feet. Lois didn't say anything, but her leg was most grateful. She suspected that Cat had seen her laboring and had taken pity on her, but since she got to sit fairly

close to Clark, she wasn't offended in the least.

Nearly forty minutes after resuming their trek and five miles down the road, they found a bait and tackle store serving Lake Chichimway's customers. Clark called Perry, told him they were all okay, asked him to call the police to secure the warehouse, and asked for a ride back to the city, since none of the store's current customers were headed in that direction. Almost two hours later, as the sun was taking its final bow for the day, Jimmy and Lucy showed up in his well-used Ford Taurus.

Lucy unlocked the doors and the three wanderers all but fell into the back seat. "When I said you needed to get out more, Sis," Lucy teased, "this isn't what I had in mind."

"Me neither, Punky," Lois answered. She tapped Jimmy on the shoulder. "Take us to the Bessolo Street warehouse, Olsen."

Lucy opened her own door and slipped out. "Be right back. I have to make a quick pit stop."

Cat sighed dramatically. "I suppose you'll have to stop for gas for your heap, Jimmy."

"Nope. Topped off the tank before we left the city limits." He held up a cell phone and showed it to his passengers. "You guys interrupted a lovely dinner date, and it's too late now to use the concert tickets I bought."

Cat chuckled. "No wonder you're so thrilled to see us. Did you at least get to order?"

"Nope. Perry paged me as the valet was parking the car. On the plus side, Lucy was as thrilled at the change in plans as I am. Of course, now she's got her sister to tease on the way back, so that's a perk for her."

"As long as the way back includes the warehouse," Lois grumbled.

It was Jimmy's turn to sigh. "I'll take you, Lois, but you're not going to be happy about what you find."

"Why won't I be happy? That place is a gold mine! What's wrong with it?"

"You'll see when we get there."

Lucy chose that moment to return. "I come bearing non-Greek gifts. I hope you like cream soda and moon pies, Jimmy, because that's about all they had for humans to eat or drink in there."

He accepted the offering. "Thanks. It's not baked grouper and vintage Merlot, but it's better than listening to my stomach rumble."

"Lucy," Clark said, "I hope you checked the expiration dates on those moon pies. When they go bad, they go really bad."

Everyone else, including Lois, laughed softly. Jimmy started the car, shifted into Drive, and pulled out onto the two-lane blacktop highway.

Bill Henderson's men were checking the building's interior when Jimmy's car pulled up in front. He let his extra passengers out and said, "Lois, Inspector Henderson said that if no one else has space in his car, he'll let you ride back in his trunk."

Lois tried to summon a glare but was too tired to make it a good one. "Nice try, Olsen. I'll see you tomorrow and give you my most scathingly brilliant riposte then."

"Looks like a late night for you, Sis," Lucy called out. "Try not to wake me when you come in, okay? I have to go to work tomorrow."

Lois pointed an index finger at her and said, "Same to you, Punky."

Lucy's laugh followed Lois into the building. She was mildly surprised that the two doors were propped open and the power seemed to be turned off at both entrances.

It was nothing compared to the shock she felt when she entered the main storage area.

There were no ships there, whether large, medium, or small. All the sheets of plastic were neatly folded and stacked against a side wall. The cell phone Lois had brought with her earlier that

day lay atop the tarps with its battery lying beside it. Beside the phone lay both Cat's and Lois' pistols, both with slides locked open and full magazines beside them. Lois would've bet two grenades and a loaded rocket launcher that there wasn't any kind of smudge on any of them.

She turned to Perry. "Chief, they were here! Those ships were all here, maybe twenty of them! You wouldn't believe what we found! We have to go after Bureau 39 hard!"

Perry's hangdog expression didn't flicker. "As it happens, Lois, I believe you completely. But since Trask and his men cleared out this building and polished the silver for the queen, you have no proof. We can print how he tossed you three out of a plane and shot a missile at Superman, but we can't print anything about the ships you found or the other people with him or the bureau itself. Best case scenario if we did, we'd get sued – worst case, we'd get arrested and disappear into the system."

"Fine! The three of us can still write up what we can prove!"

"No. I'm taking all of you off this story. Get with Myerson before lunch tom—"

"Myerson!" Cat burst out. "Chief, this is our story, our byline! We should write this!"

Perry shook his head. "You three have become part of the story. We couldn't print it if you wrote it. That's how the National Whisper operates, but the Daily Planet doesn't, not even for my best reporting team." Lois started to turn away, but Perry said, "Now look, you three, I'm not telling you to drop this. I'm telling you that we need verifiable, unassailable facts on these clowns before we take them to task. Put this on the back burner and keep digging. I know you three, and I know you'll get to the bottom of this as fast as anyone else possibly could."

Henderson chose that moment to walk up to Perry. "Sorry, but we're coming up completely dry. If there's a fingerprint in this place, we put it there within the last few hours. There's not even any dust to check for movement." To Cat and Lois, he said, "You two can pick up your weapons at my office any time after ten tomorrow morning. These guys not only left them out like they were displaying them for sale, the serial numbers are visible. We'll run the numbers for prior crimes tonight, although I can't be lucky enough to find hot weapons in your possession."

Clark put his hands behind his back and spoke slowly. "Inspector, this place didn't build itself. Someone was maintaining it and cleaning it and paying the taxes and the electric bill. Are you telling us you don't know who that someone is?"

Henderson's lips pressed into a straight line before he responded. "I'm telling all of you – and mind you, this is a professional courtesy, I don't have to do this – that we've lost the paper trail for the items you've mentioned. We can trace the funds back to the consulting firm George Thompson was working for, but we can't find where that money came from. The trail just heads off into the ether and fades away."

Henderson reached out and tapped Clark on the chest, a move which made Lois unaccountably angry. "You three find me some other evidence," the detective continued, "something I can take to the DA, and I'll not only reopen this investigation, I'll make it my top priority. I hate it when the Feds run black ops in my city." He turned and called out to his people, "Let's wrap it up, folks, unless you've got something incriminating. No? Then we have to go solve some of the other six million cases sitting on my desk."

Cat tapped Lois on the shoulder. "Come on, I'll take you home. Clark, do you need a ride?"

Perry waved his hand. "I'm his Good Samaritan tonight. Besides, I want to see what he's done with that apartment. And this is for all three of you – don't come in before lunch tomorrow. Trask hasn't gotten away with this, but he's managed to cut the urgency out of this story, so it'll keep until tomorrow afternoon."

Lois followed Cat to her Buick and sat on the front passenger

side. "I will be so glad to sit on something that isn't moving." She stretched out her legs. "Haven't been this tired since the first week of basic."

Cat started the car and slowly pulled out of the parking lot. "Yeah, these shoes are made for showing off my legs, not walking."

Lois didn't answer. She just closed her eyes and let the sounds of the city relax her. Then Cat said, "You up for a personal conversation?"

With her eyes still shut, Lois rolled her head toward Cat. "Sure. What's up?"

Cat hesitated, then said, "Clark is up."

Lois' eyes popped open and she sat up straight. "What do you mean?"

"I mean – I still like him. Or, maybe I mean that I like who he is now."

"Oh." Lois paused, then said, "I remember you telling me that you didn't want to restart your relationship with him."

"I know. I remember saying that."

"So what's changed?"

Cat stared at the street in front of them and didn't look at Lois even when they stopped at a traffic light. "You know how I tend to cut off any dating relationship before it gets serious, right?"

"Hard to miss that."

"I know. I'm getting a reputation for it."

"Really? I didn't know that."

Cat made a face as she came to a stop sign. "I've used a dating service off and on for a couple of years now. They told me last month that I've been labeled a heartbreaker, that no one on their listing wants to meet me even for donuts and coffee."

Instead of laughing, Lois sighed. "I'm sorry. I know that's not what you intended."

"I've never told anyone this, but I – I'm pretty sure I've been comparing the guys I date with my memory of Clark. And Clark wins that competition every time."

"You told me you weren't doing it deliberately."

"I wasn't doing it deliberately, but recently I've realized that it's what I've been doing. I've found myself wishing that I'd handled that whole thing better." She paused and took in a deep breath. "And now we come to the big question."

Lois frowned at her friend. "What big question?"

Cat flexed her fingers on the steering wheel and checked her mirrors, all without looking directly at Lois. "I need to know if – if Clark and I – I don't know, start dating, although that kinda sounds like we're still in high school – if Clark and I get together how much will it affect our friendship?"

Lois let out a sharp breath. "Wow." Cat changed lanes and headed down the street to Lois' apartment building. "You go for the jugular, don't you, Red?"

"I know, it's a big question and I just threw it at you without warning and you're probably having trouble processing it and Clark's a great guy and I can tell you like him but I don't know how much and I haven't said anything to him about this—"

"Cat, quit babbling! You do what you want, okay?"

She braked to a stop in front of Lois' building shut off the car. After several seconds, she turned to Lois and wiped her cheeks dry. "You're my best friend. I'd be dead several times over if you hadn't been in my life. Besides, you put up with me even when I babble like a maniac." She sniffed and wiped her nose. "I – I don't think I could take it if I hurt you over a guy, any guy, no matter how wonderful he was."

"Thank you. You're my best friend too, and I don't think I could have dealt with all those flashbacks and nightmares if you hadn't been there to help me through them all. And you've saved me more than once." Lois took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Tell you what, let's just see what happens. Who knows? Clark may meet Mayson and she'll throw herself at him and he'll decide

he can't live without her and make this whole discussion moot."

"She better not pull a stunt like that," growled Cat. "If she does, I'll tell Clark that she's secretly a lesbian cougar with a dominatrix fetish."

Lois let out a startled bark, then laughed aloud. Cat joined her after a moment.

"That would teach both of them a lesson," chuckled Lois. "Hey, you and I need some sleep, and you'd better soak your feet before you go to bed tonight. See you at work tomorrow after lunch."

"You too. I'll be the one wearing the orthopedic tennis shoes. And don't forget to pick up your weapon at Henderson's office in the morning."

"You're kidding, right? Me forget about my weapon? I'd forget my underwear first."

Cat grinned. "That's right, give Bill a shock and a thrill all at the same time. Probably kill him right on the spot."

"At least he'd die in the line of duty." They shared another chuckle. "Good night, Cat. Get some quality sleep."

Chapter Ten

It had taken nearly three weeks for Clark to get past his frustration over the Bureau 39 debacle. He'd all but had his ship in his grasp, and then that moron Trask had taken it away from him. Clark was certain that they weren't done with those people. It was their history to show up at the least convenient time, and there was no evidence that they were changing their habits.

The story of their plane ride with Trask frustrated him, too. Perry hadn't killed it, but he had gutted it, because so much of the information they wanted to use couldn't be verified by outside sources. Cat was so mad after that meeting with the editor that she'd gone to the bank, broken a twenty-dollar bill into ones, and dropped them one at a time into the cuss jar, all without saying a word. He made sure to keep away from her for a couple of days. Even Lois walked on eggshells around her for that time.

The one unqualified positive event in that time was Clark moving from probationary status to full time. It meant a bump in pay, which he appreciated, and eligibility for health insurance, which he never expected to need. The three of them, plus Jimmy and Lucy, went to lunch on the Wednesday following the notification, and a good time was had by all, even if Clark was chivvied into picking up the full tab.

After the lunch, though, once they got back to the office, Cat and Lois got into an argument over a Superman story.

Clark watched and listened open-mouthed as the argument quickly intensified.

"The tone is too positive, Cat," insisted Lois. "Superman did a good job with that truck wreck, but you're writing him as if he's Hercules reincarnated, eight feet tall and able to juggle Jupiter's moons. We have to back down the rhetoric here."

"But he is godlike! No one in recorded history has ever been able to do what he can do! Legendary heroes look like Barney Fife next to him!"

"It doesn't matter. We report the news, not our opinions or our viewpoints. Hard facts! You taught me that."

Cat slapped the folder in her hand down on Lois' desk. "Well now I'm teaching you this! What Superman can do and what he stands for are good things! We have enough negative examples in the media. We need some positive ones. And I can't think of a more positive example than Superman!"

Lois leaned in closer and growled back, "I agree with you! But that kind of thing belongs in an editorial, not on the front page! I'm not putting my byline on a puff piece no matter who the subject is!"

"Oh, you just can't resist taking him down a peg, can you?"

"It's better than hanging him on a peg no one can reach!"

Cat lifted her right hand and punched Lois on the front of her

shoulder. "Why do you have to be right all the time?" Cat snarled.

Lois lifted her hands into an open-hand strike position. "You want to throw down over this? Right here, right now? Let's do it!"

Clark stepped between them and shoved them apart. "Stop this right now! You two want to fight, there's a dojo about seven blocks from here. Otherwise you'd both better back off before someone gets hurt."

The women held each other's gazes for a pair of long breaths, then both spun away as if on cue and went to their own desks. Clark waited for a moment to make sure they weren't going for clubs or blades, then relaxed as they angrily started working again.

From behind him, Jimmy quietly said, "Chief wants to see you."

Over his shoulder, Clark asked, "About what just happened?"

"My guess would be 'yes' but I don't know for certain."

"Okay, Jimmy. Hey, we need to go shoot some hoops or something pretty soon. I need some exercise."

He heard the smile in the younger man's quiet voice as Jimmy asked, "You mean keeping those two from killing each other isn't enough of a workout?"

Clark grinned and winked at Jimmy, then walked to Perry's office. He knocked on the door and stuck his head in. "You wanted to see me, Perry?"

"Come on in, son. Sit down and close the door. We need to chew the fat over what I just saw on my news floor."

Clark flicked a glance at the aftermath of the argument between Cat and Lois. Both women were typing furiously on their computers and studiously ignoring each other. "I don't know what to tell you, Chief. One minute they were calmly discussing a story and the next minute they were ready to tear each other to pieces."

"I'm glad you were there to separate them. Lois probably would have hurt Cat, especially if she'd lost control of herself."

Puzzled, Clark shook his head. "Were they ever like this before I came on board?"

Perry leaned back and linked his fingers over his belly. "No, they weren't. And that's what's bothering me. They're acting like they're in junior high school and they both really like the same guy but they don't want to talk about it so they fight about other things." He asked the next question as if it meant nothing. "You, uh, know anything about a situation like that, Kent?"

He hesitated and exhaled deeply to give himself a moment. Should he tell Perry that he believed Cat wanted to reignite their old relationship and that Lois might feel jealous, either of his burgeoning relationship with Cat or her own nascent feelings for him? Or should he lie to his boss and stay out of their possible romantic rivalry? Could it be that, despite the ego boost the perceived rivalry gave him, that it was something else altogether?

He decided not to interfere. "No. I haven't been on a date with either of them. Haven't spent significant time with either one alone, unless it was related to a story we were working on.

Nothing personal, at least not from my point of view." He shrugged and sat back. "I'm just as baffled by this as you are."

"Okay. Will you send the two of them in here? You can get back to work."

"Sure, Perry."

Perry watched Cat and Lois approach his office like two killer whales circling the same seal. He also saw Clark suddenly pop his head up, grab Jimmy and say something to him, then vanish into the stairwell.

He'd find out what Clark was doing later.

For the moment, though, he had a situation he never thought he'd be in. Cat and Lois entered his office and stood at the far corners of his desk, as far from each other as they could get. "You two have a seat. We need to have a conversation."

Lois perched herself on the far corner of the old sofa against the wall opposite Perry's desk. Cat took one of the chairs, pulled it

toward the door, and turned it so she could see both Lois and Perry before sitting. “We have a problem, ladies.”

Neither woman said anything. Perry continued, “All right. Which one of you wants to tell me what that problem is?” Still no response. “Neither of you, huh? In that case, I’ll start guessing. My first guess is that it’s bigger than a breadbox.”

Lois’ frown grew, but Cat’s eyes sparkled for a moment and the corners of her mouth twitched. “I think I’m getting closer,” said Perry. “Is this a personal problem rather than a professional one?”

That got reactions from each of them. They both shifted in their seats, lifted their heads, and focused on the editor. Perry didn’t think either of them realized how the other was responding to his guesses. They looked almost like mirror images of each other.

At least now he had a better handle on the cause of the problem.

“Look,” he said, “I sympathize with your situation. I really do. And I understand that you both feel – ‘unsettled’ would be a good word for it, I guess. But you have to understand my position. I can’t have two of my reporters, even as good as the two of you are, starting fights in the newsroom for any reason. You two need to make peace with each other somehow. Because if this keeps up, I may have to separate you as a team. And if that doesn’t work, I’ll have to let one of you go.”

He stood and moved to the front of the desk, equidistant from both women, and leaned back against it. “I don’t want to do either of those things. You two work together too well for me to lose the team or either one of you. But if this keeps up, I won’t have a choice. As much as I like you both, respect you both, and want both of you to do well, the Daily Planet has to come first with me. Okay?”

Both women silently nodded to him. “Then we’re all on the same page here? You two find a way to work together, either as a team or apart, or one of you goes. Understood?”

They nodded again, but Perry shook his head. “I need to hear you say that you understand.”

“I got it, Perry,” said Cat. “There will be peace between us.”

After a long moment, Lois added, “I got it too. Truce.”

Perry nodded. “Just to be clear, I’m taking ‘truce’ to be the functional equivalent of ‘peace’ in this context.” He stood straight and clapped his hands twice. “Now get out there and get me some quality stories!”

As they left the office, Jimmy rushed up in front of them. “There’s a report of a jumper on the roof of the South Metro Palisades apartment building. The crowd on the street is getting pretty amped up.”

Cat turned to Lois and asked, “Jeep or Porsche?”

“Whichever’s closer,” snapped Lois. “Let’s go!”

Perry’s mouth almost smiled. All it took was a hot story to get Lois and Cat to work together again. The sight made him proud of them.

Superman landed on the edge of the roof of the North Metropolis Hilton, about eight feet from the young, well-dressed black man. The man turned and, with a bright smile, said, “The ‘S’ man himself. How’s it hangin’?”

“You don’t want to do this, sir. It’s a permanent solution to a temporary problem.”

“My problem? You wanna know my problem? I walked up to that guy down there—” he pointed to a middle-aged man at a coffee cart below them on the street “—and asked for a decaf cappuccino. Now, imagine my consternation when he doesn’t give me decaf! I’d already told him that caffeine makes me jumpy!”

Superman didn’t know if the pun was deliberate or not, so he didn’t smile. “That’s hardly a reason to go flying off the handle like this. Besides, if you did jump, I’d just catch you.”

“Flying off the handle, huh? That’s actually about as funny as my decaf line.” This time Superman smiled a little, and the man smiled back. “You know what, big ‘S’? I’ve decided to come down. Without jumping, too. I’ve seen the error of my ways.”

“Uh-huh. Let’s just step down here – that’s right. Now you go with the nice security guard—”

He was cut off by a woman’s terrified scream. He zipped away, located her falling from the roof of the South Metro Palisades building on the south side, and caught her before she’d made it half-way down.

The paramedics strapped her into a gurney as soon as they landed – and as soon as they could pull her off her rescuer. He puzzled over the details of the two jumpers’ behavior as he flew back to the Planet.

Normally a jumper would either be angry at him for stopping his or her death or be totally out of touch with reality. Neither the man nor the woman had acted – “normal,” for lack of a better term. The man had treated the whole episode like a joke. The woman, though, had been terrified. She might have been that rare one who realized death was waiting to welcome her on the sidewalk and was glad Superman had caught her, but still, she’d seemed too grateful to be caught. It was almost as if someone had pushed her off the roof. But if that were true, why didn’t she say so?

He’d have to do more research on these people. Maybe working on this together would help heal the rift between Lois and Cat.

At eight-thirty the next morning, Lois, Clark, and Cat met in the conference room to compare notes. “Okay,” said Clark, “let’s get started.”

Lois frowned and said, “Wait a minute. Why is the rookie running this meeting?”

“Because ‘the rookie’ got this initial information from Superman,” Clark snapped. “And because he’s not in the editor’s doghouse. You both need to listen until it’s time for you to talk.”

Lois narrowed her eyes at him but kept her mouth closed. Given what Perry had told them the day before, it seemed to her the prudent path to take. “Good,” Clark said. “According to Superman, neither of those jumpers acted like potential suicides. The man was relaxed, almost joking with him, while the woman was terrified until he landed her on the ground. Even then, the paramedics literally had to pry her off him.”

“So Superman thinks this woman jumped just to get his attention?” Cat asked. “Is she some kind of kinky romantic nut where he’s concerned?”

“No. Even on the ground she was still too scared to walk or stand by herself, and she couldn’t stop crying while she thanked him. The EMTs said her blood pressure was dangerously high, and they had to sedate her before she’d let them strap her to the stretcher.”

Lois lifted her hand. “Can I talk now?”

Clark gave her a direct glare. “If you have information for us, yes.”

“I do. The name of the young man Superman talked down from the edge is Jules Johnson, street name of Fast Eddie. Used to be a street hustler and small-time con man until he entered a program called Bootstrap that turned him around. He’s now a junior executive at City Recovery, a non-profit set up to help the poor get out of gangs and into affordable housing. No arrests, no legal problems, not even a traffic ticket for the last two-plus years.”

“From the time he entered Bootstrap?”

“Yes.”

“Who funds Bootstrap? Who sponsors it?”

Lois shuffled papers for a moment until she found the one she needed. “They’ve got several high-dollar donors who regularly

hire young recruits, including the Hilton hotel chain, LexCorp Industries, Wayne Industries, a medical assistant training program, and the city of Metropolis. They usually put those folks in maintenance and service slots.”

“Well, that’s not much help,” groused Clark.

“Hang on a minute,” said Cat. “Lois, you said Fast Eddie works at City Recovery, right?”

“Yes.”

“Where do they get their money?”

Lois searched through the papers again. “Um, a bunch of corporate donors. Arthur Chou, the Pembroke Initiative – they funnel money from small donors to major users, leveraging the money a lot like a mutual fund does – Wayne Industries, the Daily Planet—”

“What?” Cat broke in. “We donate to these guys?”

“Yeah. It comes from the ‘Charitable Giving’ box you check every year when you verify your 401(k) and tax deductions. Turns out the most money comes from the board of directors, but it’s tax deductible and anybody can pitch in.”

“Any other major donors?” asked Clark.

“Um, just LexCorp Industries.”

“Huh,” muttered Clark. “That’s interesting.”

“Why is that interesting?” Cat asked.

“Both Luthor and Wayne have fingers in these pies.”

Lois shook her head. “If you’re thinking that they’re working together, forget it. I’ve interviewed Bruce Wayne twice and Lex Luthor once in the past year, and their most common theme is that they dislike each other intensely.”

“What about Wayne’s interest in Bootstrap and City Recovery?” asked Cat.

“I think in this case he’s totally transparent. Wayne has a strong charitable presence in Metropolis – smaller than LexCorp’s but still significant. After all, LexCorp has a similar presence in Gotham.”

“Anything else?”

Lois’ smile turned predatory. “Could also be that both men are waiting for the other to make a mistake big enough to launch a takeover of the other’s assets. When I said they intensely dislike each other, I was understating the case.”

Clark tilted his head and said, “Understating by how much?”

“Think Australian salt-water crocodiles and anything that gets in the water with them. Or great white sharks and seals, if that’s your kink.”

Cat let a half-smile show. “Which one is the great white in that analogy?”

“Whichever one you’re talking to at the moment. The salient point is that ‘hate’ would not be an inaccurate term when comparing those two.”

Clark nodded. “Okay, I think we have a good handle on Fast Eddie. What about the woman?”

Cat lifted a paper but didn’t look at it. “Monique Kahn, no street name that I could find. She’s an executive for LexCon Construction in the accounting end of the business. Graduate of Wharton School of Business, B.A. and MBA. Her father Alvin was a mid-level underboss with the Taylor family until he turned state’s evidence on a half-dozen thugs and soldiers. Scuttlebutt is that the DA at the time, one Walter Dove, now deceased due to natural causes, wanted him to turn on Johnny Taylor but couldn’t convince him. Alvin is in witness protection somewhere out in Wyoming or Montana or Oregon. Bobby Bigmouth says that there’s an occasional rumor that Monique is under The Boss’ protection.”

Clark tapped the table. “Wait a minute. What ‘Boss’ are you talking about?”

“The alleged mind behind most of the crime in Metropolis, like Moriarty was to Sherlock Holmes.”

Lois lifted her hand to make a point, but Clark butted in again.

“Wait a minute! Why am I just now hearing something about this Boss of yours?”

Lois turned to him instead. “Because we don’t really know anything about him. We don’t even know if he really exists. Cat thinks he’s an urban legend, like the Batman in Gotham City, and she might be right.”

“Just how much information do you have about this Boss?”

“Just hints and winks and nudges,” Cat answered, “and none of it is verifiable. Everything is like that tidbit about Monique – there’s at least one question mark next to it, sometimes several.”

“And before you ask again,” Lois broke in, “you’re just now hearing about it because you just came off your probationary period. That’s Perry’s rule, not ours. Newbies get to hear about the Boss when they’re permanent, full-time, and he thinks they’re ready.” She reached out and patted him on the shoulder. “You should feel privileged.”

A knock on the door startled all three of them. Jimmy stuck his head in the room and said, “Sorry, guys, but you need to know this. Can I come in?”

Clark nodded to him. “If we need to know it, you need to tell it.”

Jimmy entered and closed the door. “Thanks, CK. I just spoke with Dr. Newman at Metropolis Hospital. Your two little birdies were released this morning about seven-thirty.”

Lois’ mouth dropped open. “No way! They keep potential suicides under observation for at least 72 hours!”

“Not this time, Lois. Dr. Newman thinks Johnson never meant to jump at all. Monique Khan, though, was hysterical and got sedated at the scene.”

“Cat and I were both there, Jimmy. We know that.”

“Two things you may not know. First, the woman is pathologically afraid of heights, which makes her suicide attempt look even stranger. Second, while she was semi-lucid, she was mumbling something about a test.”

“What kind of test?” Cat asked.

Jimmy shrugged. “No one knows. One of the nurses tried to play down what Ms. Kahn was saying, but Newman put it in the chart anyway. He told me he’d never seen two people try to commit suicide in the same public way at the very same time. Not only that, but Dr. Newman wasn’t the shrink who signed their releases. It was some guy named Popovich.”

Clark nodded slowly. “Thanks, Jimmy. This may be important.”

“No problem, guys. Go get ‘em. Yay team and all that jazz.” He turned and left the room.

It was Lois’ turn to hide a smile. “Is that it, Boss?”

Clark gave her a glare that said he was ignoring the irony in her statement. “I think we’ve milked this cow dry. Let’s meet when—”

Jimmy burst back in through the door. “Sorry, but Perry wants the four of us to head to Third and Ordway, Carlin building. Report of a bomb in the lobby.”

The three of them burst from their chairs. “My Jeep has room for all of us,” Lois called out. “Jimmy, you have all your equipment ready to go?”

“I’m grabbing it now.”

“Then let’s roll, people!”

As soon as Lois parked as close to the Carlin building as she could, Clark jumped out and yelled, “I got the south side!”

He disappeared into the crowd as the other three popped out of the Jeep. “Jimmy,” Lois ordered, “take the northeast corner. Cat, you take the northwest corner, I’ll cover the front entrance. Watch for Clark. Remember, people, run to trouble when you hear it.”

And she was gone. Cat turned to Jimmy and asked, “You okay with that, kiddo?”

He nodded. “More than okay. Let’s get in position.”

Cat was barely in place when Superman landed just outside the perimeter. He spoke with a police captain for a few seconds, someone Cat didn't recognize, then slowly walked toward the front of the building. He paused to politely tell the beautiful but vacuous TV reporter Linda Montoya – the cheap slut, thought Cat – “no comment” on the air. If Superman were to have a bachelor party, Linda would joyfully come out of the cake stark naked and do a pole dance routine guaranteed to get her arrested.

In her mind she heard Lois chuckle and say, Come on, Red, quit beating around the bush and tell us how you really feel.

It was past time for them to make up and resume their friendship.

Cat looked at Jimmy and noted that he was at the northeast corner as instructed, taking pictures as if film cost nothing. She glanced at Lois, who was slowly walking toward the lobby door inside the security perimeter—

And then the front of the building exploded.

The force of the blast shoved Cat three steps back. By the time she regained her focus, Superman was walking out of the hole where the lobby doors had been, brushing dust from his hair and his uniform as he glanced around himself. Before anyone could ask him a question, he gave a small hop and rocketed away into the sky.

Cat estimated that a dozen or so bystanders had been knocked down by the blast. Jimmy was still on his feet, and she saw Clark sprinting along her side of the building from the back. Lois was lying on the street—

Lois!

Cat forgot she was a reporter and ran to Lois' side. Somehow, both she and Clark skidded to a halt on either side of Lois just as the injured woman opened her eyes and coughed.

She tried to stand up as Cat tried to hold her still. “Uh-uh, Lois, hold on and let us check you over for cuts or contusions.”

“No – I have to – to get up and – and – do something.”

“As you were, Specialist Lane!” barked Clark. “Hold your position!”

Lois looked up at him and her eyes seemed to clear a bit. “You're not – not in the chain of command, Kent. You can't give me – orders.”

Cat caressed her friend's hair. “Lois, honey, if that were me on the ground and you were kneeling beside me, you wouldn't let me get up. Remember your training, okay?”

Lois blew out a sharp breath and settled back to the street with only a slight flinch. “Fine. I won't – move unless and until an EMT clears me.”

Jimmy reached out and touched her hand. “Lois, I'm going to risk getting in trouble with Perry and ask you if I can turn in the shots of you in the explosion and on the ground.”

“You mean you photographed me almost getting blown up?”

“Yes. I did. And I got shots of Cat and Clark tending to you.

But I won't tell Perry I have them unless you give me permission.”

She stared at him for a few seconds, then broke into a grin. “Turn 'em in, Jimmy. In this case I'm – ow – I'm part of the story, so I'm fair game. Good work.”

He smiled back. “Thanks, Lois. I'd better get back and get these developed. Wouldn't want Perry to have an aneurism over my not having them ready.”

As Jimmy trotted off to find a cab, a stocky Native American EMT knelt beside Lois. “Okay, ma'am,” she said, “my name is Lisa. Are you ready for me to check you out?”

Lois grabbed Lisa's hand and sat up. “I'm a former Army field medic and I know my body. Give me another minute and I'll be fine.”

Lisa smiled. “Navy corpsman, assigned to a Marine combat unit in northern Ethiopia. I was an E-6 when I separated from the service. How about you?”

Lois' voice gentled in the presence of a fellow veteran.

“Specialist E-4, Silver Star, Purple Heart, separated disabled.”

Lisa's voice took on a respectful quality. “You'd be Lois Lane.”

Lois shrugged. “No one else would do it, Petty Officer.”

Cat's snigger made Lisa smile. “Then you know the drill, Specialist Lane. You stay there until I check you over to make sure you're not surprised when you stand up. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“Good.”

Lisa took Lois' vital signs, then checked Lois' legs under her dress from hips to toes as Clark modestly turned his head. Then she worked both arms and hands and put slight pressure on her back to check for bruises or cracked ribs. Last, she palpated Lois' belly and chest.

“Okay, Specialist Lane, the only thing wrong with you right now that I can find is that cut near your hairline. I'll clean, disinfect, and slap a butterfly bandage on it. I don't think you'll need stitches as long as you take it easy for a couple of days. Close your eyes, please.”

“I'm cut?” Lois touched her forehead and looked startled as it came away bloody. “I didn't even feel it.”

“Don't fool with skin cuts while the medic is working on you.” Lisa fitted her treatment to her words. “Lots of small wounds don't register when they happen, and you know that. Sometimes bigger ones do the same thing. Let's see – yeah, more blood than cut. Looks like a piece of concrete clipped you. Here we go – got it. Ready to try vertical?”

Lois reached out one hand to Lisa and the other to Clark as Cat stood behind her. “Got to do it some time.” She stood and spread her feet, then slowly rotated her shoulders.

“How do you feel?” asked Lisa.

“Like one of the guys in my unit forgot we were playing touch football and tackled me.”

Lisa nodded. “You're very lucky to have gotten away with being that close to the blast. Another few feet and we would have been scraping up what was left of you with a spatula. You ever been that close to being blown up?”

“Not on purpose, no.”

The three people around her grinned. “Okay,” said Lisa, “you know this part of the drill, too. Take it easy for the rest of the day and tomorrow, use some over-the-counter pain meds if you need them but do not overdose yourself, and head for the hospital or call an ambulance if the pain gets too bad or if you have any symptoms of infection. If you need to clean up, and I think you do, don't get the bandage wet. Take a bath, not a shower, and use dry shampoo spray. Don't be a hero, either. The quicker you get the help you need, the quicker you'll be back at work throwing yourself in the line of fire.”

“Thanks, Lisa,” said Clark. “But how did you know she dives into the line of fire instead of running away?”

Lisa gave Lois a non-professional smile. “Because that's what I did. And she's a lot like me.”

“Lisa?” Cat said. “Do you mind telling us your last name? I want to mention you in our article.”

“Your article?”

Clark smiled and said, “We're reporters for the Daily Planet. We'll do a story on this incident, and we want to make sure you get the recognition you deserve.”

Lisa's face went almost blank. “I don't do this for the recognition, sir.”

“We know that,” answered Cat. “This is more like a ‘thank-you’ for helping our teammate.”

Lisa frowned slightly. “What do you think, Specialist Lane?”

Lois lifted one eyebrow. “I'd like to know your last name, too, if only to remember to whom to be grateful.”

Lisa almost grinned. “That's an awkward sentence just to keep from ending on a preposition.”

Lois's almost grin matched Lisa's. "Yeah, well, that's something up with which I cannot put."

Lisa laughed. "Okay, I'll tell you, but only because you quoted Winston Churchill and convinced me that your brain isn't scrambled too badly. It's Fairchild, Lisa Fairchild."

Cat smiled warmly. "Thank you, Lisa. We'll push for a raise for you."

"Just don't catch any more bomb splinters and I'll be happy." She stood and looked around. "Gotta go, folks. My job's not done yet."

Lisa turned to seek another victim of her ministrations. Cat turned to Lois and said, "You need to go home for the rest of the day. Take the cell phone with you after I call Perry and explain what's going on. And when I say 'go home,' I don't mean 'drop by the office for extra work first.' You know what the Chief would say, and he is in the chain of command above you."

Lois frowned at her. "Are you in the chain of command too, Cat?"

Cat put her fists on her hips and glared. "You're wounded. You need rest. I'm just saying what Lisa already told you. You go home now. Agreed?"

"Just as soon as I talk to the bomb squad—"

"No! Clark and I will take care of that. You head for home!"

Cat turned away and lifted the cell to dial Perry's desk. Behind her, she heard Clark say, "We can handle this, Lois. You need to rest. It isn't likely or Lisa would have mentioned it, but it's possible that you suffered minor internal concussion injuries. I'm surprised you don't have any hearing loss."

Lois' smile was obvious in her words. "Too many fifty-caliber rounds going off in my ears, I guess. I've already suffered some loss. Learned to read lips when I'm close enough and I can usually fill in the blanks through context." She sighed. "Okay, I'll go home and rest. Can I at least write up what I've learned so far?"

"Sure. Cat and I will come by after dinner to check on you. We can merge our stories then." Cat saw him tap Lois' shoulder out of the corner of her eye. "And get some sleep, okay? You're probably more tuckered out than you realize. Come on, I'll get you a cab."

As Clark put Lois in the cab, Cat finished briefing Perry on the blast, including the preliminary police report, told him that Lois was headed home for the night and that they'd check on her, and that Jimmy was bringing what were probably the best still photos of the explosion anyone had gotten. The editor grunted, then said, "You two come back here to write up what you have. Go merge your stuff with Lois' take. And then make sure Lois is okay before you leave her place."

"Will do, Perry. As always, you have a heart of gold."

He snorted. "Yeah, well, my shoes are full of lead or I'd be out there with you. Make sure you have a good story to give me."

Clark made sure Lois got in a taxi headed for her apartment, then turned to find Catharine. She was standing near a table where a police officer was examining some specific debris. Their eyes met and she waved for him to join her.

"Clark, this is Police Lieutenant Max Perkins, bomb squad commander. He was in the Middle East the same time Lois was, except he was defusing improvised explosive devices. Lieutenant, would you tell Clark what you started to tell me?"

Perkins looked at each of them in turn. "I can do a little better than that. My guys just found some very interesting stuff. This—" he pointed to a larger piece of metal "—is what's left of a pipe bomb. What's interesting is that it wasn't filled with gunpowder and ball bearings like the IEDs in the Middle East or the ones that crooks in the States use. It was filled with C4."

Clark frowned. "Don't you need a detonator for that, like a blasting cap?"

"Yes. These parts here—" he indicated a pile of light metal and plastic "—were part of that detonator. And the wires on this

piece tell me that it was connected to a radio receiver."

Catharine shuddered. "What was the range of the transmitter?"

"It depends," Perkins said. "If this was set to go off just by sending a pulse on a specific frequency, there's no telling."

Clark's eyes narrowed. "But you don't think that's what happened, do you?"

Perkins shook his head. "No. I think this was set to go off when a specific digital signal was sent, almost certainly in the high band, to prevent a premature detonation. Otherwise any stray radio signal, from police band to CB, could have set it off. I think this was a short-range signal, probably a line-of-sight transmission, which means the bomber was almost certainly in the crowd watching."

Catharine swore quietly but eloquently and with feeling. Clark looked at her and said, "I think Lois is a bad influence on you. You owe the jar at least four dollars for that little speech."

She glared back. "I'll drop in a censored IOU." She turned to Perkins. "So what we have is a complex, sophisticated bomb setup that was manually triggered when Superman entered the building, right? Sounds like the work of a professional."

"You've got it. My guys will analyze the C4 residue for chemical markers and try to track down the manufacturer. And if enough of the detonator mechanism survived the explosion, we'll track down the parts makers."

"Good," said Cat. "We'll work on trying to find out who benefits from trying to blow up Superman. We'll keep you in our loop if you keep us in yours."

"Sure thing," said Perkins. "I'll even tell you what we don't learn so our investigations don't step on one another."

"Thanks, Lieutenant. Come on, Clark, let's go catch some bad guys."

He shrugged at Perkins. "I have to go now. She's above me in the chain of command."

Chapter Eleven

The cabbie dropped Lois off at her apartment complex and didn't give her a hard time about the fare or the lack of a tip. She didn't realize he hadn't asked her for money until she remembered Clark giving him a trio of twenties along with strict instructions to take it easy and head to the hospital if she passed out or exhibited any serious pain. Lois smiled as she remembered Clark's kindness and care.

She pushed open the door, shut it and locked it behind her, then leaned against it. Clark was right. She was as tired now as she ever had been in Basic. And the Carlin building hadn't looked a bit like an obstacle course.

It had felt like one had fallen on her when the bomb had gone off, though.

As she pushed off the door and moved to the bedroom to change, Clark returned to her thoughts. He hadn't just been kind to her — he'd really cared about her. It wasn't so much in his tone, but in his eyes. Yes, she'd been a little loopy, but she'd seen his expression. It resembled how he'd appeared when he'd cradled Cat in his arms when he'd rescued them from the EPRAD hanger, but there was more there. Maybe it was a reflection of how tired she was, maybe it was a delayed reaction to almost being blown up, but she didn't think she'd mind if Clark wanted to hold her like that again. Of course, it would have to be the right time and the right place and he'd better not be dating anyone else like Cat or Karen or that blonde cougar Mayson Drake, but it would be nice to be in his arms again.

Oh, yeah, she was tired. Self-babbling, one of the surest symptoms of total and complete exhaustion. She'd put on some loose clothing and type up what she remembered from the bombing, make sure it was on a thumb drive for Cat and Clark when they came by. And she'd wait up for them to make sure they added her portion.

Perry would understand if she went right to sleep, but she wouldn't.

Cat and Clark sat down with Lois and her thumb drive and blended her account with the material they already had. Cat read it carefully and said, "This is good writing and I don't mind saying so. Anybody who doesn't like it needs to get blown up by a bomb."

Clark chuckled. Lois, sitting at the kitchen table with her head propped up in her hands, opened her eyes and tried to smile. "Lois, honey," Cat purred, "you go get some sleep, okay? We'll go shove this down Perry's throat and make him print it."

Lois sighed and cautiously stood. "As long as it has my name on it."

Clark chuckled again. "It's going to have all our names on the byline."

"Fine. Just put them in the order of number of Kerths earned."

"Hey!" Cat blurted. "No fair! You've got three and I've got two but Clark doesn't have any yet!"

Clark touched her on the wrist and made warm tingles run up and down her arm. "It's okay, Catharine. Maybe we can all share the one this story will earn."

"Whatever," Lois mumbled. "I'm hitting the sack. Bring me something for dinner tonight, will you?"

Clark moved his hand and Cat's wrist felt as if it had suddenly iced over. "Will do," he said. "You just get some shut-eye, okay?"

She waved at them without turning around. As she closed her bedroom door, Cat stood. "We need to get this to Perry so he can tell us what a great job we've done on it. I'll lock up."

Clark's eyebrow rose. "I see. You're driving, I presume?"

"It's my Porsche," Cat sniffed. "Of course I'm driving."

"Then I've got shotgun!"

She had to be careful. Being around Clark all the time could be habit-forming.

In the newsroom, they printed a copy of the story, reviewed it for grammar and spelling errors – Cat and Clark each found one misspelled word – and sent it to Perry after they edited the file. Then each of them returned to their respective desks and spent much of the rest of the day making calls and checking old files for clues.

Cat caught herself glancing at Clark several times during the afternoon. He was always focused on whatever he was doing at the time, so he didn't see her looking.

She didn't know why she kept looking at him. She didn't know why she'd felt that frisson of happy tension when he'd touched her in Lois' apartment. She didn't know why she wanted to walk over to him and plant a huge kiss on his mouth and tell him that she wanted a repeat of their last night together – several thousand times.

That wasn't true. She knew why.

She also knew that she couldn't declare her full, abject, all-consuming love for him. Not now. Not yet. They needed to get to know each other again. They were both different people, no longer the kids they'd been that semester at Met U. She had to be patient, to wait for him to realize her worth, for him to understand the depths of her love for him. He was so wonderful in every way – Superman couldn't be a better person than Clark was. Clark's care and compassion glowed like a beacon, even now just sitting at his desk at work. He—

Enough! she ordered herself. Quit mooning over him! You have a job to do!

Perry chose that moment to bellow for both of them to come to his office.

To say Perry acted as if he were pleased would be a serious overstatement of his apparent reaction to the story Cat and Clark

turned in. "Okay," he said, "we got a teaser under the front page fold about the bombing in the afternoon edition. We included Olsen's shot of Lois getting blown back by the blast." He looked up at them. "You're sure she's okay?"

Cat nodded. "That's what the EMT said. Lisa Fairchild. We put her in there, too."

"Good." He picked up the paper version and slipped on his reading glasses. "This version does include Lois' contribution, doesn't it?" he asked. They both nodded at him. "Okay, now. You put in here that those attempted suicides earlier this week were fake, that Superman was always intended to stop them, that someone or some group is testing him to see what he can do with his powers, and that those rescues were probably designed to test his speed and reaction time." He took off his glasses, then leaned forward over his desk and rubbed his face with his hands. "But you didn't provide any hard facts."

"Not only is that the logical conclusion, Perry," Clark retorted, "it's the angle that both the police and the ATF are pursuing. The few people who were injured at the Carlin building bombing were inside the police perimeter. If they had all stayed back, no one would have been hurt. The building was evacuated before Superman walked in the front door, which is when the bomb went off. No innocents were seriously injured. And we put all that in."

Cat heard the little catch in Clark's voice when he mentioned the injuries, but she didn't think Perry did. She'd remember it for later thought. "You saw what Lieutenant Perkins said about the remote detonator, right?" she asked. "That supports the Superman test idea."

Perry frowned slightly. "Yes, but I think we need to slice that out and save it for later, say when we have the final analysis of the bomb debris. We still don't know where the bomb came from or who built it."

Clark sighed. "So that goes in 'hold for more proof file' then?"

"It does. Just make sure you don't lose it."

"Chief," Cat asked, "what's your judgement on the rest of the story?"

The editor lifted it and nodded. "It's very good. We're running it tomorrow morning along with Olsen's shot of the two of you tending to Lois on the front page. Davis will have a companion piece on all the collateral injuries. That one's pretty short, thankfully."

"You're running it as is?"

"Except for the part about testing Superman's powers, yes. I already told you it's very good."

Her voice rose slightly and she all but demanded, "Then why challenge the part about linking the fake suicides to the bombing?"

"I needed to know that you could defend your point of view in case of legal action against us. And before you explode all over me, I also know that you didn't include any names hinting at who might be responsible. We don't have enough evidence to get an accusation like that past the legal department without a lawsuit." He waved his unlit cigar at them. "Good story, all three of you. I can't tell for sure who wrote what part, which means you're all three on the same wavelength. Excellent job. Look for it in the morning edition."

She relaxed and smiled. "Thanks, Perry. We'll tell Lois tonight when we go check on her."

"Fine. You two go get something to eat, then go tuck Lois in for the night. Tell her she stays at home tomorrow unless she needs a doctor. You two, though, be back in here by eight-thirty in the morning, ready to knock this thing out of the park with the rest of the story."

Clark got in the passenger side of the Porsche and asked, "Where do you want to have dinner?"

Cat inserted the key and paused to think. "Some place where we don't eat in the car. You feel like seafood?"

“How about the Sunburned Crustacean? We can grab a bag of those cheese biscuits for Lois.”

“She loves those biscuits, so seafood it is.” She grinned at him. “It’s almost eight, so the dinner rush should be over. We can pretend it’s a date if you want.”

He smiled back and turned to look through the windshield. Hope I didn’t just overdo it, thought Cat.

Cat rummaged around in her purse for a moment, then pulled out a keyring smaller than the one with her car key on it and held it up in front of Clark. “In case you’re wondering if this is a one-way key loan, Lois has a key to my place, too,” Cat said, “for emergencies just like this one.” She put the key in the lower deadbolt and turned it, then removed it and inserted it in the upper deadbolt. “Just remember to make some noise. If we try to be silent and she spots us before she knows who we are, it’s possible she’ll start shooting.”

He grinned at her for a moment, then she watched him realize that she was serious. “You’re not kidding, are you?”

“Not in the least.” She chuckled when Clark’s eyebrow lifted with Spockian skepticism. “I see that I’ll have to convince you. About three years ago, a burglar somehow got a copy of her key or picked the doorknob lock and slipped inside. Lois heard him from the bedroom and shot both her sofa and her refrigerator to death before the terrified burglar ran out unharmed. That was when she got the second deadbolt, and now she throws both of them every time she goes through the door. And before you ask, yes, she meant to miss the burglar.” She grinned and released the third and final lock. “Her landlord wasn’t at all amused when he had to replace the fridge.”

Clark shook his head. “Yeesh.”

She frowned and asked, “What do you mean?”

“You and she are both high-maintenance.”

Cat chuckled at him. “What was your first clue?”

He smiled but didn’t answer. After a moment, Cat opened the door and called out, “Lois? This is Cat. Clark and I are both here. We come bearing biscuits from Sunburned Crustacean.” No response. Cat took two steps toward the bedroom. “Lois? Are you awake?”

Lois startled both of them when she stood up from behind the breakfast bar in the kitchen. “I’m awake.”

Cat held the bag aloft. “We bring a peace offering, plus an imperial command from the Chief for you to stay home tomorrow.”

Lois slipped her pistol into her robe pocket and wrapped the garment tighter around her T-shirt. “Which one of you talked Darth Perry into that concession?”

Cat smiled. “He volunteered. Seems he doesn’t want one of his best reporters to be out of the office any longer than necessary.”

“Huh. That was nice of him. You two make yourselves at home while I go put on some clothes suitable for entertaining guests.”

She walked into the bedroom and pulled the door almost shut. With the door cracked open like that, she could still hear normal conversations in the living room as long as they weren’t whispered.

“I hate that Superman’s being tested,” Cat said. “He came all this way to help and someone’s treating him like a lab animal. And what are you doing now?”

“Checking out her new couch,” Clark answered. “It’s not much to look at compared to the rest of the furniture in the room, but it’s very comfy. The arms are high enough for me to lean against without lying down. And it really ties the room together.”

Cat laughed. “Clark Kent, furniture critic. Never thought I’d see the day. You want to compare Lois’ couch to mine?”

The oblique invitation was the kind of thing Lois had heard from her friend to a man multiple times, but for the first time it angered her. In an instant, a towering rage rose up in Lois’ heart and she came close to bursting out of the bedroom with her sleeping sweats in one hand and her Beretta in the other.

The sudden reality of her fury threw cold water on her plans. And she was puzzled as to the origin of those instant feelings. Maybe her head had been hit harder than she’d realized.

She missed Clark’s reply, but Cat’s next words caught her up in the conversation. “I – I’m sorry. I’m usually not this forward.” The couch made a squeak that Lois recognized as Cat sitting down on the far end. “I guess Lois told you that I date a lot but I don’t commit past a certain point.”

“No, she hasn’t. And I haven’t asked.”

“Why not?”

“That’s your business, not mine. I assumed that if you wanted me to know about your social life, you’d make it a point to inform me.”

“I’d like to. Inform you, that is. And I – I’d like to include you in my social life, such as it is.”

Clark exhaled sharply and said, “Do you really want to go there?”

Cat answered with a wistful tone, one which Lois had rarely heard from her. “Yes. Because I want – I need to know if I have any chance with you. Not the thing we had before – that was built on deceit and youth and excitement about filing the story and a little bit of fear that I wasn’t good enough. But I’m not lying to you now. I’m eight years older than I was. I may not be the best ever at what I do, but I know that I’m very good at it. I’m not afraid of washing out like I was then. And I – I need to know if there’s any chance that we can go forward together – in life, I mean.”

It was too disheartening for Lois to listen to anything else. She had to put on the sweats and come out and have a biscuit or two and listen to a summary of Perry’s reaction to the story they’d turned in. She had to smile at Cat and pretend that she was happy that the two of them were planning a reunion after all these years.

She had to act like Clark’s response wasn’t the most important thing in her life at the moment.

Cat waited on pins and needles as Clark pondered her statement. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Every ounce of air he exhaled stole a breath from her. “I don’t think so, Catharine. What happened between us wasn’t strong enough for a long-term relationship. The way it ended was pretty bad, and a whole lot of it was my fault. But while I like you as a friend, if I try to think about you as a romantic interest, it just doesn’t work in my head. I trust you as a friend, but – but I can’t see myself trusting you with my future.” He worked his mouth as if trying to decide whether or not to smile.

He didn’t. He just hesitated, then said, “I’m sorry.”

Cat looked away and wiped her face with one hand. His response wasn’t totally unexpected, but it still hurt deeply. “I see,” she finally said. “I – I had this hope that – that we could get past all that baggage.” She turned to look at him. “I really enjoyed dinner.”

“I enjoyed it too, but as friends. Again, I’m sorry, but there’s a wall between us that I can’t get over. Believe me, I’ve thought about it seriously.”

She turned away again. “You’ve thought long and hard?”

“Yes.”

“And the answer is still a great big ‘no’?”

“Maybe not a great big ‘no,’ but it is still ‘no.’”

She clasped her hands together and looked away. “What about Lois?”

He frowned slightly. “I don’t understand what you’re asking me.”

“Do you – how do you feel about her?”

She caught his grin out of the corner of her eye. “I feel very positive about her. I can see myself having a close relationship with Lois. Assuming, of course, she wants to check out that path in the yellowed wood with me.”

“Path in the yellowed wood?”

“From the Robert Frost poem about two paths in the woods diverging from a single path. It represents the choices Frost made in his early life that led to where he was when he wrote the poem.”

“That’s an interesting metaphor. Not sure how I feel about being an untrod path, though.” They shared a sad chuckle, then she locked eyes with him. “Have you spoken to her about – about how you feel?”

“Not yet. I want to wait until we’re not neck-deep in an investigation.”

Cat coughed a half-laugh, half-sob. “You may have to wait a long time, then. She tends to find trouble like some people find coins on the sidewalk.”

“I know. If I have to, I’ll bring it up when I can. I just hope we’re not being shot at.”

She chuckled and nodded. “Or she’s shooting back.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“Um—” she hesitated, then said, “Mind if I ask you a personal question?”

“Please do.”

“Okay. Is – uh – is the way you feel about Lois a – a part of the wall between us that you say you can’t get over?”

He took a breath as if to speak, then sighed. “I wonder if I should tell you – I will tell you. And understand before I say this that I’m not trying to hurt you. In fact, I’ve never said this to anyone. Not to Lois, not my parents, not anyone.”

Cat felt her brows lift. “You’re not trying to hurt me by saying this, but you might? This sounds – interesting. Please continue.”

Clark licked his lips, then nodded. “Okay. Every time I’ve gotten anywhere close to thinking about any woman as a – a steady girlfriend, I guess, Mags gets in the way. She – you pop up in my memory and smile softly and I can’t see the woman without comparing her to you. And she loses.” He dropped his gaze, then looked up again and spoke softly. “Until now.”

Cat forced her lips together. “I think – you’re telling me that you don’t think of me when you – when Lois is in your mind.”

“Not quite. I do think of you, a little, and – here’s where I’m not trying to be mean or cruel, just honest – you come in second.”

She blinked. “Oh.” This time Cat dropped her eyes for a moment. “Is that – you think that’s a permanent condition?”

He grimaced, then said, “I’m afraid so. And I have to add that I’d say the same thing to any other woman.”

“Even Karen Wells?”

He snorted, then chuckled. “I think she’s finally quit dropping by my desk with writing suggestions or spare notebooks and pens. I could open a stationary concession with what she’s brought me.”

They laughed softly together. After a long moment, Cat kneaded her hands together, then looked into his eyes. “Clark?” she said. “Don’t leave Lois hanging. If you really have that ‘forever and a day’ love for her, tell her. Don’t make her guess.”

“If that’s the direction our relationship goes, I won’t hide it from her.”

“Good.” She sniffed and wiped her nose, then stood. “Um – well, then. Can you get home okay by yourself?”

His voice was gentle but firm. “Yes.”

“Good. I – uh – I’ll just be going then.” She took a step toward the door, then paused. “I don’t think it would be a good idea for us to be alone together right now.”

“I understand.” He relaxed against the back of the couch. “Good night, Catharine. I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

She nodded but didn’t say anything else. One foot went in front of the other until she found herself in the underground

parking. All that was left was for her to go home and cry herself to sleep. He had, at least, been sensitive to her feelings. Even so, that discussion had wounded her deeply.

The damage in her life from their brief liaison was pervasive, poisoning every romance she’d begun. She’d never stopped to consider that Clark had suffered the same aftereffects as she. They were fellow veterans of the relationship wars, wounded in the same battle, suffering from their own limited form of PTSD. No wonder they both got along so well with Lois.

She really hoped Lois appreciated the man who’d just chosen her over Cat.

Lois heard the front door open and close. She didn’t want to go to sleep yet, so she walked out of the bedroom in her cutoff sweats to get a glass of orange juice and was startled when Clark stood up.

She stiffened for a moment, then relaxed slightly. “I – I thought you’d – you’d gone home.”

She’d almost said “you’d left with Cat,” but obviously he hadn’t done that.

So why was he still there?

Clark walked around the couch and stopped near the back. “I wanted to have a conversation with you.”

“About personal stuff, I presume.”

“Well, yeah.”

“About couches?”

His face went blank. “Couches?”

“Mine as opposed to Cat’s.”

“Um – couches – yours and Cat’s – you were listening at the door.”

“Yes. Why didn’t you take her up on her offer to compare couches?”

“Because I’m not interested in her in a romantic sense.”

“You told her that?”

“Yes, Lois, I told her that.”

“How did she react?”

His eyebrows drew down as if he were tired of the subject. “Not very well, I’m afraid.” He locked his deep chocolate eyes with her bloodshot peepers. “Do you have a problem of some kind with my choices?”

She tried to return the intensity but came up a little short. “They’re your choices, okay?” she insisted. “You don’t have to clear them with me.”

“But you’re busting my chops anyway. Why?”

She strode to the kitchenette for what she decided she really wanted, a glass of water. “This is my home, remember? I live here. You—” she lowered her volume to ease the impact of her next words “—you’re just an interloper.”

He frowned and tilted his head to one side. “Are you mad at me, Lois?”

Lois turned on the tap to fill the glass. “No.” She couldn’t meet his gaze, so as soon as she turned off the water, she told him the truth. “Yes.”

“Why? What did I do to make you angry?”

“You hurt my best friend and I don’t like that.” She lifted hard eyes to him. “Have I told you what she did my first month at the Planet?”

“Are you talking about the cuss jar or something else?”

“Something else.” She put the full glass on the counter beside the sink and looked at the floor. “I was having trouble with one of the guys in accounting. Supposedly something was wrong with my expense report. The little weasel called me into his office to ‘talk with me’ about it but what he really wanted was for me to go out with him and he didn’t want to take ‘no’ for an answer. He pushed himself against me and grabbed my butt.”

She took a step to one side and lifted her gaze to meet his. “Just before I dropped him, Cat came out of nowhere and

slammed him against the wall, then read him the riot act. Said that if he touched me again without my express invitation, she'd shoot him in the foot and claim it was an accident and no one would ever believe otherwise because of his reputation, and if it happened again there would be another 'accident' like that one about halfway between his foot and his head."

His eyes widened and his eyebrows rose. "So – she threatened to – to shoot him in the – where his – um—"

"She promised to make him a eunuch, yeah. And he believed her."

He nodded slowly. "I think I understand. She saved you from getting hurt, right?"

"No. She kept me from hurting him."

He nodded twice and said, "I see." Her eyes moved to his, then she wiped her cheeks dry.

Clark shifted his weight to one foot and crossed his arms. "Maybe between the two of you, she's the more dangerous one."

Despite herself, Lois laughed. "You could be right about that, Kent." She picked up the water glass and drained it. "So is that what you wanted to talk to me about, which of us is more dangerous than the other?"

He shook his head. "Not really, but I'm flattered that you trust me enough to share this with me."

She put the glass in the sink. "You've proven yourself trustworthy enough to know some important things about me."

"Thank you. What I really wanted to ask you, though, was if you'd like to go to dinner with me."

The idea surprised her. "I don't know," she muttered. "I don't like thinking of myself as the third wheel. Or the buffer between a couple."

She saw the puzzled look crawl across his face and wondered at it. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

"What do you mean, what am I talking about? I don't want to be the pity companion on a date between you and Cat. Or the buffer girl so you can take her some place cheap but with me there to keep her from calling you on it."

"Pity companion – oh, no, that's not right. That's not what I meant at all."

She slammed her fist onto the counter surface. "Then you can take her someplace nice! Just the two of you! Some restaurant with subdued lighting where she can dress up and glam out and you can wear a suit with no tie and show off your shoulders just a little and walk her to her front door and—"

"Will you listen to me! I don't want to go on a date with Cat, I want to go on a date with you!"

She almost tripped on her tongue. "Wh-what? Me? You – you want to – to go to – to dinner with just me?"

"Yes! That's exactly what I meant to begin with!"

"Just me?"

"Yes, just you! No Catharine Grant to get in the way, just you and me!"

She put her fists on her hips and almost yelled up at him. "Then why didn't you lead with that, knucklehead? We both could have saved some time and aggravation!"

He towered over her and snapped back, "I tried to but I didn't anticipate having to go two falls out of three just to ask you on a date!"

She bared her teeth but brought down her volume. "I'll have to think about it!"

"Fine!" he growled back. "Since you're staying home tomorrow I'll call you just before I leave the office!"

She crossed her arms and stepped to one side. "Call about seven! I have a therapy session late tomorrow afternoon!"

"I'll call you then," he growled. He turned and stalked to the door, then stopped with his hand on the doorknob and muttered something that sounded like, "I'm not leaving it like this again." His shoulders drooped, and he turned his face to one side and

sighed over his shoulder. He sounded drained as he said, "Lois?"

She turned away and rubbed her face. "Yes, Clark?"

"Is it going to be like this if we start dating?"

She shook her head, then realized that he probably couldn't see her. "Boy, I sure hope not."

"Me too. This is exhausting. And I – I don't particularly like it."

A wet chuckle escaped her lips. "I'm sorry. I guess I really am high maintenance." She sighed. "I hope someone someday thinks I'm worth the effort."

She barely heard his final words for the night. "I think you're worth that and far more. Good night, Lois. Sleep peacefully."

"You too," she whispered.

He slipped out of the apartment and left.

Cat turned over in bed again, still unable to get comfortable. She wished that Clark had chosen her instead of Lois, that Lois hadn't been caught between them, that Cat's parents had stayed close to Metropolis instead of moving to Idaho so she could visit them and cry on their shoulders, that she'd never accepted that undercover assignment eight years before, that Superman would hold her the way Clark had held her—

A sudden thought burst in her brain and made her lurch up in bed with her eyes wide open. It couldn't be true! It couldn't be!

But if it were true—

Superman had held her, and on more than one occasion. True, they hadn't been romantic occasions, but the feeling of being surrounded by those arms of velvet-covered steel was the same.

And each time, it had felt remarkably similar to having Clark's arms around her. The comparison simply hadn't occurred to her before. All she'd noted before was that both men had muscles to spare and a gentle touch.

Could that mean—

No. It wasn't nearly enough. If that were the only piece of evidence she had, she'd get tossed out of any court of law in the land. Perry wouldn't entertain even an op-ed piece with a premise that thin. She wouldn't believe it if she told herself about her suspicion. It just wasn't proof of anything but Clark's own physical strength.

If Clark were Superman, other things would show up. Like his surprisingly intense reaction to learning that Bureau 39 had been looking at Smallville a quarter-century earlier. Like his taking something from that little ship with the Superman crest on the front at the Bessolo street warehouse. Like his being on the far side of the Carlin building today where—

Where no one could see him.

And Superman had flown away without checking on the injured.

Maybe he'd somehow known that no one needed an emergency room or even hospital care. Or maybe he'd seen or heard something else he needed to take care of.

Or – someone else?

Maybe he'd never actually left. Clark had appeared beside Lois awfully fast. He must have been sprinting from the other side of the building. And he had been most attentive to her.

And if Superman had a girlfriend, Cat would run over every other reporter in the city to get the exclusive on the woman who—

A snapshot of what that woman's life would be like burst into Cat's mind.

If Superman had a girlfriend, Cat would want to interview her and learn everything she could about this mystery woman – and so would every other reporter in the world. The woman's private life from birth would be splashed across the front pages of newspapers everywhere. Network news anchors would compete for the minutia on her family. Neither she nor her friends or loved ones would ever have a moment's peace, and she'd be threatened by every hoodlum or crook or thug who decided to use her to control

or just influence Superman. She'd be a political figure whether she wanted to be or not, and for the same reasons. And if she and Superman happened to end their relationship for any reason, she'd spend the rest of her life with a target painted on her chest. She might be in even more danger from that point on.

Cat would never do that to her worst enemy. She'd certainly not do it to her best friend.

But that all assumed that her original assumption was correct. Clark had been traveling the world for years, but Metropolis was the first place Superman had been seen in public. It could all be some bizarre coincidence that the two men had both recently arrived in the city. People came to Metropolis all the time. By itself, it meant nothing.

She'd long ago learned not to trust in coincidence, to treat it as a distraction at best and as misdirection at worst. Sometimes – some extremely rare times – coincidences did happen.

But multiple coincidences all pointing the same direction meant there was a fire generating that smoke in her head.

Cat got up and drank a glass of water, then visited the bathroom. Sleep, she mused, might never come on this night, now that she'd decided to discover for herself the truth of Clark's "other job" – assuming he really was the hero she thought he was. Had there been anyone there to take her bet, she would've wagered real money that she'd be awake all night.

She would've lost that bet. The arms of Morpheus welcomed her the moment she lay down, and she soon slipped into a dreamless and relaxing slumber.

Chapter Twelve

The next morning, a busy yet self-indulgent Lex Luthor selected the fabric for his new suits, gave the tailor a near-impossible completion date, rushed him out of the office, then sat down at his desk as his faithful servant poured a cup of imported Brazilian coffee for him. "Thank you, Asabi."

"Will there be anything else, Mr. Luthor?"

"Not at the moment, no. Please see to Ms. Kahn's comfort. I'm sure she won't want to repeat that fall from the roof any time soon."

"Of course, sir."

"Oh, Asabi? I mean that literally. Make sure she's calm and comfortable before she returns home, and make every sort of hospitality available to her. We absolutely do not want her to be injured or even discomfited in any way whatsoever."

"Very good, sir."

As Asabi turned to leave, Lex picked up a report on his hi-tech affiliate. WayneTech was still ahead of LexData in sales volume, value, and product line innovation. Perhaps there was someone in Wayne's main office who—

There was a "thump" from the open balcony door. He looked up and saw the blue-and-red-clad hero leaning against the door jamb. "Superman! The man who is stronger than a locomotive and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. To what do we owe this honor?"

"I think we need to talk, Lex. May I come in?"

Lex gave him his most charming smile. "Of course. Please do. Can I get you anything? Coffee, soft drink, or perhaps something with more of a kick in it?"

"Thanks, but no. I wouldn't get anything out of it."

"Oh, yes, of course, you're the invulnerable Man of Steel."

Superman picked up a long sword from its wooden display rack on the wall beside the balcony door. "You seem to have a dizzying array of nicknames for me."

"Not original with me, I assure you. Those names are all courtesy of the national press, if not the international. Especially given your feats of – what are you doing? That longsword is a valuable antique."

Superman flipped the sword in the air and caught it by the

blade. "Do you recall our conversation some weeks ago, the one we had right after I first appeared in public? I asked you to pass along my – I guess 'admonition' is as good a term as any – to you and your peer group not to engage in illegal activities in the city. Yet that's exactly what's happened this week. Two people, one of whom works directly for you and another who works for a charity you support heavily, went to the roofs of high buildings at the same time earlier this week—" he stared at the sword for a moment. It seemed to go limp. Then he easily bent the blade into a Mobius strip "—and both jumped off within seconds of one another. One of them said something about a test. A suspicious man – or a paranoid one – might easily see a connection to you. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Superman's creating the Mobius strip – from pure medieval steel – impressed Lex with both his power and control. He couldn't let his visitor know that, of course. "All I know is that you've badly damaged a First Crusade combat sword. I could sue you."

"Oh, yes, I suppose you could." He gently laid the sword on the floor and opened a wooden box sitting on the edge of Luthor's desk. "I don't know how you'd serve that subpoena, though." He lifted a pearl-handled, silver-plated 1873 Colt .45 caliber single-action Army revolver out of the box and spun the cylinder. "This is a nice historic item too, isn't it?" Luthor nodded. "And it's loaded, too. How convenient?"

Superman spun the pistol on his index finger like a Hollywood gunfighter. "You've seen how strong I am. Of course, that should have been evident at the Carlin building bombing. It should also have been evident that I can't be hurt by any conventional means."

Luthor took a step back. He knew his face showed real alarm. "Well, yes, I happened to catch the TV broadcast. I'm seriously considering entering the media market with an outlet—"

"Before you do that—" Superman cocked the pistol and pointed it at Luthor's chest. "—you really should know how fast I am."

Lex took two more steps back. "Wait – you don't mean – you're not going to shoo—"

BANG!

His cigar fell from his mouth and hit the rug below. His hands flew to his chest to search for the bloody wound he was certain he'd just suffered.

But he hadn't been shot. He hadn't received so much as a scratch.

Superman stood before him, holding a barely dented smoking bullet in his fingers. The hero grinned and placed it in Luthor's hand. The heat from the spent round burned his palm and he dropped it beside his smoldering cigar.

Great, he thought, now I have to replace the lion-pelt rug as well as the sword.

Superman leaned in to whisper in Luthor's ear. "The tests stop now, Lex. Pass that on to your high-society buddies."

The blue fool spun on his heel and headed toward the balcony. He was about to exit the room by the time Luthor regained enough voice control to ask without squeaking, "What if they don't?"

Superman stopped and turned back. "I'm sorry. Despite my enhanced hearing, I believe I must have misunderstood you."

"I asked, 'what if they don't?' If the tests don't stop, that is. Just for the sake of argument, what would happen should these tests – assuming that is indeed what they truly are – do not stop?"

Superman crossed his arms and seemed to increase his density. "That would be a bad idea for someone to have. The tests need to stop, mainly because they're endangering people. They're also taking up my time, which should be spent helping at real accidents and disasters. As a bonus – and not a good bonus – they're irritating me. I'd certainly hate to unleash the wrath of Superman on whoever is responsible."

"Yes, about that." Luthor picked up his suit coat and settled it

on his shoulders as he spoke. “The person – or persons – responsible for these tests, assuming these events actually are tests, isn’t likely to terminate them simply because you say so, especially if I say that you said so. Without admitting to any responsibility, I, for example, would not stop them.”

“Why not?”

A victorious smile threatened to escape Luthor’s control, but he held it back. “Simple, really. If these actions truly are tests, they are being run by someone who obviously has little, if any, regard for life or property. You have insisted to me that you will work within the law on all levels and not behave as a super-vigilante, wantonly and randomly executing ‘justice’ upon those who oppose you or your ideals. I believe that is exactly what you will – and will not – do. So, pending some legal action proving someone’s complicity in this alleged testing scheme, your hands are effectively tied.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Superman turned to leave, but Luthor called him back again. “Wait. I believe you have overlooked something very important.”

“What’s that?”

“As long as you are in Metropolis, people will be in danger. And if the difficulty of the tests keeps ramping up, as these seem to have done, some innocents will die – or at least be gravely injured – and it will be your fault. Do you really want that on your conscience?”

It was a direct hit. Luthor watched the hero’s thought processes catch up to the conclusion to which he’d led the muscle-bound moron. He should learn to control his body language better, thought Lex, or he’ll never be able to keep a secret.

The moment passed. The blue flyboy turned and flashed out into the late afternoon glare.

Dinner tonight would be a good one for Lex. Not only had he identified Superman’s biggest weakness – his real compassion for people – he’d scored points off the hero without giving anything away.

This was working out even better than his original plan. Maybe he’d keep the burned rug and damaged sword as mementos of his pending victory.

Dana Friskin smiled at Lois as her patient strode into the consulting room. “Good afternoon, Lois. How are you feeling today?”

Lois flopped down on the couch and crossed her arms. She stared at her feet and said, “I guess you saw the morning paper, huh?”

Dana nodded slowly. “I did. And I’m glad you weren’t hurt any worse than you were.”

“I assume you read the part where someone set off the bomb when Superman was right in the middle of the kill zone?”

“The Daily Planet didn’t call it that, but yes, I read that part.”

Lois fidgeted for a long moment, then turned to the doctor and said, “I don’t understand why someone would test him like that.”

Dana’s ears all but pivoted like an ocelot’s hearing prey rustling nearby. “That little tidbit wasn’t in the paper. How do you know that someone is testing Superman?”

“The fake suicides earlier this week – one of them babbled about a test of some kind – the Carlin building bomb, and the ultra-high frequency tone that he could hear but no one else could. Clark said Superman told him it was up around 90,000 hertz. The normal human ear can hear up to about 20,000 hertz. My hearing tops out around 12,000, maybe thirteen on a good day, because of all the loud percussive noises I was exposed to in weapons training and in combat. Even then the top end is fuzzy. Sometimes I have a hard time hearing what other women or little kids tell me, especially if they don’t over-pronounce their words or they’re speaking in high-pitched tones. It’s why I don’t bother watching Marilyn Monroe comedies or Mickey Mouse cartoons on TV.” She

grabbed the nearest pillow and forcefully fluffed it. “I’m glad you’re an alto.”

“I assume Superman found the tone generator?”

“Yes. It was also connected to a pipe bomb, like the one in the Carlin building, so to be safe he flew it at his best speed out of Suicide Slum up into the stratosphere before it blew. Apparently that one was supposed to determine how he’d react to a threat in a residential neighborhood, or maybe how quickly he could think and disarm a threat.”

Dana sat back and frowned. “That someone cares so little about endangering innocent lives that he or she or they would put them at risk is disturbing.”

“It’s disturbing to me, too. But it’s a pretty strong indication that there really is a ‘Boss’ running the crime in Metropolis. Information about Superman would be extremely valuable to him.”

“Well, I’m confident that you and your coworkers can discover the identity of this person and bring him to justice. Now let’s talk about you personally, okay?”

Lois shrugged. “Sure. That’s why the VA pays you the big bucks.”

Dana smiled at the old joke, then leaned forward. “Anything happening in your personal life lately?”

She reached up and touched the small Band-Aid still on her forehead. “You mean other than this neat little souvenir?”

“Yes. Are you still having problems with Cat?”

Lois slid lower on the couch. “I don’t know. You remember me mentioning Clark Kent, the new guy on the team?” Dana nodded. “Well, Cat told me that she wanted to try to restart their romantic relationship. Trouble is, Clark doesn’t want to, at least that’s what he says. And he – he said he was going to call me tonight but instead he called earlier today and now I have a date with him on Friday.”

Dana wanted to jump up and do a happy dance at the news. “Where are you going?” she said quietly.

“I asked him that very question. He said I should – and I quote – ‘dress up and glam out.’ Makes me think it’s going to be some place special.”

Dana’s voice lowered in both volume and timbre. “So, how does that make you feel?”

“Conflicted.”

“Conflicted how?”

Lois sighed deeply. “Cat’s my best friend. I’d take a bullet for her, and if Clark was unsure which of us he wanted to date I’d step aside and smile.” She snorted. “I’d hate it, but I’d do it.” She looked directly at Dana. “But he turned her down before he knew how I’d answer him. I really, really want to go out with him, Doc. Maybe – maybe I want more than that from him.”

“Like what?”

Lois stood and slowly paced around the couch. “You know I don’t like the term PTSD, right? I – I think it’s because – because the guys who really have it have serious problems in their personal relationships. I talked to a guy in the hospital in Germany who couldn’t sleep without medicating himself with booze or drugs, couldn’t go to the range to stay qualified as a rifleman because of the noise, and nearly killed a nurse because she walked up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder.” She waved her hands in opposing circles as she changed her pacing pattern. “I – I didn’t tell you that I almost shot Cat a few weeks ago because she walked up on me as I was waking up one – oh.” She stopped moving.

Dana probed gently. “Um, Lois, it’s not the best idea to stop talking to your therapist in the middle of a sentence and say ‘oh.’ It’s one of the first things they teach us in shrink school. It usually means the patient just connected some dots.”

Lois nodded and resumed her pacing. “Yeah. That – that was Clark’s first day at the paper. I’d been dreaming about Sarah

Ferguson getting wounded, and I was meaner to him that morning than maybe I should have been. If he's seen me like that – if he's seen my Harley Quinn-type crazy and still wants to hang with me, maybe – maybe I'm not as crazy as I sometimes think I am. Maybe I can be Sandra Bullock to his Hugh Grant instead."

Dana slowly reached out and grasped Lois' hand as she went past. "Then go out with him. Talk to him. Listen to him. It might be that he needs a – oh, 'lover' isn't the right word, but I'd hate to settle on 'girlfriend.' That sounds so 1950s to me."

Lois chuckled and sat down again. "I get it. He might be 'The One' and he might not, but if I keep pushing him away he'll definitely be 'The One Who Got Away.' Hey, did I tell you we had an argument when he asked me out?"

Dana laughed. "No, but I can't say I'm surprised. With this kind of start, your relationship should be very interesting."

"Interesting. Huh. I guess 'May you have interesting relationships' is a corollary to the Chinese curse that says 'May you live in interesting times.' Even if we just end up as friends, that would be a good description."

"That's a nice smile. Don't forget that you can smile at Clark, too. Now, before we go on to other things, I want to tell you something. As your therapist, of course, but also as your friend."

Lois leaned closer. "This I've got to hear."

"Okay, here it goes. I want you to enjoy the evening for whatever it is. Not for what it might be or for what you'd like it to be or what you think Clark wants it to be. Just relax and give yourself permission to have a good time with a man you've described to me as good and kind and sensitive and patient. Think you can do that?"

Lois' smile nearly touched her ears. "I'm pretty sure I can, Doc. In fact, that was already my operational plan."

"Good. Now, can we talk about that veterans' group meeting?"

Lois' smile inverted. "I'd rather not. Thinking about going to one of those makes me feel like I might be going to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting."

Dana shrugged. "I can't make you go, and I wouldn't try to in any case. But it's something to think about. I also think you'd benefit from hearing other vets' stories."

Dana could tell from Lois' body language that she'd rather talk about getting shot or blown up.

Clark liked the way Lois leaned against her front door, relaxed and supple all at the same time, with a soft smile gently elbowing her cheeks apart. "That was a wonderful dinner, Clark. How did you find that restaurant?"

He found himself wishing he could take her in his arms and hold her until they fell asleep just so he could see that smile first thing in the morning. Instead, he said, "I've found quite a few surprising places in Metropolis in the time I've been here."

She reached out and took his hand. "And you without a car. You must spend a fortune on your shoes."

"They're less expensive than the auto insurance in this city." They shared a soft laugh. "Oh, I wish this date would last forever," she sighed. "But all good things must come to an end."

He leaned over slightly and kissed her forehead. "We'll have other dates, Lois."

"Mmm. Will we?"

He tilted his head to one side and whispered in her ear. "I certainly hope so." He moved to kiss her forehead again, then said, "Although we might want to go to a place with less expensive chocolate next time. I didn't know you were such a chocolate lover."

He moved back as she shook her head and smiled. "No-no-no, not a chocolate lover. Nor am I a chocolate fancier, connoisseur, aficionado, or mere enthusiast. I am, without a doubt, the Daily Planet's resident chocoholic."

"I will make a note of that."

"You'd better. I don't want to have to remind you every time we see each other."

He returned her smile. "Anyway, I'm glad you liked the place. You picked the restaurant next time, okay? And we don't have to go Dutch. I can pick up the whole check."

She took his hands in hers, and he was pleased to see how relaxed she appeared. "Deal. As long as I pay for the meal the time after that."

He smiled back. "Planning ahead, are we?"

She lifted his hands and kissed the middle knuckle on each one. "Yes, I am. You have a problem with that, Kansas?"

He tugged one hand free and cupped her face with it. "No. No problem at all." He lowered his other hand and slipped away.

"Good night, Lois. Sleep well."

"Good night, Clark."

He turned as if leaving, but she called out, "Clark? Can you – can you wait a minute?"

He looked over his shoulder and said, "Sure. What's up?"

"I – I have a – a favor to ask you."

He knew he'd do almost anything she asked of him. He turned to face her and said, "What is it?"

"I – I have a – an appointment on Tuesday evening. It – it's a meeting."

"What kind of meeting?"

She looked away and said, "It's something my therapist wants me to get involved in. I – she wants me to meet other vets who have PTSD."

He waited for her to speak for a long moment, then asked, "What's the favor?"

She frowned. "To go with me, dummy. That's what I asked you."

"You didn't actually ask me, you just hinted at it and I didn't want to make an unwarranted assumption." He lifted one index finger. "But I'll go under two conditions."

She tilted her head and frowned at him. "What conditions?"

"First, that you feel free to change your mind about me going with you. Or changing the date without feeling like you're inconveniencing me."

"All that's the first condition, right?" He nodded to her. "No problem," she said. "What's the second condition?"

"That if anyone at the meeting feels really uncomfortable with me being there, I leave immediately. And neither one of us objects."

She exhaled slowly. "Sounds like you've thought about this."

"I have. And I've decided that because I'm not a war veteran, I won't force myself on the ones who are or who think I'm not ready to hear their stories."

She nodded. "That's a good reason. But I don't think it will be a problem. You wouldn't be the only boyfriend or girlfriend or spouse or close friend or significant other there."

"Oh? Cat's attended a meeting?"

She met his eyes directly – too directly, he thought later. "No. She's never been."

"You haven't invited her?"

"I've never been myself."

"Ah." He paused for a moment, thinking about what a revealing conversation they were having, then quirked his lips to one side in a half-smile. "I guess it'll be a first for both of us."

"Guess so." They were both silent for a long moment, then she said, "Good night, Clark. I think we both need some sleep tonight."

"We do." He brushed her hair over the bandaged cut on her forehead. "Good night, Lois. Like I said, sleep well."

He walked to the elevator and reached for the call button, then stopped and looked back at her with raised eyebrows. She laughed softly, then reached into her purse and pulled out her front door key. He smiled again and pressed the button as she unlocked the

first deadbolt.

Then Clark was gone and Lois was inside the apartment where she leaned against the door and threw the locks as if in a dream state.

From the dark abyss of the apartment, Lucy said, “That must have been some date.”

Lois jerked into combat-alert mode at the first sound, then realized who was speaking. She all but ran to her sister and grabbed her and spun her around. “It was! It was some date!”

“Urrggh,” Lucy grunted. “Can’t – breathe – let – go!”

Lois abruptly dropped her little sister on the couch and laughed. “Sorry, Punky, but it was wonderful! Hey, I thought you were going out with Jimmy tonight.”

“Hang on.” She stood and slowly took three deep breaths. “Wow, you could still crush me in a fight. Anyway, Jimmy called because he had to work late. We rescheduled for tomorrow afternoon. The Shakespeare In the Park company is doing Hamlet at the Riverside Center for the Performing Arts. He said the funniest scenes are when a helicopter or plane flies overhead and drowns out the dialogue. The actors just stand there staring at it as if they’re seeing a UFO.”

“I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard ‘Hamlet’ and ‘funniest’ used in the same paragraph.”

“It’s even funnier when they drop back into character as if nothing had happened.”

Lois chuckled, then said, “Hey, do you want to hear about my date?”

“Of course I do! Why do you think I’m still up?”

“Great! You make the root beer floats and I’ll get the spoons.”

“Turn on the lights first, okay? I don’t want you to steal my ice cream in the dark.”

Clark walked home in a near-daze, thinking about the list in which Lois had included him. It had sounded as if she thought of him at least as a close friend and at the most a potential spouse. The thought made him want to zone out and float.

The thought that kept his feet on the ground, though, was that there was a lot of ground to cover between where they were at the moment and where he’d like to be.

It was then that he realized that the thought of waking up next to Lois every morning was, to him, something that made him smile unreservedly. There was nothing about Lois – nothing major, at any rate – that put him off the way so many little things about Cat put him off. Lois was fire and stone, almost volcanic, in the way she chased after the truth. Cat sought the truth relentlessly, but Lois would run through a brick wall to find it. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to withstand her assault if she targeted him. Cat might try to trap him, but Lois would park a tank on his chest.

Tonight, he thought, boded well for their future together. He’d been concerned that she might slam the door in his face after the date, but instead she let him leave with the prospect of going out with him again.

Not a pity date, either. She wanted to go out with him. And she trusted him enough to ask him to accompany her to an open therapy meeting. The dual thoughts warmed his heart and lent wings to his feet.

He had to force himself down to the sidewalk again.

Mid-morning the next day, Saturday, Lois dropped Lucy off at the park – something about Jimmy’s Taurus being on the fritz – and went to the office to catch up on her paperwork. Cat was there, as was Karen Wells. Cat was legitimately trying to work, and Karen was trying to regale Cat about her latest boyfriend.

When Lois walked off the elevator, Karen apparently decided that Lois would be a more responsive target than Cat, so she swung her hips to Lois’ desk and leaned against the side. “Hi,

Lois,” Karen drawled. “How’s life treating you these days?”

Lois smiled and replied, “Just fine, Karen. And you?”

“Oh, let me tell you about my new boyfriend Doug! He and I went out last night, and we went back to his place – he’s got one of those new apartments downtown because he’s a hedge fund manager, whatever that is, and he—”

“Ms. Lane?” a familiar baritone voice called out from above them. “Would you like to interview me now, or should we reschedule?”

Lois saw Karen’s eyes rise until she saw Superman hovering over them. Her jaw dropped and her eyes bulged. Lois knew there would be no more mention of Doug the hedge fund manager today. She hid her grin and replied, “Now is an excellent time, Superman. Would you like some coffee? Or maybe a soft drink?”

The blue-clad hero landed softly, then tilted his head and said, “I think I’d like to try a soft drink. People in Metropolis seem to consume a lot of them. Maybe I’ll take up the habit just to be sociable.”

“Of course,” Lois said. She turned and said, “Karen, would you be a dear and get a couple of Cokes for us? I have some dollar bills here.” The woman seemed frozen in space and time.

“Karen?” Lois waved her free hand in front of the other woman’s face. “You still in there?”

Cat stood up. “I’ll cover it, Lois. You get your interview started before Superman has to go help at an emergency.”

Lois glanced at Cat, half-expecting her to be at least a little angry, but Cat smiled openly before she took the proffered bills and strode to the vending machines.

“Please,” Lois said, “have a seat and we’ll get started.”

“Of course. Before we do, though, I think—” he gently held Karen’s upper arms and guided her backward to a chair “—the young lady here should sit down.” He settled Karen in the chair, then asked her, “Are you all right?”

Karen’s eyes were locked on the hero’s sharply defined chest. Her mouth moved but no sound came out. She reached for Superman’s arms, but he pulled his hands back before she could grab him. He turned back to Lois. “Please begin whenever you’re ready, Ms. Lane.”

“I think this will work better if you just call me Lois.” Two twenty-ounce bottles of Coca-Cola materialized on Lois’ desk. “Thanks, Cat.”

“No problem. Mind if I listen in?”

“I don’t mind. Superman?”

“Please feel free to listen.”

Lois pulled her recorder from her purse. “May I record this interview?”

“I have no objection. In fact, I think it would be better if you were to record it. That reduces the chance that you’ll accidentally misquote me.”

“Okay. First question. Why did you allow me to label you Superman? You had the opportunity to give me your name.”

He picked up the bottle and examined it for a moment, then spun the cap off and tasted it. “Hmm. Not too bad. I think it actually tastes better than it looks.” He put the cap back on and set the bottle down. “To answer your question about my name, I’m not sure you could pronounce my given name correctly. My native language doesn’t always translate directly into English. And I doubt it would carry the same meaning for you that it does for my people.”

“That brings up a related question. Who are your people?”

He almost smiled. “You’d probably call them ‘aliens,’ I suppose, although if you visited our world you’d be the aliens. I’d rather not tell you or even show you where I’m from. I don’t think an unsolicited visit from the humans of Earth would be welcome.”

“Huh. On some levels that makes perfect sense. But if your people aren’t eager for us visit them, why are you here in the first place?”

“To help.”

“Help? Help what?”

He took a bigger swig of Coke. “Not bad. I think the taste grows on you.” He took another drink and said, “Perhaps first I should tell you what I’m not here to do.”

“Sure, if you think that’s a better way to answer.”

“Very well. I am not here to tell you how to run your planet or your national governments. I am not here to alter your society, although I’m not so naïve as to think I won’t bring changes just by being here and doing the things I’m doing. I’m not here to prepare Earth for colonization by my people. And I’m certainly not here as an advance scout for an invasion. That’s completely absurd, though again I’m sure my statement alone won’t change anyone’s mind, especially if that person is unwilling to listen to reason.

“I’m only here to help, Ms. Lane – excuse me, Lois. Most of my actions will be at natural or man-made disasters, accidents, or active crime scenes. And I’m not here to replace your police forces. From what I’ve seen, they generally do an excellent job with the resources provided them. Nor am I here to investigate corruption or illegal activities. You and your compatriots are far better situated than I to perform those functions. As I said, I’m just here to help.”

Lois nodded. “I like what you’ve said so far, Superman. But I’d prefer a more definite response to the question of why you’re here and how you plan to go about doing whatever it is that you do, something shorter and more on point. Any suggestions?”

He picked up the Coke bottle again and drained it, then frowned in apparent thought. “I’m not coming up with anything at the moment.”

Cat’s voice floated past Lois’ shoulder. “Truth and justice.”

Lois turned and looked at her. “Sorry, what?”

More confidently, Cat repeated, “Truth and justice. Superman is here to fight for truth and justice. Right, Superman?”

He hesitated, then nodded. “I like that. Thank you, Ms. – I’m very sorry, but I don’t remember your name.”

“Cat Grant, Lois’ partner and best friend.”

He caught Lois’ eyes with a questioning look. Lois nodded, and the hero smiled. “That’s very good. I like it. Thank you, Ms. Grant. It will inspire me, too.”

Lois smiled back. “Is there anything about your or your activities that you’d like the Daily Planet’s readers to know?”

“Yes, actually. Some people are in the process of setting up a new non-profit business, the Superman Foundation. We plan to fund it with donations and licensing of my likeness. The money will go to various charitable endeavors yet to be identified.” At Lois’ quizzical cant of her head, he added, “We don’t plan to limit the disbursements to only a few organizations. The board of directors will add suitable recipients as time goes by.”

“Good to know. Can you tell me who’d doing the legal work on this new Foundation?”

“Murray Brown, civil attorney, approached me last month and made the initial suggestion. I thought it was a good idea, especially since some knock-off action figures with my name on the box have already shown up in a few places. Murray showed me the numbers on the licensing fees, and I was a little stunned. I’d no idea an action figure of me could earn that much money.”

Cat chuckled from behind Lois. “So you’re selling dolls now, Superman?”

Superman gave Cat a frown over Lois’ shoulder that might have been amused but might also have been serious. “Murray has insisted that I never refer to the action figure as a ‘doll.’ He claims it would be demeaning to me and would tend to push sales – and license fee collections – down. I don’t completely understand that, but I’m willing to accept his word for it.”

“Thank you,” Lois said. “I assume that a board of directors will operate the foundation?”

“That’s correct, Lois.”

“Can you tell me who is on that board? We got a bare-bones press release on our office fax machine yesterday, but it didn’t have much detail. And none of us have been able to pin Mr. Brown down long enough to ask these questions.”

“I don’t mind being the source. I don’t know who the top candidates are, I’ve only seen the list of names in no particular order, but I’m impressed by the people in the running. There are some elected officials, a few judges, several business leaders, clergy – quite a few of those – and at least one community affairs activist.”

“But you can’t give me any names?”

He shook his head. “If I mention a person who doesn’t end up on the board, it might be embarrassing for that person, for the Foundation, and for me. I can’t tell lessons out of school.”

Lois looked up, surprised at the phrase. “Uh – do you mean, you can’t tell tales out of school?”

Superman’s eyebrows rose slightly. “Oh, is that the idiom, tell tales out of school? I’m sorry. There are so many in English. And idiomatic British English is almost impenetrable to me sometimes.” He shook his head and mused aloud, “I still don’t know why bad outcomes are described as ‘pear-shaped’.”

Cat chuckled, then stopped when Lois threw a sharp glance over her shoulder. Lois said, “Superman, may I ask you a question off the record?”

“Does that mean you won’t quote me on the answer to this next question?”

“Yes.”

“Go ahead, please.”

She hesitated, then asked, “Is Lex Luthor’s name on the list? Anywhere at all?”

The hero frowned in apparent concentration, then shook his head. “If it’s there, I didn’t see it. But I’ve met Mr. Luthor. He doesn’t strike me as one who has the time to serve on the board of a charity like the Foundation.”

Lois sighed in relief. “Thank you. Back on the record, can you tell me more—”

Superman’s head suddenly snapped around and he stood straight. “I’m sorry, but there’s a high-speed chase on the freeway and the guys being chased are doing over a hundred. I’ll try to get back in a little bit and give you any additional detailed information on the Superman Foundation I have, but right now I must go.”

Then he turned and vanished.

Lois sat still for a long moment, thinking about how much good Superman might do with that Foundation. She’d punch that up as much as she would the humanity that the hero had displayed before them.

Cat exhaled deeply, then turned on the police band receiver on her desk. A minute later the dispatcher repeated what Superman had told them. Cat smiled and switched the unit off. “Looks like you have yet another great story, Lois.”

“Hey, I’m glad you stepped in with the ‘truth and justice’ thing. I was coming up dry.”

“I think you have enough for a banner. ‘First In-Depth Interview With Superman’ by Lois Lane. Perry will love it.”

Lois stood and stretched her shoulders. “Yeah, well, I hope I get to flesh it out a bit more. Hey, do you have plans – oh, sorry, Karen, I kind of forgot about you being here. Karen?” Lois rolled her chair closer to the other woman. “Are you okay?”

Again, Karen’s mouth moved but no sound emerged. And her eyes weren’t focused on Lois but on some point on the wall beyond Lois.

Wearing a straight face, Lois turned to Cat, who was trying but failing to suppress a laugh. “Cat? Will you stay with her while I get her a Coke? I think she needs it.”

Cat snorted as she brushed her hair back over her shoulders. “Are you sure she doesn’t need something stronger?”

Later that evening, after returning to the Planet in the Suit and giving Lois and Cat more details about the Superman Foundation, Clark landed in an uninhabited alley a few blocks from his apartment on Clinton and spun into civvies. As he walked home, he thought about the messages the globe had shown him that morning just after he'd awakened.

At first he'd been stunned.

Then he'd been horrified.

Then he'd felt deeply sad. He'd even shed a couple of tears.

But now he knew. He wasn't an experiment. He wasn't a mutant. He wasn't an advance scout. He hadn't been tossed away like spoiled leftovers.

He was just a little boy whose parents had given him the best gift possible.

They'd given him life. And a chance to make a real difference.

Not only life, but life with possibly the best people in the Western Hemisphere to raise him, help him see his differences as gifts, coach him to control his emerging abilities, and love him with a love they'd stored up over decades of marriage and yearning to be parents. Even if he did say it himself, he thought they'd done a terrific job. They'd stood beside him, helped him move past those failed schoolboy romances, given him wonderful life advice, and established a home – a safe zone – for him to return to when he needed it. They might not have been perfect, but as far as he was concerned they were so close as to make no difference to him.

He smiled as he envisioned telling his adoptive parents about his origins. It would change nothing between him and them, he knew that, but it would be good for them to know that their finding him was no accident, that their stewardship of an alien child was intentional and not some massive galactic screwup.

He wished he could have shared all of it with Lois, but he didn't want the world to know that much about his origins. Clark would tell Lois his Kryptonian name later – if their relationship progressed to that point. And he'd tell her everything about his past, including the parts he'd learned from the globe.

The only thing he wished he'd been told was whether or not he could father children with a human woman. It might make a difference to any prospective bride. The woman would surely want to know if morning sickness was a possibility.

He realized once again that he was lucky that Catharine hadn't gotten pregnant from their one night together. Overall, that was a good thing for both of them. It would have devastated him to learn that she'd had his child and he'd been absent all this time.

Ah, well, he'd learn about his fecundity – and more things – all in good time.

Chapter Thirteen

Clark leaned back in his chair and stretched. His Superman interview with Lois the previous weekend had gone quite well, including the secondary material on the Foundation he'd given her later that day. Street crime, both violent and non-violent, had taken a precipitous drop in the last month or so. In the same time frame, the tests he was sure Lex Luthor had been sponsoring had stopped, or at least had taken a hiatus. He'd taken to staggering his shifts as the hero, not doing a full patrol every night, checking different areas of the city at different times. And he'd perfected the spin-change to keep from creating serious wind gusts and alerting the street people to his presence – and to keep a high-speed camera he'd not seen from recording him nude. There would be no super-porn if he could help it.

With all that happening, he felt he was due some down time after work that evening. He saved his open files, shut down his workstation, stood and stretched again. There was an old KU game being replayed on the cable sports channel, one where he'd performed well, and he wanted to critique his performance—

“Kent! A moment of your time, please.”

Once again, Perry had managed to sneak up on him. Clark was still puzzled as to how such a big man with such a commanding presence could move so stealthily. “Yes, Mr. White?”

Perry sat on the edge of Clark's clean desk, beside the backward-facing plaque which read, “A clean desk is the first sign of a troubled mind.” It had been a gift from Catharine, and even though he'd let her down in the romance department, she was still his co-worker and he liked her. However she felt about him, it hadn't damaged their relationship as friends.

He still had to deal with his boss, though. The man smiled and patted Clark on the shoulder. “I've asked you several times to be a little less formal with me, Clark. Saves time and emotional pain.”

“Sorry, Chief. Er, I mean, Perry.”

“Much better, don't you think? You know, son, it seems to me that you're not connecting with your co-workers as well as you might. On a social basis, I mean. I think you could do better, and I've come to realize that one of the reasons might be that I haven't brought you into some of our social circles with enough enthusiasm.”

This was starting to sound like an invitation to join some kind of professional organization, and Clark realized that contacts like those could give him some inside info on how things worked in the city. “That sounds good to me. When would be a good time to —”

Perry stood and pointed the first and second fingers of his left hand at Clark. “Seven o'clock tonight in the conference room. You've just got time to go grab a sandwich and hit your bank's ATM.” He started to walk away.

“Huh? ATM? Perry, what's this—”

Over his shoulder, Perry called out, “Eduardo's oldest is in a music school recital and he can't miss it. We need one more for our regular Monday night poker game.”

Clark felt his eyes bulge. “Poker? Perry, wait a minute! I don't —”

“Ha! You're going to tell me you're not a great player, but so what? No worries, as our Aussie friends say. We'll teach you as you go along.”

Teach him as they went along? Not this little blue superhero! He didn't play often, but when he did, he won. A lot. He never used his powers to peek at the other players' cards, but he couldn't help but notice things like elevated or depressed heart rate and blood pressure, skin temperature and color, changes in breathing patterns, expansion and contraction of the iris, and tension in another person's voice, all of which are biological indicators that anyone could read. And he could count cards with the best of them in any stud or blackjack hand.

He looked through the open door of the conference room and saw Lois mouth to her other partner, “Perry's recruiting Clark for tonight's game. We got some fresh meat.”

“Straight outta Kansas.” Catharine grinned back and quietly added, “Mama needs some new shoes, baby!”

They were looking for fresh meat? Well, this fresh meat was going to make a meal out of them. And if anyone got new shoes tonight, it would be Clark.

Cat smiled at Clark as he held Lois' seat back for her. Except for Jimmy, who was occasionally smiled upon by the poker fairy godmother, the other players played the other players and not the cards. She'd bet the first pot that Clark was Jimmy's kind of player.

Perry started the deal. “Okay, people, this hand is plain old draw poker, pair of jacks or better to open. White chips are a quarter, red ones are a dollar, green are five, blue are ten. Ante up a white chip if you're playing the next hand. If no one can open, ante up again, discard one, and get one off the top. If no one can open after the second ante, the pot rides, we re-shuffle and re-deal. Table stakes, but IOUs can be used with the approval of all the

players still in the hand. Got it?”

Everyone nodded. “Okay, I think the only two players who haven’t met yet are Clark Kent, the Planet’s resident rookie, and Mayson Drake, Metropolis’ own district attorney, so let’s keep it legal. We’re on a first-name basis around this table. You two shake hands and come out betting.”

Clark put out his hand. Mayson stared at it for a long moment, then took it in what Cat knew from experience was a surprisingly strong grip. “Glad to meet you, Clark. Some of these borderline reprobates call me the Great White Shark.”

He smiled at her. “Really? They told me you were more like Atilla the Hun.”

Mayson hesitated, then took her hand back. “You look like you belong in a haystack but you talk like you’ve got some chutzpah. I’ll know soon enough.”

Clark gave her that butter-won’t-melt-in-his-mouth smile and tossed in a white chip. Cat laughed silently. The man was due a comeuppance.

Forty-five minutes later, Cat had decided to leave Clark alone and go after Mayson, Lois, and Perry.

For the first thirty minutes or so, Clark had folded easily, lost regularly, and taken only one small pot that Jimmy had tried to bluff him out of. Then, suddenly, he’d turned completely around and started snapping at the money on the table as if it were a pod of seals and he were a killer whale. If this kept up, he’d earn the nickname “Orca” in no time.

Cat sat out three hands in the second hour with a Coke or the “need” for a bathroom break. Clark gave her a firm glare when she opted out of the third hand but didn’t say anything.

She’d started to suspect that he was peeking at the cards using his vision gizmo – Lois’ catch-all term for Superman’s enhanced visual abilities – but if Clark were Metropolis’ new superhero, he wasn’t reading the cards. She would have seen that. And she strongly suspected that Superman’s ethics didn’t allow him to cheat that way. He’d lost a sizable pot to Mayson that obviously surprised him. Seemed he’d tried to bluff her and she’d called.

He wasn’t reading their cards. He wasn’t bottom-dealing. He wasn’t switching cards.

He was reading the other players, though, she realized, and doing it quite well.

That first twenty minutes or so had been spent learning everyone’s tells, something Perry did naturally and which Mayson the attorney had learned how to do professionally. It was also something both she and Lois could do, although neither was as consistent as Mayson.

And apparently none of them were as good at it as Clark obviously was.

He wasn’t as good as Lois was with wild cards, though. On Lois’ second deal, after Clark switched from passive loser to ravenous winner, she shuffled and called out, “Okay, 7-card stud, ace high-low, first and last cards down, one-eyed Jacks and deuces wild. Real card beats wild if they’re the same value, and you have to have a natural in your hand to use a wild one. Unmatched wild cards are face value. So you can’t just claim five aces with one natural ace and four wilds. Best you can do with that hand is a pair of aces plus the face values of the other three wilds. Any questions? Good. Open from the dealer’s left and go around the table. Mayson, it’s your cut.”

Mayson tapped the deck once and said, “They’re fine like that, especially since we’re playing kiddie rules.”

The Coke bottle in Cat’s hand stopped halfway to her mouth. It wasn’t a good idea to talk trash with Lois Lane.

But Lois just asked, “Perry, are the cuss jar rules still in effect, even after normal hours?”

Perry nodded slowly. “Without question.”

Lois turned back to Mayson. “Then let’s just play cards –

sweetheart.”

Lois took that hand with two wild cards and three kings – a non-Vegas approved hand of five kings. Only one ace showed up, and no one else had more than a full house.

Clark pulled a card from the discard stack and acted like he was checking it for markings. “This must be the deck I was playing with the day Bureau 39 showed up.”

Mayson frowned across the table at him. “What makes you say that?”

“That deck was already confused, and Lois’ wild cards just make it dizzier.”

To everyone’s surprise, Lois chuckled. “As long as I win, Kansas, I don’t care if they’re hypnotized.”

The last hand of the night was straight five-card stud, no wild cards, Perry dealing. When everyone had their cards, Clark showed a pair of red deuces and a pair of black treys. Jimmy had a ten-high nothing and folded – Lady Luck had not sat down with him and he was tapped out. Perry showed a pair of nines and nothing else, and Lois folded with a jack-high nothing on the table. Mayson’s hand showed two aces, the five of clubs, and the eight of spades with an unknown hole card, and Cat showed two black queens along with the seven and ten of hearts. Her hole card was the six of spades, so a bluff was her only hope.

Given the skill level both Mayson and Clark had showed, it was a pretty thin hope.

Perry folded, saying, “I was about forty years old when I quit beating my head against the wall. I’m not starting again tonight.”

Mayson gave out that predatory grin she loved to show. “Cat, it’s just you, me, and Clark now. The bet is five bucks to you.”

Cat’s hand hovered over her pile of chips for a moment, then she turned her cards over. “Fold. I’m just barely breaking even, and I kind of want to watch you and Clark go at it.”

Mayson chortled evilly and said, “The bet is five bucks to Clark.”

He smiled and softly said, “I’ll see your five and raise you ten.”

Mayson stared at his eyes, then said, “You’re trying to bluff me. I’ll see your ten and raise another ten.”

“I won’t tell you that I don’t bluff because you know that’s not true,” he replied. “But I will see your ten and raise – oh, another ten would be nice.”

Mayson looked at Clark’s pile of chips, then at her own. “We could both go all in, but I wouldn’t want you to have to take your meals from the donut cart. I’ll see your ten and raise you twenty.”

It got quiet around the table. Clark played with his chips for a moment, then said, “My bank is slightly bigger than yours, so I could raise you again and bankrupt you or force you to fold.” He picked up a pair of blue chips and tossed them in. “But I don’t play that way, and you’ll need bus fare to get to work next week. Call.”

Mayson’s predatory grin showed her molars as she turned over her hole card, the ace of spades. “Three aces. I think that beats your measly two pair.”

Clark nodded as she reached out to rake in the pot. “It would – except I don’t have two pair.” He turned over his hole card to reveal the two of clubs. “I think I win this hand.”

Mayson froze for a long moment, then laughed. “Full house, deuces over treys! Whoever heard of that hand winning anything?”

Clark tossed each player a red chip. “People, thank you for a most instructive and entertaining evening. We’ll have to do this again some time.”

Still chuckling, Mayson said, “How about next time we play a game requiring real skill? Like Monopoly?”

Cat breathed a sigh of relief. Mayson wasn’t always a gracious loser. Maybe she, too, thought highly of Clark. Maybe she thought that taking offense at losing to him would be a bad start to a

relationship. She was several years older than Cat, so she'd really be playing the cougar role, but she wasn't over the hill yet.

Of course, neither Cat nor Lois would sit still for that kind of play from Mayson. It wouldn't be according to Hoyle.

Clark got home in time to see the second half kickoff of the replay he'd wanted to see, and after changing into just a pair of exercise shorts, he watched himself run the kick back for a touchdown. He'd seen the play a number of times before during coaches' review sessions, but it was the first time he'd noticed that one of the guys on the kicking team was blocked below the waist from behind, a penalty the officials had missed. The flag that wasn't thrown would have nullified his score. It was the first time he'd seen this contest on TV, and somehow it felt unnatural, almost as if he were peeking into someone else's past life. It was just too weird, and for some reason he felt uncomfortable in his own home.

It was as if he were chewing something really nasty, and the longer he watched the nastier his mouth tasted. He turned off the game and stood up to go to bed instead.

Then someone knocked on his door.

He pulled an old jersey over his head and peeked through the door outside.

Great. Catharine and Lois were both there. At least they weren't sniping at each other. But he was in no mood to entertain them this evening. If Lois had been alone, yes, probably, but not both of them together.

If whatever they wanted wasn't work-related, he'd get rid of them as fast as he could.

He opened the door and shook his head when he saw them. "Okay, what's going on? Have I got a target painted on my back or what?"

Lois crossed her arms as she strolled in and almost smiled. For a moment, Catharine looked startled at his attitude, then she moved to one side and closed the door. "We have a question for you."

He nodded and sighed. "Of course you do." He swept one arm at the middle of the room. "Would you like something to drink, either of you? I believe I can brew up some coffee, or I can offer you ice water, iced tea, or cream soda. What's your pleasure?"

Lois led the pair to Clark's couch and took the near end as Cat scampered to the far end and flopped down. Clark stood in front of them, almost touching the table with his calves. He crossed his arms and faced them both.

"I guess you're not thirsty. So what's this big important question you have for me?"

Lois leaned her elbows on her knees and finished her smile. "Cat says she did some digging on your college football career. She says you played free safety for KU in the Sun Bowl six years ago and returned the second half kickoff for a score. She also says you intercepted three passes in that half, ran one back for another touchdown, and almost won the game all by yourself. That true?"

He leaned closer to them. "You came over at this hour to ask me about a six-year-old college football game?" He lifted his hands and turned away. "It's late, I'm tired, and I was headed to bed when you two beat on my door." His voice rose in volume. "Don't we see each other enough at work during the day? Or during the poker game? Or was there some other reason you two showed up at my apartment at eleven-twenty tonight?"

Catharine's face fell. She was obviously surprised by his pique. Lois, though, was positively angry. She abruptly rose from her seat and said, "I'm sorry we kept you from your slumber, old man! We'll just leave and let you get your beauty sleep!"

Catharine touched Lois' shoulder. "Lois, I think—"

Lois spun into a front stance and glared at Cat. "Don't tell me what you think, you red-headed Jezebel! This was your idea, remember?"

Catharine nodded. "I know. And it wasn't anywhere near as funny as I thought it would be. I'm sorry I talked you into this. Totally my fault. I'll meet you at my car, okay?"

Lois seemed surprised at her conciliatory speech, but replied in a calmer tone. "Okay, fine." She turned to Clark and said, "I'm sorry. I blame it on — on anything I could think of if I could think of it. I'll see you tomorrow."

Catharine waited until Lois closed the front door, then said, "Clark, I'm really sorry. It's really my very bad idea, so don't take it out on her, please. Lois didn't want to come but I kinda pressured her into it."

He waved at her dismissively. "I'm sure I'll laugh about it in a couple of days. It's just that I anticipated spending time alone tonight, then Perry roped me into that poker game, I tried to watch myself on the replay of the game you asked me about but it felt — icky, somehow, then you two drop in and ask me about the game I was trying to watch but couldn't. It's really no one's fault. Please tell Lois that I'll apologize to her in the morning." He took her hands in his. "And let me apologize to you now. I shouldn't have blown up at the two of you. Neither one of you deserved it."

Catharine's soft smile almost made him reconsider his decision not to pursue a relationship with her — almost, but not quite. "I'll tell her. And then we can chalk this night up to experience." She took her hands back and made finger quotes as she intoned, "Don't drop in on Clark Kent this late at night without a really good reason."

He shared her laugh. "Good night, Catharine. I'll see you at the office tomorrow."

"I think we're to the point in our relationship where you can call me Cat."

"All right, Cat. Good night, and sleep fast."

She grinned at him. "Good night, Clark." She reached out and tweaked his nose. "And we'll both see Lois, assuming she lets us live."

When Lois went to work the next morning, she was still bothered by Clark's reaction from the night before. She hoped they could straighten everything out this morning. So she was surprised when Clark met her as she walked off the elevator. "Lois, please let me apologize for last night. I didn't react very well to your sudden visit. I'm really sorry I was such a jerk."

She didn't smile, but she didn't frown either. "I understand, Clark. I'm sorry we burst in on you like that. I'll know better next time."

His eyes twinkled at her. The sight gave her a warm and fuzzy feeling in her chest. "You have my permission to burst in on me any time," he said.

This time she grinned. "As long as I'm alone, right?" He nodded, and she touched his hand briefly. "Staff meeting in ten minutes, okay? We'll talk later."

He nodded again and turned to go to his desk. She watched him move, thinking that there were many less pleasant ways to be greeted at work.

She could get used to this.

The Tuesday morning staff meeting arrived with the usual fanfare. Perry handed out assignments, checked on the progress of unfinished stories, and made sarcastic, aggressive, or encouraging comments as he deemed proper to the staff during the meeting. Lois knocked on his office door as soon as the meeting broke up to check with him about the veteran's session that night. She hoped she could explain why she wanted Clark with her. She wasn't sure she herself understood.

He waved her in as he punched in numbers to an inside line. "Hang on a second, Lois. Be with you as soon — Benton? Oh, sorry, Booth. Perry White here. I need you to tell Benton that there's a meeting this afternoon at three he has to attend. That's

right, three o'clock. He'll find out what it's about when he gets there. No, it's on the top floor, Mr. Stern's office. No. Stern knows he works with the presses, so he doesn't have to worry about the ink on his shirt, he just needs to be there on time. Good. And also tell him that if he skips this meeting, his next emergency will be at the unemployment office. No, that's from Mr. Stern. Just tell him, okay? You should be there too, assuming no problems in the print room. Yeah, see you then."

He hung up and turned to Lois. "What do you need from me, honey?"

Her mouth worked but no sound came out on the first try. The second time, she managed to say, "Perry, there's a voluntary therapy meeting tonight at seven and I want to take Clark with me so can he and I get loose a little early and grab a bite to eat before we go?"

He blinked as if processing her run-on sentence, then nodded. "Assuming we don't have any screaming emergencies, sure. I gave you and Cat and Clark the investigation into the state comptroller's office, didn't I?"

"Yes, and you know how those things go. It'll take until Friday, at least, to get anything concrete out of those people, then we'll have to verify it which will take until Wednesday of next week, then we'll need to poke around in the other avenues we don't know about yet, and I guess we'll need something else to occupy our dead time."

He grinned. "You three get started on that story. You and Clark can take off at five-thirty, and I'll let you tell Cat that you're leaving her here to hold the fort."

She gave him the meanest friendly look she had. "Gee, thanks, boss. I guess you remember that Cat still hasn't been de-clawed."

As Lois made her way to Cat's desk, she glanced at Clark's workstation and noted that it hadn't been powered on yet. He must have found something else to take care of after the staff meeting. As she got closer to Cat, the redhead blew out a raspberry as Jimmy walked away from her desk and dropped her face into her hands.

He met Lois' eyes with his and shook his head slightly. As he hurried off on some other errand, Lois softly asked, "Bad news, Red?"

"Huh? Good morning, Lois, Clark and I both want to apologize again for last night, and the news isn't bad, it's just useless."

Lois perched on the edge of her friend's desk. "I've already talked with Clark. Everything's fine as far as I'm concerned." She gestured at the folder Jimmy had given her. "What useless thing did you find out?"

Cat leaned back and stretched, causing Sean Lombard in sports to have a coughing fit, one she didn't appear to notice. "I just talked to Lieutenant Perkins with the bomb squad. The police finally got the chemical analysis back on the C4 in the Carlin building bomb. It appears to be from a munitions plant in eastern Kazakhstan, but the chemical signature doesn't quite match, so we can't use that in the follow-up article. All we can say is that it might have been mixed from two or more different sources."

Cat gripped her keyboard as if she were trying to snap it in two, then dropped it on her desk. "The detonator was cannibalized from parts in one or more burner cell phones. They don't know how long the C4 has been in-country, the phones they've identified are unregistered, and they were used only for that one call."

She slapped the keyboard and popped the "backspace" key off. "The blasting cap was a generic one usually used to set off dynamite charges in construction or demolition sites or in strip mining. They didn't recover enough leftover bits of the cap to get a manufacturing code or even a country of origin, and they can't match it to a theft or illegal import. The only lead they have – and

it's thin – is that somebody had mad skills building that bomb, and unless he or she makes a serious mistake we'll never find that somebody." She picked up a pencil and held it for a long moment before snapping it in two. "Crap, this is frustrating! All that waiting and we got nothing!"

Lois waited for Cat to grab the reins of her temper. Cat finally looked up at her and said, "I'm sorry, Lois. Was there something else you needed?"

"Um – yeah, there is. Clark and I are leaving a little early tonight, work permitting. I'm going to a – a meeting."

Cat tilted her head slightly. "For your therapy sessions?"

"Yes."

"About the PTSD?"

Lois hesitated, then nodded. "Yes."

Cat smiled thinly. "Good. I'm glad you're going."

Lois let out a long breath. "I – um – I have to admit that I thought you'd be upset. At least a little bit, anyway."

"No. I wish I were the one going with you, Louise, but the important thing is that you go, not that you go with me."

Lois grinned back. "Thanks, Thelma. After all, if it doesn't work out, you can always buy that red T-bird you've been looking at."

Cat returned an amused frown. "If all we're gonna do is shoot Brad Pitt and drive the car off the edge of the Grand Canyon, I'll just steal one."

Clark got out of the Jeep's passenger seat and waited for Lois at the front bumper. The signs pointed the way into the small church's fellowship hall, so he knew they wouldn't get lost inside.

Lois stopped beside Clark and grabbed his elbow tightly enough to hurt a normal man. "Uh, Lois, can you let some blood flow back to my forearm?"

She eased her grip but didn't release him. "Sorry," she whispered. "Well, I – I guess we better go in, huh?"

"Only if you really want to. I'm not going to force you or point a weapon at you to get you to walk through the door."

Her eyes widened in realization. "Oh! Speaking of that—" She glanced around, then slipped her hand into her purse and handed her pistol to Clark—"I'd appreciate it if you'd hang on to this while we're inside. I'm guessing the other participants would appreciate it too."

Without changing expression, he dropped the magazine into his left hand and put it in his pocket, then worked the slide, ejected the round in the chamber, caught it with his left hand, put it with the magazine, and made the pistol disappear his other front pants pockets. "Done. Shall we enter?"

She paused to reflect on his excellent manual dexterity, then took a deep breath and let it out quickly. "Might as well. We've come this far."

It was time to begin the meeting. Dana Friskin looked around the room – no Lois Lane. She was more than a little disappointed. Whether or not she realized it, Lois needed to see and hear and talk to some other vets who'd been through the same type of experiences she had.

She glanced at the introductory remarks printed on the notecard in her hand again, despite having already memorized them. So she almost missed the door opening and Ben Hector greeting a newly arrived couple. It wasn't until Ben asked the newcomers their names that Dana's heart did cartwheels.

"I – I'm Lois."

"Hi. My name's Clark."

"Hi, Clark, hi, Lois. My name's Ben. Come in and find a seat anywhere. We're about to start."

Clark stopped them. "Before we get too comfy, Ben, I need to tell you that Lois is a vet but I'm not. I'm here for her, but if anyone is really upset with my being here, I'm willing to wait

outside in the car.”

Dana could see Ben’s broad smile from her seat. “We already have three or four non-vets here tonight. One of us will mention your civilian status before we get started, but I doubt that’ll be a problem. And thank you for mentioning it.”

Lois’ sigh of relief was audible halfway across the room. This would be hard for her, Dana knew, but there was no shortcut to mental health. Sometimes you just had to walk through the minefields and hope you weren’t blown up too badly.

As soon as they found two seats together in the circle of chairs, Lois grabbed Clark’s hand and tried to crush it. Every nerve ending in her body was yelling at her to run fast, run far, and hide well. He slowly moved his head into her line of sight and whispered, “I’m right here, Lois. I’ll be here as long as you want me to be. I’m not going anywhere.”

She turned what she knew were wide, panicky bunny eyes to his and locked on to him. After a long moment, her breathing eased a bit and she relaxed ever so slightly. Then she offered him a shy smile and tucked her hair behind her ears with her other hand. “Thank you, Clark. You – you’re a good man.”

“You make it easy. Wups, I think we’re starting.”

Dana stood in the open part of the semi-circle of chairs and said, “Okay, this therapy session is about to begin. I think we’ve got some new folks tonight, and if they choose to do so, they’ll introduce themselves in a few minutes.

“First, let’s cover some familiar ground. Most of you know that up until the American Civil War, there was very little occurrence of anything like PTSD on the battlefield – or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – because armies would just march up to one another, fight using bladed weapons or slow-firing muskets, then one army would back away and cede the battleground to the other. A soldier would train, equip, and prepare for a battle for weeks, then fight for maybe a couple of hours, maybe a full day. Then the cycle would repeat itself. The break between battles allowed almost everyone to recover from the shock of close combat. Plus there weren’t a lot of wounded survivors in those armies.

“There were some notable exceptions, of course, but the Civil War was the first time that so many soldiers on each side broke under the stress of continuous combat and being under fire for consecutive days instead of just an hour or two. The Confederates didn’t do much for their damaged vets because they had so few reserves and couldn’t rotate either individual soldiers or complete units out of the combat area. If a man could carry a rifle and march, he did it.

“The Union, though, had enough reserves and sufficient nursing care to give this phenomenon a name. They called it ‘soldier’s heart’ to indicate a man who’d taken as much combat as he could handle and then had seen more without enough down time between bouts of fighting. The only treatment they had was rest and quiet, but it worked well enough to keep using it on the sufferers.

“World War One accelerated the frequency of diagnosis of PTSD, although the British often called it ‘nostalgia’ or ‘railway spine.’ The latter name was often used for civilians like Charles Dickens, who displayed these symptoms after being in a railroad accident. Americans often called it ‘shell shock’ or ‘war neuroses.’ In World War Two, the US military sometimes called it ‘battle fatigue’ or, among the guys who fired rifles at the enemy, ‘the thousand-yard stare’.”

“I knew a couple of guys who had that look,” whispered Lois. “You didn’t want to be on a patrol with them.”

He nodded back without saying anything.

“Now we call it PTSD,” Dana continued. “But whatever it’s called, whatever symptoms show up, it interferes with your life on a daily basis.”

“Or your loved ones’ lives,” a thin blonde woman on the front row blurted out. Then she looked around and hunched down in her chair. “Sorry,” she muttered.

“That’s okay, Cindy. Do you have something you want to share?”

The young blonde stiffened. “Do I have to?”

“Of course not. You don’t have to do anything that makes you uncomfortable.”

Cindy wrapped her arms around herself and tried not to cry. Everyone held still for a moment, then to everyone’s surprise – including her own – Lois moved to the chair beside Cindy and wrapped her arms around the quietly weeping woman. Lois lifted her head and said, “It’s my first time here. Hope I’m not stepping in where I shouldn’t.”

Dana smiled and shook her head. “You’re doing fine, Lois. Do you have something you want to share with the group?”

Lois looked at Clark, who said, “We want everyone to know that I’m not a vet, and if anyone is really uncomfortable with that, I’ll step outside.”

Dana snapped her fingers to get everyone’s attention. “Clark is here with Lois as a friend. Unless they’ve eloped in the last few days, they aren’t married—” she waited while a chuckle flowed across the room “—nor, to my knowledge, are they significant others, and he’s made this offer on his own. If anyone is uncomfortable, I understand, but remember that he’s here to support Lois, who might not be here tonight if not for him. Clark knows that what is said here or happens here stays here. Right, Clark?”

He smiled that disarming smile again. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Okay. Anyone uncomfortable with Clark being here with Lois?” A short man with floppy brown hair lifted his hand from the back row. “Yes, Mickey?”

“What does Clark do for a day job?”

Before Dana could speak, Clark turned and said, “Doesn’t matter. If I weren’t here for Lois, I wouldn’t be here at all. If anyone talks about this meeting to anyone on the outside, it won’t be me.”

Lois was less surprised at the sudden steel in Clark’s voice than the rest. After a moment, she turned back and smiled at Cindy, who took Lois’ hand and clasped it to her chest. “Cindy?” whispered Lois. “Anything you want to say?” The woman – little more than a girl, actually – opened her mouth as if searching for words. Lois pulled their joined hands back to her own chest and quietly said, “Why don’t you just tell me about it?”

Cindy freed one hand and wiped her eyes, then nodded at Lois. “Sean and I – we got married just five weeks before he deployed – he was gone almost a year – and when he came back it wasn’t him. I couldn’t touch him while he was asleep and – and he started drinking and now he – he gets furious for no reason and one morning I woke him up and he punched me right here—” she touched the middle of her left eyebrow “—and then he – he gave me this scar.”

Cindy touched a small depression on the skin covering the orbital bone around her right eye. “I bled a lot and he took me – took me to a clinic where they sewed me up and threatened to have him arrested and Sean would have hit the doctor if I hadn’t held his arm and then he cried and told me he was sorry and he loved me and he took me home and left and I – I haven’t seen him in four months.”

She broke down again and Lois could barely understand her next words through her tears. “I don’t know where he is! I just want him back! I want my husband back! He loves me and I love him! Every time I look in the mirror I see my eye and I know how much pain he’s in! Please! Oh, please help me!”

Cindy wrapped her arms around Lois again and wailed. After a moment, Ben and a woman Lois didn’t know appeared beside Cindy and gently helped her out of the room.

When they were gone, Dana knelt beside Lois and hugged her. “You did great, Lois. You deserve another medal.”

Lois shook her head. “No, I don’t. I just – I think I understand some of what Sean is going through, wherever he is.”

“I know. Is there something you want to share with the group?”

Lois caught Dana’s eyes with her own and slowly nodded. “Yes.” Then she stood and walked back to her original seat beside Clark. “But I’m going to do it from this chair.”

Dana grinned as another chuckle ran its course. “Whenever you’re ready, Lois.”

Clark stood and helped her sit. She fidgeted for a moment before speaking. “My name is Lois. I was in the Middle East, one of the first combat infantry women in the theater. On my last mission, I got shot in the leg and now I’m separated from the Army on a partial disability pension. I saw some of my – my buddies die in combat. And I know I killed some indigenous personnel.” She bent over for a moment, then sat up again. “Indigenous personnel. Some euphemism, huh? Makes them seem less human somehow.” She rubbed her hand across her face. “Doesn’t matter that they were shooting at me.”

She grabbed for Clark’s hand again. “Sometimes I dream about those actions. The worst dreams are when those live-fire actions get all jumbled up together in my dreams and I’m edgy all day. Kind of like Sean. And I don’t drink or take drugs but I – I always carry a weapon with me.”

Dana’s eyes widened, along with those of about half the room. “Lois? Are you armed now?”

Lois shook her head. “No. My Beretta is unloaded, and Clark’s holding it for me. I don’t think I could take it from him if I wanted to, either. He’s pretty strong.” She gave him a thin smile. “And quietly determined.”

She basked in his return smile for a moment, then looked back at Dana. “Anyway, I’ve finally realized that I need more help than I’ve been getting. I’m not a danger to random passers-by, but I don’t – I don’t relate to people in general very well.” She closed her eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. “I woke up from one of those bad dreams and pulled my weapon on my best friend a few months ago because she startled me and she thought I was going to shoot her.” Her eyes opened and liquid sneaked out. “I never told her how close I was to pulling the trigger.” A soft sob escaped. “I think I would have shot myself if I’d put a bullet in her.” Her fists clenched and her eyes closed again. “I – I need help! Can you help me?”

Almost on its own, her body turned toward Clark and fell into him. His arms encircled her and he gently embraced her with just the right amount of pressure. His hand came up behind her and stroked her hair.

He might never be her husband, her lover, or even a boyfriend, but he was a rock she could hold to, a friend she could depend on every minute of every day. Somehow she knew he’d take on a battalion of heavy tanks for her, that he’d lay down his life for her if the moment of decision came for him.

And she trusted him with her own life.

Dana knelt beside her again and took her hand. “You’ll get through this, Lois. I really believe you’ll be okay.”

Lois knew she’d be okay as long as she was enveloped in Clark’s gently powerful embrace. All she needed to do now was to tell him how much he meant to her.

That task might take more courage than she’d ever had.

Chapter Fourteen

Cat had her head down and focused on a new assignment when Clark and Lois came in Wednesday morning, so she was surprised when Lois leaned down and hugged her. Cat looked up to see her friend’s bright smile – a smile she’d rarely seen anywhere, much less in the newsroom – shining like the full

moon. Lois rubbed Cat’s shoulder for a moment, then slowly walked to her desk and powered on her workstation, still smiling like an heiress with a new bequest.

That was not normal behavior for Lois, from the smile and the personal contact to the good mood. But it was a positive kind of change. Something really good must have happened at the meeting the night before. Maybe even a breakthrough of some kind.

That would be nice, thought Cat. Clark must be good for her in more ways than one.

“Hey, Lois,” Cat called softly, “was last night a good night for you?”

The smile was still there. “It was a great night. I talked a lot of things out at the meeting, and afterward Clark and I went back to my place and talked until I fell asleep on the couch. I woke up when he carried me to the bed and took my shoes off.”

Cat’s face fell. “You mean – you mean you and Clark – you – you were—”

Lois giggled. “No. I didn’t ‘get lucky,’ as you’ve said a few times. But it was still a good night.”

Before Cat could probe further, Jimmy charged over and said, “Perry wants to see all three of you right now. I think you’ve got a big story.”

Cat nodded to Jimmy, then whispered, “You owe me details, girlfriend.”

Lois just smiled wider.

Lois’ good mood didn’t last past the three of them being given that new assignment.

“Boxing?” Lois demanded.

“Why, sure, Lois,” Perry drawled. “The three of you can collaborate on the main story while Clark and Cat come up with some dynamite background material. Should be good for at least three sidebars apiece.”

“But – boxing? Why me? What did I do wrong?”

“Honey, you haven’t done anything wrong that I know about. It’s just – well, a good reporter needs to be able to write about anything.”

“This is sports, Perry, not hard news!”

“Ordinarily I’d agree with you, but this is different. It’s the boxing event of the century! Four different championship belts and one exhibition, all in one night! Never happened before. I want you three to get interviews with all the fighters and one with the promoter, Max Menken. Do what you do best! Dig deep and bring back the real story! Now git!”

Lois took a step toward the door, then turned back and glared at her boss. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with my connections, would it?”

Clark turned a puzzled expression to Cat and whispered, “Connections?”

Cat touched her lips with one index finger and whispered back, “I’ll fill you in later.”

The editor’s face cleared as if he were declining to answer on advice from his lawyer. “Connections, Lois? I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean ‘connections’ in reference to my father.” Lois’ voice turned hard as granite. “You know we don’t get along. And you know why, too.”

“Or we can let Lois explain them herself,” Cat muttered. She braced herself for the explosion she knew was coming.

Perry put his elbows on his desk, his own voice full of butter and honey. “I do. But I also know that the Daily Planet has a pipeline into this event that no other media outlet in the world has – you. With your name on this exclusive, we’ll double our circulation, maybe triple it. Our advertiser rates will go up. Might even be some money in the budget for raises.”

Cat stage-whispered to Clark, “I wouldn’t say no to that.”

She got a “look” back from him that she interpreted as “That’s not funny.” After a moment’s reflection, during which she decided

she was thankful that Lois hadn't heard her crack, she whispered, "Sorry."

Lois took in a sharp breath, then leaned forward at the waist. "You're not being fair!" Lois snarled at Perry.

Their boss' voice hardened. "I'm not responsible for your perceptions. I'm responsible for helping the Daily Planet make money. My judgement tells me that this is the best opportunity we've had to make money since Superman showed up. Now if you can't help me execute my job function—"

"That's a low blow!"

"—then I'll have to find someone else to take this assignment and give you the American Kennel Club review! This is your pick, Lois!"

No one in the office moved for a long moment. Then Lois inhaled deeply and let it out slowly. "Fine. I'll do it." She turned and gestured at the rest of the team. "I assume I'm also responsible for these two reprobates and what they produce?"

Perry hesitated for a moment as if weighing his response, then said, "Yes, as long as you tell me they're pulling their weight on this one."

"Done." She turned and almost marched out of the office.

"Come on, dead weight, let's go."

She led them to her desk, then growled. "I forgot, I need new batteries for my recorder. You two get your stuff and I'll meet you at the elevator. Cat, don't forget that the bathroom in Allie's gym is pretty nasty." She stalked off in search of her micro-electric prey.

Cat watched her enter the supply room, then tugged on Clark's coat sleeve to turn him to face her and leaned in close. "You need to follow her lead on this, okay? Her dad is Dr. Sam Lane."

Clark's eyes almost clicked as he made the connection. "Sam Lane. The surgeon who works on injured athletes."

"Yes, except he's specializing in boxing now. Guys have average records, get hurt, have his surgery, and come out three times better than before."

"And the problem between him and Lois is – what?"

Cat shook her head and put her hand on his upper arm. "I don't have time to tell you all of it. Just don't get between them, even if you think one of them needs a standing eight-count."

"Got it."

Lois came out of the supply room ready to roll – then she saw Clark standing in Cat's personal space. The thing that stabbed her heart was that it looked like Cat wanted him there. And she'd never brought her romantic life onto the news floor.

Until now.

It wasn't as if Cat hadn't warned her, either. She'd all but announced that she wanted an up-close – if not intimate – relationship with Clark. And despite his declaration that he wanted to date Lois instead of Cat, it looked like she was starting to wear him down.

She decided a bathroom break was in order after all. Hopefully Cat wouldn't come in while she was there, not until she'd managed to rein in her emotions.

She also decided not to think about how hard her emotions were hitting her – and why she felt so bereft without Clark beside her.

Discipline. She'd learned discipline in the Army. Don't let your emotions block you from doing your job. Complete your assignment.

No matter what.

Cat led them to the parking area, where they took Lois' Jeep to the gym. Cat let Lois lead the group into the ring area. Clark wore his usual conservative suit and ugly tie, Lois had on an almost mannish pantsuit, but Cat was wearing a stylish, attractive dress that drew the attention of all the fighters in the gym. She moved

closer to Clark's right and reached across her body to put her right hand on his firm right bicep. "You know," she said quietly, "Lois might be used to this place, but I'm not. I don't mind telling you that I feel like a haunch of raw antelope in the zoo's lion exhibit."

Instead of laughing at her or making a humorous crack of some kind, Clark put his left hand on her right and squeezed lightly. "Don't worry, Cat. I'll protect you if you need it."

Cat heard more than just his words. They were gentle as velvet and hard as iron all at the same time. His touch was soft, yet firm, as if he were enveloping her in his protection. She could not have been more certain that as long as Clark stood beside her, she was completely safe, here or anywhere else. His promise to protect her wasn't possessive or dominating, just reassuring. His hand on hers didn't hurt her, but it did demonstrate his heroic determination.

His statement and his touch almost convinced her that she was right: Clark was indeed Superman. It wasn't proof that she could take to Perry's desk, but the majority of her doubts melted away at that moment. She'd never tell anyone she knew, of course, not even Lois. But it settled her heart to count him as a friend, even if he never chose to tell her his secret.

Or if he was ever anything more than a friend to her.

And that unsettled her heart yet again, just for a different reason.

She switched hands and reached into her purse for her recorder. Before she could flip it on, Lois barked, "Tommy Garrison!"

The fighter in the center ring with a sparring partner looked up at her and neglected to call time out. He took a right to the head and then a left to the jaw that sent him to one knee. His partner laughed and reached down to help him back up, saying, "Allie's right, Tommy, dames is bad for a fighter!"

Then Garrison exploded.

By the time two other fighters had pulled him off the sparring partner, the man was face-down on the canvas, completely limp, and was bleeding from his nose and mouth. A balding man in a sweat suit who appeared to be in his fifties ran out of a small office in the back and yelled, "Stop it, Tommy! Save it for the ring!"

Garrison was infuriated, way too mad to say anything for the moment. Roid rage, thought Cat. The guy was ramped up on steroids like few men Cat had ever seen. It would certainly explain his upper-body strength, his overdeveloped muscle definition, and the unbanked fire in his eyes. Not to mention his out-of-proportion response to being teased.

He finally regained some control and screamed, "Gimme another one, Allie! I want another one!"

The man he'd addressed as Allie tried to calm him down. "Take it easy, Tommy. You don't need to break your sparring partners. You're supposed to be tuning yourself up, not using them up."

"Then I'll tune up with one of them!" He gestured at the trio of reporters. "I bet the redhead could give me a couple of good rounds!" He leaned over the top rope and leered at Cat. "Come on, sweetheart! Gimme some sugar!"

Cat stepped back, hoping her fear didn't show. Clark surprised her – and yet didn't surprise her – as he moved in front of her and crossed his arms. "You need to treat this lady like a lady, mister," he growled.

Garrison pulled his arms away from Allie. "Yeah, right, like a lady," he barked. Then his breathing settled down a little and he asked, "Where you clowns come from, anyway?"

"Daily Planet," Clark replied. "We're reporters."

"Yeah, sure. You ever been in a ring before, pretty boy?"

"That's not why we're here. We want to interview you, not box you."

"I don't talk to reporters who never fought before. You got the guts to step up here?"

“Writing is my job, not punching.”

“Scared, huh? Tell you what – you get up here in the ring with me and show me what you got and I’ll talk to you.”

Cat glanced at Lois, who looked stunned by the challenge. Cat knew – or thought she knew – there was no way Clark could hit that man for real without putting him down on the canvas. Or, if Clark hit him hard enough, killing him. Clark in the ring? Wasn’t gonna happen.

But Clark astounded them all by taking the steps to the ring two at a time and sliding in through the ropes. “All right, tough guy,” he said, “here I am.”

Garrison’s face lit up like a traffic signal and he danced closer to Clark, taunting him. “You look pretty solid, Princess. Maybe you can fight after all.”

“I try to avoid fighting if I can.”

“Oh, yeah? Take this, pretty boy.” Garrison feinted with his left. “Oh, I just about tagged you then! Come on and face me.”

“Kent, get down here!” Lois called out.

Garrison wound up and pulled an uppercut past Clark’s face. “Felt the wind that time, didn’t you, Princess?”

“Tommy, cut it out!” Allie yelled. “He’s not a fighter!”

“He’s up here with me, ain’t he?”

“Clark, please don’t do this!” Cat insisted. “Come down from there!”

Another feint came, a left jab that Clark dodged with his open hands raised. “Almost got you, pretty boy! Come on, throw a punch!” Garrison grabbed Clark’s lapels and tried to shake him, but Clark snapped Garrison’s hands apart with his own and shoved the crazed fighter across the ring.

Garrison snarled incoherently and took an angry step toward Clark. Two other boxers grabbed Garrison’s arms and held him while Allie moved between the two men. “Cut it out, Tommy! You can’t hit him.”

“Watch me! I’ll punch him into next week!”

Another voice boomed across the ring. “What do you think you’re doing? Are you people insane?”

Allie leaned toward Lois and said, “Max Menken, my boss. He’s driving this crazy train.”

Before Lois could respond, Menken was in their midst. “No visitors, Dianello! You know the rules!”

Allie pointed at Lois. “She’s a reporter for the Daily Planet, Max. I figured it would—”

“Be good publicity, I know. But all press information goes out through me! I don’t care who she writes for!”

Allie leaned in closer to Max. “She’s Sam Lane’s older daughter.”

Menken’s eyes widened. “The medal winner?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that changes things.” Menken straightened his jacket and stood as tall as he could. “You should have told me who you were. Why don’t you and I come to my office so I can give you what you need for your article?”

Lois put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “First off, Mr. Menken, you didn’t give me a chance to tell you anything. Second, we don’t want a press kit, we want to interview the fighters.”

Menken shook his head. “Sorry, no interviews with the fighters until after the bouts. You’ll have to get your info from me.”

Cat saw that Lois was about three seconds from starting her own brawl, so she said, “In that case, Mr. Menken, what can you tell us about your fighters and their history? The state boxing commission almost refused to sanction these fights because your guys have fought so many times so close together. Garrison’s had, what, seven fights in the last fifteen months?”

“Eight bouts in seventeen months. And he won every one of them by knockout in the first round. The rest of my guys have

comparable records. You can look them up in the state commission records. And they all passed their physicals before every fight. Everything’s public.”

“Including your training schedules and techniques?”

He frowned and shook his head. “No. That information is private. We’re not doing anything illegal, so publishing what you’re asking for would just give the next opponents an advantage over our guys.”

Clark rubbed his arm as if it were bruised. “So you’re saying that none of your guys are juiced up?”

Menken took a moment to light and puff on a particularly foul-smelling cigar. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. We don’t use any kind of steroids here. Not only does the state commission forbid it, those things would mess up the training regimen we use.”

Cat lifted her hand and waved it to thin out the smoke. “Speaking of which, what’s the big draw on Saturday other than all four championship belts being up for grabs? It’s big for boxing, but news-wise it’s a niche story. You talk like this is some one-of-a-kind everybody-should-be-fascinated-thing.”

“Oh, it is, little lady.” Cat forced herself not to bristle at the term. “Not only are all four belts up for grabs, the big winner will fight Superman – for charity, of course.”

Cat nearly choked at Menken’s statement. Nothing like this had been announced publicly. A quick glance at Clark told her that it was the first he’d heard of it, too. “So why haven’t we heard about this before?” she demanded. “You can’t believe that Superman is going to be a part of this!”

“Part of it?” Menken laughed. “Honey, he won’t be able to stay away. Think of it!” He waved his hands at an imaginary billboard. “The ultimate street fight! The most spectacular night of boxing there ever was! And the winners of each bout are gonna fight Superman one at a time! The eyes of the world, right here on Metropolis!” He glared at the three reporters. “Write about that!” Then he straightened, dropped his hands, and put on a gentlemanly demeanor. “Now, please excuse us, but the gym is off-limits to the press. Everybody back to work! ‘Cept you, Garrison. You hit the shower.” Then he pointed at Allie. “You shoulda known better.”

As Menken turned and stalked away, Allie tried to put a good face on the mini-confrontation. “I’m sorry, Pumpkin. You know, everybody’s a little nervous and there’s a lot riding on this event.” He turned to Cat and shook her hand gently. “I’m really sorry about what Tommy said to you, Miss. He’s usually a lot – nicer.”

Cat nodded. “I’m sure he is.”

Allie stared at her for a long moment, then turned to Clark. “You all right, kid? Garrison’s a pretty tough character.”

“I’m fine. He never laid a glove on me.”

Lois snapped, “Good thing, too, judging by what he did to his sparring partner.”

Allie rubbed the back of his neck. “I know, I know,” he muttered. “All I can say is that I’m sorry.”

Cat touched his arm with one hand and patted his shoulder with the other. “Hey, Mr. Dianello, you can’t be held responsible for anything anyone else does. We have to go now and write up a story our editor won’t beat us over the head with.”

Allie chuckled and relaxed slightly. “Okay. See you Saturday, Pumpkin?”

Lois gave him a small smile and said, “Don’t make book on it, but we’ll see.”

Lois turned to go, but Cat called out, “Don’t leave without us, Pumpkin!”

Lois stopped, turned slowly, and fixed dark and threatening eyes on Cat. Then she turned again and stalked toward the door. Cat touched Clark’s sleeve to stop him and said, “Hang on a minute. When did you find out about Superman fighting the winner?”

“This is the first I’ve heard about it. It’s as much a surprise to

me as it is to you. And I don't even know for certain that it's going to happen."

She looked around and shook her head. "This is a pretty nasty place. And I don't think there's much Menken won't do to make this fight night one for the history books."

He frowned and took her hand in his. "I agree with you. Come on, let's get you out of here."

Cat headed for the front door before Clark could take a step, tugging him along in her wake. She wanted to leave, to get out of this testosterone-drowned building, but she didn't trust those other boxers enough to walk past them without an escort. Lois might have their respect, but she didn't, and she knew it. But she did know that Clark would protect her no matter who or what came at them. It made her feel safe.

It also made her feel wistful and a little lonely. If only she'd known eight years ago what she now believed was true of Clark, it might have made all the difference in the world.

It would have made all the difference to her.

Clark could feel Cat's relief as soon as he escorted her through the door. He had thought she might be faking her tension to get close to him and hold his hand, but now he was sure she really had been apprehensive about being in the gym. Maybe it was all those strong men whose control might have been tenuous to start with, because having beautiful women like Cat Grant and Lois Lane in the building certainly broke up their workouts for the moment. Or maybe it was the knowledge that she didn't have the tools to deflect their attention if it got too personal.

Which would explain Lois' attitude and lack of fear. She'd been under live fire and returned it. She surely wasn't acting like a man. And it was hard to intimidate a woman with actual combat experience under her belt.

Unless, of course, you counted the older, distinguished man she was talking with on the street.

They moved closer and Clark heard the man say, "What brings you here?"

"The ultimate street fight," she answered coolly.

"Oh, uh, right, right," he stammered back. "What else?"

Clark stepped past him to stand at Lois' right side while Cat took up a position on Lois' left. Lois glanced at each of them in turn and said, "I'm trying to get to the fighters. You know, for the paper."

The man looked at Clark, who said, "Clark Kent, sir. I'm her partner. On this story, that is."

The man shook his hand, then turned to Cat, who said, "Hi, I'm Catharine Grant, chopped liver and tuna sandwich."

"Sorry, Dad," said Lois, "I should have introduced everybody. Cat Grant, Clark Kent, Dr. Sam Lane. We're the lead investigative team for the Daily Planet."

"It's good to meet you, Clark, Cat. I wish I could help you with the press, but it's not my department."

"Sure, Dad, we know that."

"And the fighters, of course, well, they're a little jumpy, what with the big night so close."

"Sure, yeah, everybody wants to keep them away from us wicked reporters."

Lois' dad fake-laughed with her, then hesitantly asked, "Lois, are you by any chance going to have some free time soon? I'd love to have dinner with you."

"Ah – maybe. Soon. I'm really busy – we're really busy, and —"

"Sure," he said. "Well, when you get out from under—"

"Sure! Call me."

She spun on her heel and stalked off to find a taxi. Cat gave Sam a sympathetic look and followed. Clark offered his hand again and said, "Good to meet you, Dr. Lane. I'm sure we'll see you again soon."

Sam took Clark's hand and held it. "I don't know what your relationship is with my daughter, Clark, but I'd take it as a personal favor if you'd watch over her as best you can."

Clark looked into the other man's eyes and saw fear. "I will do that, sir."

Lex stiffened in his high-backed chair and held the phone closer to his head. "I see. No, I didn't realize they were that close. Yes, it's a problem, which is why I suggested a press blackout in the first place."

He drew his hand back and threw a dart. "Max, calm down. Oh? Well, let me paint you a little verbal portrait. Imagine a man whose net worth is in excess of twenty billion dollars, and that this same man is currently the third richest man on the planet. The planet Earth, Max. He is superseded only by Mr. Albert Chou of Hong Kong and Elena Pappas of Athens, Greece."

Another dart struck its target a few centimeters from the previous toss. "And when I say 'currently,' I really mean temporarily. Imagine further that this same man has an additional annual income of over two billion dollars, which is approximately two hundred million per month, seven million per day, three hundred thousand per hour, five thousand a minute. How long have we been talking, Max?"

A third dart landed between the first two. "That man is me. I hope you see my point."

He listened for a few seconds, then slumped a bit and said, "You don't see my point. Why am I not surprised?"

He picked up the fourth dart and took a breath. "Well, then, let me explain it to you, Max. If a man like you has a problem, I expect you to solve it with your own customary flair. For a man like me, on the other hand, life is a bowl of rubies – an extremely large bowl. I have no problems."

He clicked off the phone and set it on the end table beside his chair, then buried the fourth dart in the target between the first and third throws – the "S" insignia on Superman's chest. He stood to retrieve them and said to the air, "No problems at all."

"Oh, you might have one or two. Problems, that is."

Superman's voice, seemingly issuing from the ether, startled him badly. It took him the four steps from the Superman cutout to the end table to recover. "My goodness. I really must help you find a cell phone. I'm willing to pay the bill, assuming that you will cease to enter my home or office without announcing your arrival."

The blue-clad hero floated down from the ceiling. "I guess I'll have to look into getting one. I'm sure the Superman Foundation would be willing to foot the bill. It would give them a way to contact me in case of emergency."

"You could also call my secretary for an appointment instead of repeatedly trying to frighten me half to death."

"Aw, now, Lex, where's the fun in that? If I don't show up out of the blue, as it were, I don't get to see you practicing your dart game."

Lex turned and looked at the cutout. "Er, yes, I'm – uh – somewhat embarrassed for you to see that."

"Why? It just confirms to me the opinion you have of me." He gestured at the darts in Lex' hand. "May I give it a try?"

Lex considered the question for a moment, but saw no valid reason to refuse the blue pest this odd request. "I suppose so. Ah, you don't plan to throw them through the wall, do you? Such a repair would be rather expensive."

"The wall? Of course not." At machine-gun speed, Superman turned and fired the darts at the cutout's face.

Lex walked to the target and examined it. There was a dart in each nostril and one in each eye, directly in the pupil. He grasped one and tried to pull it out.

It wouldn't come. It was stuck fast.

Lex looked again and saw that the point of each dart was

buried in the wooden backing of the target. It would take a pair of pliers to free them from their cellulose prison.

Or some super-help.

“Problem, Lex?”

Lex turned to see the innocent hero face Superman sometimes wore when he knew something you were trying to hide. “Perhaps a small one.” He gestured at the darts. “Would you mind assisting me with it?”

“Of course not.” Superman slowly extracted the first dart so that it squealed sharply as it came out of the wood. After the second removal – equally loud and high-pitched – he asked, “By the way, Lex, you don’t really have a bowl of rubies, do you?” Another dart enthusiastically protested its removal from the target. “Because if you did, I would chide you over using the money they represent for something so frivolous and egocentric instead of doing real charitable work with it.” The last dart produced a particularly irritating high-pitched squeak, not unlike someone dismembering a live chipmunk.

The Man of Steel gently laid the darts in Lex’s palm. Lex sighed and said, “No, I do not have a literal bowl of rubies beside my bed or my chair or just sitting on a table. I was using the mental picture to illustrate something to one of my associates.”

Superman mimed wiping sweat from his forehead. “Whew. That’s a load off my mind. Well, unless there’s something else I can do for you, I need to be going. Those kittens won’t save themselves, you know.” He lifted toward the skylight through which he’d entered. “See you later.”

You shall indeed, thought Lex. You shall indeed.

Superman flew south as he gained altitude. He tried to vary his direction of departure when he flew away from Luthor’s presence because he didn’t trust the man not to track him. He wished he’d heard the entire phone conversation, because Lex’s words to Max about solving problems with his “customary flair” bothered him. Luthor was probably involved in the fights, and if half of what they suspected was true, it was not a good thing. Too bad that what little he’d heard did not constitute evidence against Luthor.

Although the bit with the darts was funny. Superman grinned as he recalled Lex trying to pull that dart out. And the screeching noise they made coming out was a bonus funny.

It was a small win, but a win nonetheless. He only hoped it wasn’t a meaningless win.

Chapter Fifteen

That night, after the nothing they got at the gym, Lois looked around and exhaled deeply. The only people from the day shift who hadn’t left were Clark and Karen Wells. Cat had left at her usual time to phone her parents in Idaho. They seemed to have a really good relationship, which usually didn’t bother Lois but tonight irritated her for some reason. Karen was pretending to work, but was really on the phone trying to set up a date with her boyfriend. It wasn’t going well, and the difficulties in her private life gave Lois some guilty satisfaction. Never mind the dangers of *schadenfreude*.

She glanced at Clark, who was either working for real or was doing an excellent job pretending. And it was maddening. He had no right! He needed to be at home watching a football game or baseball game or basketball or tennis or something, anything, not poring over the public financial info on Max Menken. He should be out on a date with Karen or Mayson Drake or some other bimbo – or even with her – not staring at the records of the boxers scheduled to fight on Saturday.

Her irritation overcame her control. “What are you still doing here?”

He lifted his gaze and obviously pretended to be surprised by the question. “I’m working.”

“Uh-huh. On what?”

He waved his hands over his desk. “Just this.”

“Sure.”

“Lois—”

“You’re waiting for me to talk about it, aren’t you? To open up.” He opened his mouth but she overrode whatever he’d planned to say. “See, this is exactly why I hate partnerships.”

His eyes narrowed as if he were angry. “Why?”

“Because your partners are always there for you, whether you want them to be there or not! They’re always ready to listen, to share your troubles! Well I don’t feel like sharing!”

Clark lifted his hands as if declaring peace, but Lois wouldn’t let him.

“Okay, so I don’t get along with my father! Big deal!”

“It isn’t a big deal, Lois. It’s just—”

She didn’t let him finish the sentence. “Just what?” She turned to face him and growled, “What were you about to say?”

He crossed his arms and leaned back. “Just that you seem to get along pretty well with Cat. You and she are partners. Have been for quite a while.”

The shot hit home. “That’s different,” she said quietly. “Cat’s a – well, she’s a different breed of cat. No pun intended. She’s saved my life more than once.”

A grin tried to sneak onto his lips. “My point is that you don’t really hate partnerships. You just have a hard time trusting people. You trust Cat because she’s proven herself to be a faithful friend.”

She turned back to her desk. “Yeah, well, it’s not likely that you’ll have the chance to save my life.”

“Is that why you trust Superman?”

Without looking, she responded with a single nod. “Yes. He’s saved all three of us at different times. And all three of us together that one time.”

“That’s true. But didn’t your father provide for you and watch over you when you were younger?”

She put down her pencil and looked off in the distance. “We didn’t starve or wear filthy rags to school, but no, he didn’t watch over us.” She growled at nothing and at no one, then snatched up the pencil by the eraser end and pounded the point into the desk until it shattered. Through gritted teeth, she said, “He was so wrapped up in his work that he didn’t have time for anyone or anything. Except, of course, his short-term girlfriends. He was never what anyone would call a ‘Daddy’ to us.”

“A lot of parents are workaholics, Lois.”

She swept the pencil fragments off her desk onto the floor. “Sure, yeah, but the ones I’ve met have at least tried to spend some quality time with their families! Even the cheaters! My father just came home to criticize us. ‘Daddy, look, I got a 98 on my science test!’ ‘That’s wonderful, Lois. That leaves two points for improvement.’ According to my father’s love-Lois scale, I was barely a two out of ten.”

She had more to say, but her desk phone chose that moment to ring. “Hang on, Clark.” To the phone, she said, “Daily Planet, Lois Lane speaking.”

“Pumpkin, we gotta talk.”

“Who is – Allie?”

“Yeah. We really gotta talk.”

“Sure. I can meet you first thing in the morning here at—”

“No! Gotta be tonight. Right now!”

She exhaled sharply, then said, “Okay. How about an hour—”

“Can’t you come now? It’s really important.”

“Uh – okay. I’ll meet you at the corner of French and Fourth across from Danny’s Deli.”

“You’re leaving now, right?”

“I’ll be there as soon as my Jeep can get me there. What’s this about?”

“It’s about the fights. I can’t say more on the phone, but I’ll tell you everything I know in person. Park down the block and walk the rest of the way.”

“Hang loose, Allie. Remember your blood pressure.”
 “I wish that was all I had to worry about.” He hung up before Lois could respond.

She stood and picked up her coat. “Clark, that was Allie. He’s really upset about the fights, and he may know something crucial. I hate to do this to you, but he—”

“He’s more likely to open up if you’re the only one there. I get it. He knows you and trusts you, but he doesn’t know me well enough to trust me. No problem.”

She gave him an appraising once-over, but even though he didn’t appear enthusiastic about her going alone, he looked and sounded sincere. “Thanks. I’m glad you understand, even if you don’t like it.”

“You’re right, Lois, I don’t like it. I’d rather go along as backup. But getting the story is the primary goal – anything else is secondary. I’ll stay here and keep going over these statements. Maybe Allie will give you something I can use, too.”

She shrugged into her coat and stood in front of him. “You’re a good partner, Clark. Thanks.”

Lois found a parking place half a block from the T-intersection where Danny’s Deli sat. Lois thought about her conversation with Clark as she walked to the rendezvous with Allie. Clark had done something not many other people in her life had done.

He’d listened to her.

He hadn’t judged her, criticized her, corrected her, or offered solutions for her problems. He’d simply listened. The one time he’d spoken, he’d asked a question and made his point gently. Other guys would have insisted on going with her to meet Allie, but he’d understood her decision and supported her, albeit reluctantly. He was a gentleman who—

“Lois!”

She looked up and silently berated herself for losing focus and situational awareness. Allie should never have been able to see her first, even if her knee was starting to bother her and he was standing in the shadows across the wrong street from the deli.

She pivoted and headed across the street and saw a delivery truck’s lights flip on. Who made deliveries that late at night?

Nobody did.

She looked up and saw her friend step into the crosswalk. But it was wrong! It was like being with her unit on patrol, unable to bring her weapon to bear on the target fast enough, knowing what was about to happen but couldn’t stop it, couldn’t change it—

“Allie! Take cover!”

The truck’s engine revved and Allie stopped in confusion as the light changed and Lois tried to run to knock Allie out of the line of fire but her knee seized and she fell to the street with a muffled scream and grabbed her leg to her chest and the truck ran over Allie before she could take a breath to yell again and the truck’s tires squealed as it made the next corner and vanished.

The pain in her leg unfocused her vision for a moment. The first thing she saw clearly was Allie’s body lying bent and bloody and immobile in the street.

“No! Allie, no!” She half-crawled, half-stumbled to his side. The combat medic in her saw a casualty on the asphalt and realized that the patient was already dead. The security specialist in her looked around for the truck, but it was already gone. The reporter in her set to work composing the article outline.

The friend in her wept and mourned Allie’s passing.

The phone in Lois’ apartment rang incessantly. Lucy finally picked up the receiver without either sitting up or looking at the clock and murmured, “H’lo?”

“Lucy? This is Cat.” There was no response from Lucy.

“Lucy! It’s Cat Grant!”

“Tha’s nice. Hope you’re happy together.”

“Wake up, you bonehead! Lois is in the ambulance now but

won’t go to the hospital!”

“Who are you calling – wait, what ambulance?”

“Are you alone?”

“Yes and what ambulance!”

“There was a hit-and-run a little while ago and Lois hurt her leg and won’t go to the hospital.”

“So you called me because – I’m next of kin?” Lucy threw the covers back and sat up. “How bad is she hurt? Will she – her leg – how bad is it?”

“No, no, the truck didn’t hit her! You know Allie Dianello?”

“Yeah.”

“Lois went to see him late last night on a story and he was run over by what witnesses say was a delivery truck. She tried to help him and her knee collapsed, and she’s still on site refusing to go to the hospital. Clark’s waiting for us at the ER and the police won’t let her leave the scene of the accident without medical treatment because she’s almost hysterical. You’re next of kin and you can make her go see a doctor. None of the rest of us have the legal authority.”

“Okay. If you can get a cop to the phone—”

“It’s a mobile phone and I’m standing next to the detective.”

“Then hand him or her the phone and I’ll get her there.”

Clark cursed himself. He should have insisted on going with Lois. He could have – should have – saved Allie. They could have blown the story wide open without anyone dying.

And Lois wouldn’t be coming to the hospital with an unspecified leg injury.

A young woman entered the ER waiting room and stalked directly to him. “Hey, Clark.”

The greeting from the short brown-eyed girl startled him.

“Who – oh, hi, Lucy.”

She put her hand on his arm. “My sister gets herself in all kinds of trouble, doesn’t she?”

“Do you?”

“Uh-uh. I let her do as much of the crazy dangerous stuff as she wants. I like breathing.”

He tried to smile. “I’m sure you’ve heard this before, but you and Lois don’t look that much like sisters. The family resemblance must be in the attitude.”

She grinned and lowered her hand. “It is. I’m almost as hard-charging as she is, except I don’t carry a gun. Oops. I mean, a weapon.”

His mouth flickered for a moment, not quite long enough to be called a smile. “Can you tell me anything about Lois’ injuries?”

She shook her head. “I only know that her knee folded up under her when she tried to shove Allie out of the way of the truck that killed him. They’re bringing her here more as a precaution than anything else, although the ambulance attendants had to sedate her so they could strap her to a gurney and give her some painkillers through an IV. How well did you know Allie?”

“I met him for the first time yesterday when we went to the gym to get the story on his fighters. We didn’t get to talk, either, but I got the impression from Lois’ phone call with him earlier that there was something big going on, something that involves the fights on Saturday. How well did you know him?”

“Not as well as Lois. Our father wanted her to be a doctor, didn’t think hanging around boxing gyms was professional or ladylike for either of us. He didn’t think I was smart enough to get through medical school, either, and told me I could be a good secretary if I put my mind to it.” Her voice hardened and she said, “I’m working on a Master’s in business administration, should be done before summer.” Lucy turned away and muttered, “That’ll freakin’ show him.”

The flashing ambulance lights got their attention before either could say anything else. He stepped back as Lucy ran to her sister – there wasn’t much room in the entrance and he took up a lot of

space.

His X-ray vision told him that other than some minor swelling, Lois' knee apparently hadn't suffered any new damage. She'd simply tried to do too much that day and used up all the reserve leg strength she had. He and Cat would have to take turns sitting on her in the newsroom to allow her knee to recover.

And his generalized anger at himself and Allie's killers found a new target in Doctor Sam Lane.

Clark wondered if he'd heard about Lois' knee yet. Then he wondered how much the man would care when he found out.

Cat walked in from outside, moved up beside him, and put her hand on his shoulder. "She'll be okay, Clark. She's really mad at whoever ran Allie down, and she insists that it was deliberate murder and not an accident. The detectives on the scene didn't help, either. They suggested that it was some kind of mob payback not directly related to the fights."

His self-control had never been so tenuous. He knew he shouldn't say it, shouldn't even think it, but he turned to her and growled, "We'll find the truth. We'll find it if I have to take this city apart brick by brick."

Just then, Lucy poked her head through the door and called, "Hey, Kent, you need to get in here and talk to her. The doctors won't let her phone anyone. She wants to call in her story and she's not quite all there right now because of the drugs they have her on."

He wasted no time in following Lucy's order.

Cat was glad Lois wanted Clark. He might be the only one who could get anything printable out of her at the moment.

And she was relieved that she didn't have to face the man's fury.

She remembered how he'd behaved toward her the last morning she'd seen him at Met U. He'd been angrier than any man she'd ever been around up to that point in her life. And he'd hurt her terribly when he'd walked out on her without letting her explain herself, but he hadn't frightened her.

Just now, though, he'd almost terrified her. Had he suspected—wrongly, of course—that she'd played a role in hurting Lois, Cat didn't know what he might do to her. His livid declaration about taking apart the city to find the truth worried her. If he was indeed Superman, and she was almost totally certain that he was, the knowledge of his depth of feeling for Lois made Cat's navel pucker. Not only could he fulfill his threat, he would.

He'd regret it deeply afterward, but it wouldn't stop him.

Clark stayed with Lois until she drifted off to sleep. Prior to that, though, he'd gotten enough from Lois to know which detectives to talk to, what questions to ask them, and how to put it together with what Lois saw and heard. It was too late to get the story in the morning edition, but he was sure it would be in the afternoon run.

He dialed his boss' number from the waiting area, mentally apologizing to Alice White for waking her up in the middle of the night. She might well be used to it, but he was also sure that she didn't like it one bit.

In a muzzy voice, Perry answered. "Perry White, Daily Planet."

"Chief, this is Clark. Lois got a call last night to meet Allie Dianello about the so-called fight of the century, but when she found him a delivery truck ran over and killed him. The police are calling it a hit-and-run accident but Lois thinks—"

"She thinks it was murder." His words were clear and firm now.

"Does Lois always think that?"

"No, but I don't remember the last time she was wrong. What about you? Do you think it was deliberate?"

"After hearing what she told me, I think it probably was

deliberate."

"How's Lois holding up?"

"She's in the hospital for the night. She tried to save Allie but her knee gave out on her and she's in quite a bit of pain. There doesn't seem to be any additional permanent damage."

"Good." The editor let out the breath Clark knew he'd been holding, then asked, "So what's your plan?"

"Interview the detectives who caught the case, find out if Allie left any notes or recordings of what he was going to tell Lois, and help Cat keep Lois from serious injury."

"What serious injury?"

"If she's right about this story and she keeps pushing, she'll put herself in the crosshairs of whoever is pulling the strings. That person or organization won't hold back because of Lois' winning personality. And we both know she won't step back because of personal danger. In fact, I think if she knew who killed Allie and the law wouldn't or couldn't make a legal move, she might go hunting."

The flat statement apparently took Perry by surprise. "I didn't think you knew her that well."

His response made Clark glad that he hadn't communicated his mood to Lois, but he also regretted saying anything to Cat about his anger over Lois' injury. It was one more brick in the solid wall he'd built in his mind that convinced him that Superman must never, ever act out of anger or fear. He had to control himself first in order to serve the city he'd mentally and emotionally adopted.

He replayed Perry's next words in his mind until he'd caught up. "I'm sorry to say that I think you're right about Dianello's death being murder, Clark." He paused, his voice containing more steam than before. "I want all three of you in my office at one o'clock tomorrow afternoon. We'll put this together then. I'll make sure DA Drake will be there, too. If we give her what we've got, she'll probably give us the exclusive on the bust."

"We'll all be there, Perry, even if I have to carry Lois in."

His boss laughed. "You know, son, I'd almost give an Elvis tour scarf to see that."

Around two-thirty in the morning, just after Allie's death, Lex stood on the roof of Lex Towers playing catch with himself by bouncing a rubber-coated baseball off the practice wall on one side. One return bounce went over his head, and he nearly fell from the surprise of seeing Superman floating above and behind him. The blue-clad hero caught the ball, landed softly, and handed the ball back to Lex.

"That's it," Lex huffed. "I'm giving you a cell phone the next time you come here. I'm sure there's room for a pocket to carry it in your cape. I'll even program my personal phone number in it."

Superman didn't snark back, which surprised Lex. "Is something wrong?"

"Why should something be wrong for me to come see you?"

Slowly Lex replied, "Nothing has to be wrong. It's just—you're usually more talkative than this."

Big Blue, as Lex was starting to call him in his mind, turned to one side and crossed his arms. "Did you know Allie Dianello?"

Lex frowned as if concentrating. "The name doesn't ring a—wait, wasn't he the trainer for the fighters for the Fight of the Century?"

"Why did you speak of him in the past tense?"

"Because you did. What happened to him? Did he resign his position?"

Lex knew that he wasn't exhibiting any of the characteristics of lying, even though Superman's scrutiny bothered him. The hero finally broke his gaze and said, "He was killed by what the police are calling a hit-and-run accident late last night. Someone is either trying to hide something about that event or provoke me into participating to keep the fighters safe."

“That’s a bit extreme, don’t you think? Besides, that conclusion isn’t fully supported by the facts released to the electronic media.”

“Maybe not, but that’s the way this feels to me.”

“Surely you don’t suspect that this is another of those tests you were talking about a few weeks ago.”

“No, Lex. I don’t think this is connected to the tests. I could be wrong, of course, but this feels different, almost like a mob-related thing. No one died in those earlier tests.”

“As you say. Since you are unfortunately unable to help the trainer at this time, what do you intend to do? And why are you discussing your decision with me?”

“Well, I wasn’t going to appear at the fight, but I think my decision has been made for me. I’ll be there. As to why I’m talking to you about it – Lex, do you believe in the afterlife?”

Lex hesitated so he could shift mental gears. “I must say, that question—” he tossed the ball from his bare hand to his glove “—literally came out of left field.”

“Seriously, I’d like to know what you believe. Many humans do believe in the afterlife, and most of those believe that there’s a system of reward and punishment associated with it. What do you think?”

“Hmm. I don’t wish to insult anyone who holds a belief which contradicts my own, but I do not accept that such a construct exists. Of course, I have no empirical proof either way.”

“What about Pascal’s Wager?”

“I assume you are referring to the assertion that one should believe in God because if one does not believe and is wrong, one is the loser of the wager, and that if one believes and there is no God or afterlife, nothing is gained or lost.”

“That’s a simplified explanation, but I think you’ve caught the essence of it.”

“You are not the first person to ask me about this. The wager itself is not evidence, nor is it a scientific or empirical proof. In fact, it’s possible to look at it from an angle that makes it a matter of self-interest to believe, not a matter of faith.”

Superman nodded. “I agree with what you said about the wager. I suppose I was checking my own belief system against another intelligent man’s beliefs.”

Lex didn’t fall for the ego boost the Man of Steel’s words might have given a lesser being. “Just so I’ll know, what are your beliefs? Do you believe in an afterlife and someone who rules over it?”

Superman smiled. “Yes. Because I know I’m not only less than perfect, I’m not the strongest or the smartest person in the city, much less in the history of the world. I know I’ll have to answer to the person who is all that and a bag of chips, as I’ve heard some young people say.” He rose above the playing surface on the roof. “And now I must be going. Those bad guys won’t catch themselves.”

Lex watched him fade into the dark northern sky. He enjoyed his occasional conversations with Superman, though he wondered what the blue-clad hero received from them.

Perhaps he only needed to speak with someone who wouldn’t kiss his buns of steel with empty fawning and vapid expressions of gratitude.

As Superman flew away, he pondered the conversation they’d just had. If Lex hadn’t known Allie or that he was dead, how could he have known the circumstances of his death or what the media had made public? The details of the story hadn’t broken yet, and he’d initially stated that he was unaware that Allie was dead.

There was only one answer. Only someone involved in the action could have known. Lex had to be involved in the fights and whatever else was going on. It was a mistake on Lex’ part, one Superman might not be able to take advantage of.

Not yet, anyway.

He wished he could let Cat and Lois know what he’d just learned.

Lois woke up just after seven the morning after Allie’s death when two nurses came in to take her vital signs and a blood sample. “Again? You vampires just drained me.”

The night nurse, Bonnie by the name on her badge, having already experienced Lois’ temper and determination, silently listened to the airflow in her lungs, drew a tube of blood, and sent what she surely thought was a private mental message to her relief persecutor.

It wasn’t private enough – Lois caught the look. “When do I get out of this Inquisition torture chamber?” Lois demanded.

Bonnie replied, “The doctor will be by to see you during morning rounds. Unless he finds more damage than we think you have, we should be able to release you this afternoon.”

“I’m not staying here and watching TV all day,” Lois growled. “Unhook me and let me sign out. I’ve got bad guys I have to catch.”

“Now, Ms. Lane, you mustn’t leave until the orthopedist can —”

“The orthopedist can kiss my sweet little behind! I know my own body! Now unhook me and give me my clothes or I’m unplugging myself! And if you try to hold my clothes hostage I’ll walk out the front door naked!”

The day nurse suppressed a laugh and said, “That won’t be necessary, Ms. Lane. You do need to wear a knee brace for a few days, though. I’ll go get one and bring it as soon as I can.”

“You’ll bring the brace and my clothes right now or my threat will be reality! I’ve got a murderer to catch and I can’t do it from this room!”

The night nurse sighed. “She’d do it, Bob. Better find the ortho on call—”

“Just bring me the brace. I’m a qualified combat medic and I think I can figure out how to use it.”

Bob nodded. “As long as you understand that you’re leaving against medical advice, Ms. Lane.”

“I’m well aware of what I’m doing. Now get this IV out of my arm before I do it myself. I’m a little out of practice and I’d rather not bleed on your nice clean floor.”

After a cab ride to her apartment, she took a quick shower and changed clothes. Then she strapped on the brace, double-checked the cane she’d gotten from the VA physical therapists when she’d first come to Metropolis, then headed to the gym, grateful for the small bottle of oxycodone tablets Bob had given her that morning.

The prospect of talking with her father was more painful to her than bending her knee far enough to drive her Jeep, something Bob had advised her not to do for a couple of days and something she knew was not the best idea she’d ever had. But the leg loosened up as she drove carefully – carefully for her, anyway – to beard the lion in his den.

When she walked into the gym, the atmosphere struck her immediately. None of the fighters paid any attention to her. No one was sparring or hitting a bag or jumping rope. The fighters were all in groups of three to six men, remembering Allie. She caught snatches of their conversations as she passed them.

“—showed me that left uppercut and made me work on it till I thought my shoulder would fall off—”

“—worked my corner in the Simpson fight—”

“—couldn’t slip a head punch until Allie taught me how—”

“—taught me how to protect myself coming out of a clinch—”

A fresh wave of sadness came over her. She hadn’t stopped long enough to think about how much she’d miss that gruff old man with the soft spot for the Lane girls. The man had called her “Pumpkin” the day before he—

Enough. She’d mourn Allie later. Right now she had a murder

to solve.

She searched the building's interior until she spotted her father sitting on the edge of the sparring ring, holding a copy of the Daily Planet folded to show the teaser for Allie's story. She walked slowly toward him until she was almost close enough to touch him. "I – I'm sorry, Dad."

Sam Lane shook his head. "He was a real character."

"Tough, too."

"That he was. Always had a soft spot for Lucy, and especially one for you. Used to call you 'Pumpkin'." Sam chuckled quietly.

Lois turned away to hide her tears. "He still did."

"Hit and run." Sam sighed. "I never thought he'd go out like that."

Lois wiped her cheeks dry, hesitated, then turned to him and said, "He didn't. I think he was murdered."

Sam's jaw dropped. "What?"

"I was there. I saw the truck coming at him straight and fast. It wasn't a drunk, wasn't an accident."

"You were there?" He lurched to his feet and glared at her.

"What were you doing there?"

"My job!"

"Your job doesn't require you to place yourself in harm's way!"

She sensed people looking their way, so she moved closer and lowered her volume. "Actually, it does involve doing exactly that. I don't look for bad guys waving weapons around so I can stand in front of them yelling 'Shoot me now!' But I have dedicated my life to finding the truth and making it public."

"That's not what I meant! Why were you there?"

"Allie asked me to meet him."

"Did the driver see you?"

"I don't know how he could have."

Sam exhaled. "Good."

Her eyes widened. "What do you mean, 'good?' Why is that a good thing?"

"Lois, I want you to stay away from this."

"This? What 'this' are you talking about? What am I on to, Dad? What do you know?"

He turned away and looked at his shoes. "Nothing! It's just – there are some pretty rough characters in this business."

She refused to be deflected. "What did Allie want to tell me about the fights?" she hissed. "Are they fixed?"

"No, they are not fixed! Now please, just – just stay away."

"I can't stay away! I'm a reporter and this is my story!" She waited for him to speak. When he didn't, she demanded, "Help me with this! Tell me what you know!"

"No!" he snapped.

She pinned him with a glare. "You're lying."

"Don't be ridic—"

"I know the look! I've seen it often enough."

"Lois, let's not do this! Not now, and – and certainly not here. I can't help you!"

"You can't? Or you just won't?"

"No!" He started to say something but changed his mind and said, "You need to just forget this."

Her temper boiled over. "You'd like for me to forget everything, wouldn't you? The fights, the doors slamming, the women you cheated on Mom with, the impossible demands you made on me and the constant criticism of Lucy! You'd love to have had the perfect father-daughter relationship—"

"I never claimed to be a perfect father!"

"You were hardly a father at all!"

"I did my best!"

"Your best sucked!"

He looked stunned, as if Lois had hit him in the head with a club. His mouth moved but no sound came out.

She gritted her teeth and silently counted to five to regain her

self-control. "Never mind all that. Can you tell me anything about the murder or not?"

He stood tall and turned his face away from her. "I know nothing about the death of Allie Dianello."

Her anger suddenly fled. All that remained was a deep sadness – for herself, for her father, for Lucy, for her mother, but mostly for Allie. She took a half-step backward and said, "Whatever you say, Dad."

She turned and marched out of the gym, her decision made. Her partners wouldn't like it – she didn't like it – but this was the way it had to be.

Lois glanced at the newsroom's wall clock. The appointment with Perry and Mayson was scheduled for one o'clock, just fifteen minutes away. Clark and Cat both wore small grins as they converged on Lois' desk.

She hoped they'd all three still be partners in a few minutes.

Cat looked at the clock and said, "I hate waiting."

Clark grinned at her. "This time it's worth it."

"Yeah, well, I waited for you at lunch today but you didn't show and I didn't think that was worth it."

"It wasn't like it was a date or anything."

She gave him a hard stare. "I still had to eat alone and I hate doing that too."

"Easy, Cat, I was meeting a source. I'll tell you all about it after we talk to Perry."

Lois glanced at her monitor and hesitated, then saved the file she was working on. "I hope you both think it's worth it in a few minutes." She hit a few more keys and sent it to the printer on the far side of Clark's desk.

"I'll get it," said Cat.

Clark gently touched her shoulder. She didn't quite jump out of her skin. "Come on, Lois, this is great! We're going to take down a really bad guy with this – Cat, what's wrong?"

As she walked back to her partners, Cat's face paled and she stopped in the middle of the newsroom for a moment, then continued to Lois' desk. She waved the printout in the air between herself and Lois. "What – what is this?"

Clark took the printout and scanned it as Lois sat silent in her chair, staring at nothing. "Hit-and-run?" he almost whispered. "You told us Allie's death was murder. In fact, you insisted it was."

Cat shook her head. "No, no, no, no, and no! We're not turning in this – this piece of crap!"

Without looking at Cat, Lois leaned back and crossed her arms. "Yes we are. That's what happened."

Clark growled, "What happened to murder?"

Her voice hardened and she snarled back, "The evidence happened! It says this was a tragic accident!"

"We can't turn this in, Lois!" Clark insisted. "Perry might fire us all!"

"Then bring me something that convinces me I was wrong!"

"We can't—"

"Let me talk to her, Clark."

Clark lifted his hands to either side and barked, "Be my guest!"

Cat leaned on Lois' desk and took a deep breath. "Look at me, Lois. Come on, look at me. That's it. Now. You nearly got run over and killed last night. A good man, a man who looked out for you and Lucy when your parents split up did die. We have a chance to pull down a really bad guy with this story. We present the facts, an investigation will start on the local level and maybe end up bringing in the Feds. The District Attorney for the city of Metropolis is meeting with us in Perry's office in a few minutes, and you want to submit this sorry excuse of a story as the truth?"

Treacherous tears dripped down her cheeks. "Cat, please!"

"I've never known you to run from the truth, Lois. Not ever.

Not when the Army told you they were cutting ties with you, not when Perry paired you up with me, not when I told you Claude would break your heart if you got mixed up with him, not when they told you that you needed to see a counselor, not ever! So why now?"

Small damp spots appeared on her blouse below her face. "I – I can't—"

"You have to! You have to tell us the truth!"

She sniffed and wiped her nose on her sleeve, then softly said, "It's my father."

"Your father? He's involved in this?"

She nodded. "I think it has something to – to do with his medical practice, but I don't know. And we can't even hint at who he is! If we print anything about our source being a doctor he might – they might—" and she broke down.

Cat straightened and hesitated, then looked at Clark. "Your call, partner."

"No," he said. "It's all our call. Whatever we decide, we have to be together on this."

Cat nodded to him. "Okay, partner. What's our call?"

He turned and looked Lois' way. She knew this very good man would do the right thing, even if her father went to prison.

"I say we protect our source and go with Lois' version of the story."

Cat sighed. "Perry's gonna hate me. All of us. I'll be risking a good friendship with Mayson. And District Attorney Mayson Drake may officially clobber all three of us for wasting her time." She waited, still and quiet for a long moment, then turned back to Clark. "I hate it, but I agree. We go with Lois' version."

Lois didn't know whether to be happy or sad, but she did know she was grateful. "Thank you. Both of you. I promise I'll find a way to make it up to you."

Clark slid his hands into his pants pockets. "It may take you a while."

Cat pressed her lips together, then said, "Come on, you two. Let's go put our necks on the chopping block."

Lois stood and stepped between her partners, then grabbed each one by the arm and pulled them next to her. It was the closest she could come to saying "I love you" to either of them for what they were risking for her.

Chapter Sixteen

Perry sat in his office chair, too stunned to stand. He could not believe what he was hearing from the Daily Planet's three best investigators. "Allie Dianello wasn't murdered?" he asked.

"Hit-and-run accident," answered Cat.

"No problem with the fights?"

"Not that we could find," sighed Clark.

"And you had the District Attorney for the city of Metropolis come to our office for nothing?"

Lois looked at the DA. Mayson Drake stood staring through the window with her arms crossed. "Yes, we did," Lois admitted. "I'm sorry."

"And Max Menken gets away with murder," Mayson said. "Literally."

Lois fidgeted in her chair. "I know you don't have enough evidence to get an indictment—"

"If we put what we have together with what you really have, we might," Mayson snapped.

Perry looked at his team of reporters, then focused on Clark. "Kent, you're the newest member of this club. I need you to be honest with me. Are you three bluffing on this, or are you playing this hand straight?"

Clark looked at Cat, who refused to make eye contact with him. Then he looked at Lois, who seemed to silently ask him something. He finally looked back at Perry, his face a mask of passivity. "I'm going with my partners on this one, Chief."

Lois sighed and looked at her hands. Cat gave Perry a challenging stare but didn't speak. Mayson finally broke the silence. "This was not a reasonable use of my time, people. I suggest you think twice before you ask the DA's office for any consideration more serious than fixing a parking ticket." She turned and glared at Cat. "And you'd better think twice before you use my home as a safe house again."

She slung her purse over her shoulder and marched out the door without another word.

Perry tossed the story the three reporters had given him onto his desk. "That woman's right. We wasted her time. We had a ten-high nothing and we put money in the pot against three aces showing. If Mayson bothers to give us the time of day for the next six months, I'll head to Vegas as an Elvis tribute artist."

"Perry, I—"

"Save it, Lois." He sighed and shook his head. "Now I've got to tell the board of directors that we don't have a terrific angle for the fights on Saturday. And I'm really not lookin' forward to that conversation."

Clark lifted an index finger. "Uh, I may be able to help there. I have a Superman angle."

Perry leaned forward. "For the fights?"

"Yes."

Lois glared at him. "And when were you going to share that little tidbit with Cat and me?"

"I haven't had the chance, okay? The source I met this morning was Superman. I scored an interview with him and got his tentative commitment to fight the winners of each fight Saturday evening." He looked at Cat's open mouth and rapid blinks, then glanced at Lois' sudden anger, and said, "That's the big seller, that Superman participates in the fights."

Perry looked at Lois' welder's torch-level stare and was glad that it was directed at Clark and not at him. Of course, he couldn't show how relieved he was that this was so. He glanced at Cat, who had moved back to allow Mayson to leave and hadn't come forward again.

Why did she look like she was trying not to smile?

Didn't matter. "Clark, you get that story into shape and get it to me by two-thirty. No, make it two-ten. I'll hold fifteen column inches open for it for tonight's edition, and I know I'll catch grief from the print room for pushing back the deadline that far. Lois, I've got your story, such as it is. Cat, you give Clark any assistance you can on his mini-feature." He stopped talking for a long moment, then growled, "Why are you all still in my office? Get going!"

Perry watched Cat lead them out with Clark bringing up the rear. Clark closed the door and spoke quietly to Lois, whose expression softened after a moment. Then she nodded. The two of them gave each other shy smiles as they moved back to their desks. Cat, in contrast to her determined expression just moments before, looked almost forlorn.

Perry wondered for a moment about their three-way dynamic and whether or not he was reading it correctly, that Clark and Lois were feeling their hesitant way toward each other and leaving Cat as the outsider. Or, maybe Cat was showing the early signs of bipolar disorder. Then he reminded himself that he was an editor, not a relationship counselor or a shrink.

All three of them needed to be reminded just who drove this train. He had three particular stories in mind to assign them – but maybe he'd wait until they came in the next morning. After all, Lois needed a man in her life she could love, and if that man worked on the same reporting team with her, it didn't matter to Perry.

As long as Clark didn't hurt her more than the others had.

As the three slouched back to their desks, Lois leaned close to Cat and whispered, "Eleven tonight, my place. Wear black."

Cat's eyebrows rose, then she controlled her reaction and waited for Lois to look at her face. "That means we're going spelunking again, right?"

"If we're calling Allie's gym a cave, then yes."

Cat nodded, then quietly said, "We're taking the big guy, right?"

"Absolutely. We may need some muscle."

"You'll fill him in?"

"He's having dinner at my place. I'll recruit him then."

Cat hesitated, then mouthed, "Chinese takeout, I hope. You don't want to poison him."

Lois' eyes narrowed, then the corner of her mouth twitched and she nodded. "I'm buying the food, he's cooking. We'll be fine. You just be there with all your gear." She stopped at her desk. "I'm not letting Allie die for nothing."

Cat nodded and moved to her own desk. The fake story they'd given to Perry was just a delaying tactic, a stall to lull the bad guys to sleep so the reporters could get the truth before the bad guys knew they were in trouble. It was a classic Lois tactic, one she'd used with good effect before.

Just not against Perry. Cat hoped that the move wouldn't come back to bite them.

Eleven P.M. Time to roll.

Cat hated interrupting Lois' dinner date with Clark — sort of — but they'd both affirmed to her that tonight was a good night to do some snooping in the gym. She made her way to Lois' apartment, hoping that she'd allowed him to cook. Lois was a fair hand with Army field rations and simple meals, but they'd never show up on a restaurant menu. Clark, on the other hand, had made some delicious dinners for Cat back at Met U, and they were always—

No! Best not to go there.

As she stepped out of the elevator onto Lois' floor, she heard what sounded like an argument behind one of the doors. Poor kids, she thought. That relationship sounded like a train wreck waiting to happen.

The argument got louder as she approached Lois' apartment. It couldn't be.

Surely he wasn't dumb enough to make her that mad!

The words didn't come through the door clearly, but the sharpness of the disagreement was apparent to the most casual listener. Cat was glad she was on the outside of this one.

She hesitated, then knocked on the door, fearful of what she might see.

The door flew open. "Finally!" Lois burst out. "Come in here and tell him he's nuts!"

Cat found herself dragged inside, facing Clark, who stood in the middle of the room with his hands on his hips. "Come on, Cat," he challenged, "tell me I'm nuts."

Cat realized she wasn't on the outside after all. She looked from Clark to Lois and asked, "Why am I telling Clark he's nuts?"

"You know the John Wayne movie 'McClintock'?" Lois snarled.

"I've seen it once or—"

"Then tell him he's crazy!"

Cat closed her eyes for a moment, opened them again, and said, "Nothing is orange, not even the clock, so this must still be reality."

The oblique "Clockwork Orange" non sequitur stopped all conversation long enough for Cat to ask, "Will just one of you please tell me how a John Wayne western movie indicates that Clark is insane?"

Lois glanced toward Clark, then, sarcastically, he half-bowed and gestured for her to talk. "We watched that movie after dinner, which was heavenly, by the way, and you can take home some leftovers if you want, and you should because Clark's a great cook, but he also seems to think that spanking a grown woman is

the way to her heart and I told him he's nuts!"

"No! That's not what I said. I said that the setup and resolution are funny if you put the movie in its historical and cultural context. I don't think it's ever okay to hit a woman with anything unless she's trying to kill you. I never have, nor do I plan to, but that conservative audience for whom the movie was made would have thought the battle between Wayne and Maureen O'Hara was hysterical. Remember that she landed some pretty telling blows herself. And if you knew your John Wayne history better, you'd realize that the same two actors did the same basic setup and resolution in 'The Quiet Man' about fifteen years earlier. 'McClintock' set that Irish story in the late American West and added some slapstick touches." He stopped and crossed his arms. "I'm not nuts."

Lois had lost her ferocity during his analysis. Cat turned to her and asked, "Anything you wish to add?"

Lois dropped her gaze. "I — I'm sorry, Clark. Sometimes I still lose my temper over dumb things like that. It — I guess — it's my — my PTSD."

Cat slipped back out of Lois' line of sight and signaled to Clark to hug her. He seemed reluctant at first, but then he touched her elbows and she spun like a wind-up toy and snapped her arms around him. Cat thought she heard someone whisper, "Please don't leave me."

She realized that Lois actually had said that when Clark pulled her as close to him as she could come while they were both still dressed and quietly said, "I'm not going anywhere, Lois. I don't ever want to leave you."

Well. Good. Cat didn't have to push Clark to tell Lois what was in his heart after all.

And she hadn't had to take sides in one of the dumbest debates she'd ever heard.

The three of them arrived at the gym just before midnight. Lois parked her Jeep two blocks over and around a corner from the entrance. All three of them were wearing black slacks or jeans with black or navy-blue long-sleeved sweaters. Cat and Lois each had a small soft-sided briefcase strapped across their bodies.

Cat caught up with Lois and asked, "You're sure we can get in the gym? Don't they lock it at night?"

"Will you give it a rest, Red?" Lois insisted. "Yes, it's locked up, but there's a vent on the second floor above the back entrance that's been loose since I was fourteen, and yes, I checked it the last time I was here. It's still a security vulnerability."

"I sure hope so," Cat muttered.

"So do I," Clark added. "If only to stop her complaining."

"That's enough out of you, Farm Boy."

He grinned at Lois. "As you wish."

Cat watched Lois out of the corner of her eye and saw a smile sneak across her face. It looked like things were going very well on that front. Lois' hair even looked a bit longer and more feminine than it had since Cat had known her, and she hadn't heard Lois curse at anyone for anything for weeks.

The soldier was turning back into a woman, and it was a very good thing to see.

Of course, that meant that Cat's own meager chances with Clark were shrinking by the moment, but it was a price she thought she was willing to pay if her friend could find real happiness with this complex and heroic man. She hoped they would soon progress to a point where he trusted her enough to tell her his biggest secret, one Cat was certain Lois couldn't see because she was too close to him.

The only real conflict between the two women wasn't over Clark, it was Cat's tendency to editorialize about Superman and trumpet his good works in her news columns, while Lois continually edited Cat's copy for that kind of content. It seemed to mean that while Lois was impressed with what the hero could do,

she was more impressed with the person Clark was, which was a good thing where their developing relationship was concerned.

Cat hoped Clark was smart enough to know which end of that stick was the better one.

Clark gave Lois a gentle smile and hoped that the vent she'd referenced was large enough for him to fit through. It would seriously damage his dignity if he got stuck.

Clark boosted Cat, then Lois, up to the fire escape ladder – it was stuck, probably rusted in place, a perfect opportunity to send the city after them for a safety violation – then jumped and grabbed the bottom rung himself. They crept to the vent above the back door where Lois and Cat both went to work on removing the cover with their covert and borderline legal tool kits. Since there was no room for him in front of the vent cover, he stayed back and acted as lookout.

No one moved in the alley below them. A big tawny cat hunted for rodents around a dumpster, braving the city rats which were rooting through the trash for their own meals. The cat, which appeared to be a female who'd recently given birth, seemed willing to risk the mob before her to feed her kittens. It was a tableau Clark had witnessed many times in his globe-trotting, and it always impressed him irrespective of the size or number of the participants. Perhaps the Superman Foundation could set up a catch-and-neuter program for feral cats and dogs to cut down on the groups of wandering—

A grunt from behind him reminded him why they were there. "Got it," Cat stage-whispered. "Lois knows the building better, so she should go first. Clark, you're our rear guard. Let's go find the truth."

He grinned. It was a better motto than "Go Team!" for what they were doing.

He helped Cat into the vent opening, then Lois, then he followed. The gym funk hit him right away. Lois didn't react to it, but Cat wrinkled her nose and stifled a cough. "Does it stink in here or is it just me?" Cat whisper-asked him over her shoulder.

"It isn't just you," he replied.

"Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger," Lois muttered.

"Glad you feel that way," Cat quietly returned. "Me, I'm going for a scented bath when I get home. I doubt that would kill me, but even if it did, I'd die with lilacs in my olfactory sense."

Lois took a deep breath and stood up. "Anybody hear anything besides us?" she whispered. Cat and Clark both shook their heads in the negative. "Then we're good. Even I can hear conversations on the ground floor from here, and except for us the building's empty."

Clark looked around. "Then let's find Menken's office and have ourselves a little look-see at what he's got in there."

Lois' voice came out hard and flat. "I'll go you one better. This is my dad's office."

Cat tried the doorknob. "Locked. Do you have a key?"

"No."

Cat knelt before the door with her tool kit in her hand again. "Then I got this one."

Clark took a few seconds to look around the building again. There was no one else there, not even a security guard. It bothered him, so he asked Lois about it.

She frowned. "I don't know, but you're right, they should have someone walking the halls for insurance purposes. A guard wouldn't be expected to put out a fire or arrest a trespasser, but he could call in the alarm. Their premiums must be through the roof."

Cat stood and pushed the office door open. "We can add the lack of a guard to the total mystery, but now I suggest we get in and out as quickly as possible. Somebody could always decide to take a late-night stroll up here."

Cat led them in. Lois hesitated at the doorway. Clark reached out and put his hand on her upper arm. She turned and gave him a

quavering smile, then squared her shoulders and stepped forward. He followed and closed the solid steel door.

Cat asked, "Do we use flashlights or can we turn on the room light?"

"Room light. We can't be seen from outside." She turned and pointed to a set of file cabinets. "I suggest we start there. Look for anything on Tommy Garrison. We can work outward from that if we have the time."

Cat opened the first file drawer. "How much time do we have?"

"Allie used to open up at about a quarter to five and get the boxers moving. Menken probably does the same thing just to keep up appearances and keep the fighters in a rhythm. I'd guess we've got no more than four hours to find something and get out before someone finds us." Lois glanced at Clark. "Hey! What are you looking at?"

He pushed his glasses back up on the bridge of his nose. "This room is the wrong size. It's too small and it's asymmetrical." He examined the contents of the back shelf. "These books are medical, but they're too old and too generic for Dr. Lane's specialty. Some of them were published fifteen years ago. Is there a hidden closet or room back here?"

"If there is, I've never seen it. What are you—"

"Found it."

Cat made a noise that sounded like "Huh" but he didn't know what she meant. He'd puzzle it out later.

Clark pressed a hidden pressure plate on the back wall and a panel pivoted silently. A light automatically clicked on to show another bookcase, another file cabinet, and a table with a life-sized cutaway model of the human head and torso.

Lois quickly scanned the titles on the bookcase as Cat stared open-mouthed at the model. "Are you guys seeing this?" Cat blurted. "Look at that skeleton! This isn't just bone, it's a bone and metal sandwich! Is that what he's been doing to these fighters?"

Lois pulled down a binder labeled "Surgery Results – Garrison, T." She leafed through the first few pages, then said, "I think this has all we need. It's a detailed description of the work he did on Garrison after he tore his rotator cuff, including photos of the surgery itself." She leafed through part of the binder. "This is really damning stuff, Clark! There's no way the AMA would approve of this kind of procedure!" She dashed tears from her eyes. "What has my dad gotten involved in now?" She slammed the binder shut and dropped it on the table. "I should've been with him! I could've stopped this – this abomination!" She turned and leaned her head against Clark's chest, then took in a shuddering breath.

He wrapped his hands around her shoulders. "No, Lois," he said, "this isn't your fault. You would've gotten pulled in with him. He was trying to help injured athletes and just went too far too fast. Menken has him trapped."

Cat picked up the binder and flipped through it until she found a specific page. "Clark, look at this. No wonder these guys are winning so easily. I could hit Garrison in the head with a baseball bat and he'd barely feel it. That would just make him crazier. The only guy who could possibly stop any of them in a fight is Superman."

The look she gave him was almost pleading and he didn't understand what it meant. After a long moment she shook her head and said, "I just hope we can get this data to the boxing commission in time to stop the fights. These clowns are liable to kill someone in the ring."

"I think we have what we need," Clark answered. "There's no sense in pushing our luck. Let's go back to Lois' place and – what was that?"

"What was what?" Lois demanded.

Cat's ears seemed to rotate forward like her namesake's. "I think the front door just slammed shut."

Lois reached for her purse and the pistol she carried, but Cat put her hand on Lois' wrist. "We can't shoot our way out of this one. If they catch us in here somebody will get hurt and they'll scatter like roaches. We'll never catch them. Clark, is there a hiding place up here?"

"There's a closet where the two of you can hide. It's not big enough for all three of us. It's inside the lab room." He reached over to one side and said, "This is the release for the hidden door. Just press it when—"

"No!" Lois burst out. "If they find you they'll hurt you! I won't let — you can't — please!"

He held her elbows and looked down into her frightened eyes. "This is the best way, Lois. You two take Garrison's binder and hide. If they catch me searching like I haven't found anything, they'll likely just escort me out of the gym. They won't call the police on me because they can't afford to reveal what they have here. If they find you two, though, something bad might happen."

"No! I can't — I can't lose you!"

"It's the best option now," Cat said in her ear. "Clark could sell sand to a lifeguard and you know it. He'll talk his way out of this."

Clark pulled Lois to him and kissed her quickly, then pushed her at Cat. "Cat, give me your toolkit. They need to find something to convince them I'm working alone. I'll get them away from here and delay them as long as I can. You two get in the closet. Now."

Cat could hear better than Lois, so she kept up a whispered commentary on what she could pick up. "They're yelling each other's names, I assume in surprise. Menken just took my tools. Clark better replace them or—"

"Worry about that later! What's going on?"

"The other guy is Garrison." Cat smiled. "He just called Clark 'Princess' again. Not very original. This guy's definitely got sexual identity issues."

She felt Lois almost laugh beside her. "Any punches thrown yet?"

"No. I think Menken is trying to convince Garrison that hurting a reporter is a really bad idea, especially since 'Princess' isn't carrying any documents. Wow, even his threats sound like bad detective novel dialogue."

Cat paused, and Lois said, "I can't hear anything!"

"Chill, girlfriend. They're escorting Clark out of the building — ha! I think Menken just tripped and fell into the wall. I'd bet Clark helped him take that tumble." Cat frowned, listening, and after a moment she slowly opened the closet. "Now I can't hear anything. I think we're in the clear. You still have your tools, right?"

"In my pocket."

"Then let's get out of here. We should use the vent again in case they're still downstairs."

They hustled to the vent and, even short a set of tools and a tall man to boost them up, got out and replaced the cover in what had to be record time. Cat stopped on the landing to check out the area, then slid down the ladder as far as it would descend. She hung from the bottom rung for a moment, then let go and dropped a distance of about a little more than half her own height to land on her feet. No one reacted to her noise, so she hissed at Lois to drop the evidence to her and follow.

Lois stumbled when she hit the asphalt. Cat caught her arm and kept her from falling. "How's the leg?"

Lois flexed her leg and took a hesitant step, then said, "It's okay, but I wouldn't want to do that again any time soon."

"Then let's get back to your apartment. We can start going through the binder and be ready for Clark to get back."

Lois stumbled again, then righted herself. They hustled to Lois' Jeep and got out of the area. Lois kept wiping her face as she skidded around street corners. If Lois had been standing in front of

Menken with a weapon in her hand, Cat wouldn't have given a nickel for his chances of survival. Cat wanted to reassure Lois that Clark was fine and couldn't be hurt, but she couldn't. Even now it was Clark's secret, not hers, and he had to be the one to tell her, even if Lois were wound up tighter than a two-dollar watch over his safety.

Cat was just as angry as Lois at Menken and Garrison, because her best friend was scared and tearing her heart in two and trying not to show it.

Lois did her best to hide her fear for Clark from Cat, but she was doing such a bad job of it that Cat knew exactly what she was feeling. The Jeep screeched to a halt in its assigned parking place in Lois' garage, but the driver's door remained closed and the engine kept running.

Worried, Cat touched her shoulder. "Lois? Honey, don't be scared. Clark will be fine."

Lois' eyelids slid shut and she coughed out a sob. "I — I know you have to say that but don't lie to me. Please."

Cat reached over, turned off the engine, and slid the key out of the ignition. "You really love him, don't you?"

Lois leaned her forehead on the steering wheel. "Yes," she whispered. "I love him so much it scares me." She turned toward her friend. "If he — if something happened to him — I don't — I couldn't—" She stopped and took a breath. "I don't know if I could take it, Red! I don't think I could live if they — if he — if he died." She dashed fresh tears from her face. "I — I'd rather take that bullet or knife or poison and — and die so he could live."

Cat reached out and Lois, weeping quietly, fell in her arms. Maybe it was partly Lois' PTSD, maybe it was Clark's innate goodness, maybe it was Lois' lack of others showing love to her for much of her life, but Cat understood what Lois meant.

At the same time, she realized that she wasn't sure she would give her life for anyone else, with the probable exception of Lois. The soldier in Lois was being supplanted by the woman, something that Cat would have bet significant money would never happen.

But it was happening, right before her eyes. It was beautiful to see. And Clark had been the catalyst.

No matter what else happened, Cat vowed to herself to help them protect that new-found love against any and all threats.

Including herself.

Chapter Seventeen

By the time Lois wound down enough to sleep, Clark still hadn't arrived. Cat yawned, told her that he'd surely gone home to his own apartment, and said that it was her turn to sleep on Lois' couch.

Lois undressed and lay down in an oversized football jersey she found in her closet. Seconds later she was asleep.

Early the next morning, Cat gently nudged her awake. "Lois, honey, I'm going home now. Do you want me to call someone for you?"

Lois sat up and rubbed her eyes once. "No, that's okay. You and I need to touch base with Clark this morning, though, probably best for us to meet him at your place. And can you email Shane Johnson at the boxing commission and have him stop the fights? I'll leave his address on your voicemail."

"Where will you be?"

Lois turned away and slid out of bed. "I have an errand I have to run this morning."

Cat paused a moment, then smiled and said, "No problem. I'll look for you, when, about ten-thirty?"

"What time is it now?"

"It's just now seven-thirty."

Lois sat on the foot of the bed and massaged her knee. "Yeah,

about then.”

“Okay. Later.”

Lois entered the gym for the second time that day. At least this time it was during the morning daylight hours and she used the front door.

She walked toward the locker area where her father was examining a young man who wore a fresh pressure wrap around his waist and shoulder. “That should do it,” her dad told him. “Now, I want you to baby it for a few days and we’ll check it again. Light workouts only, lots of supervised stretching, absolutely no lifting weights, and no sparring! You wait for me to give you a clean bill of health.” The young man grinned and nodded, then stood and walked away. Sam Lane picked up a towel and was drying his hands when he realized his daughter was standing in front of him. “Lois? It’s good to see you, but why are you here?”

“Look, this – this isn’t easy for me, so I’ll get right to it. I know about the surgeries you performed. I know—”

He turned and tossed the towel into a hamper. “I have nothing to say about that.”

“Dad! I need to know! Not as a reporter, but as your daughter.”

He shook his head. “I can’t tell—”

“I will not let you shut me out!” she growled. “Not after I killed this story!”

He spun and stared with wide eyes. “You what?”

“If we’d published it, you could have been hurt, even murdered!”

“You should have written it.”

“Oh, right, so Lucy and I could visit the morgue and identify your body!”

“Keep your voice down. Besides, it’s my problem, not yours.”

“Of course it’s my problem! You’re my father! I care about you!”

“This has nothing to do with caring, Lois!”

“Right! You would say that!”

“You think I don’t know anything about caring! I know you resent me for all those times I let you down. And you should, you really should. I was a louse, a heel, but it was all because of my work!”

“Oh, yeah, your all-important work! Building machinery to beat men’s brains in!”

He snapped a hand between them as if brushing away an insect. “Not at first! At first I wanted to build replacement parts for victims of catastrophic injury. And not just athletes! I’m talking about people hurt in car wrecks or industrial accidents, those with birth defects—” he gestured toward her bad knee “—soldiers wounded in battle. That’s a good dream, Lois, it’s noble! It’s worth sacrificing for.”

She couldn’t control the quaver in her voice. “It’s worth sacrificing your family?”

He turned away and sighed. “You always think you’ll make it up to them. But then time gets away from you – and you never do.”

Lois thought of a dozen barbs she could throw at him, a dozen blows to land on his heart, a dozen more insults to pile up between them. But that wasn’t the story.

And it wouldn’t ease her pain – or his – in the least.

She stepped closer and stood almost at attention before him. “Did Menken kill Allie?”

Sam turned away and gazed at nothing across the gym. “I’ve been afraid to ask myself that question.” After a long moment, he seemed to stiffen, then turned toward her. “Write your story, Lois. You’re a professional. It’s your job.” Without blinking, he leaned closer and added, “Do what’s right. I will too.”

Then he turned and walked away.

Lois was almost afraid to go home.

At home, she’d have to finish the story and include her father’s information. He hadn’t told her anything new, but he had confirmed that Allie was a murder victim. He may have also signed his own death warrant.

At home, she’d have to wait for the boxing commission to send Cat the confirmation that they’d stopped the fights. If that happened, some young men would go home uninjured tonight instead of to the hospital or the morgue. And they’d have to include that information in the story.

At home, she’d have to call Cat and Clark and tell them that her father was caught up in the story, neck-deep in the scandal surrounding the Fight of the Century. He might serve time in prison. He might lose his license to practice medicine. He might even be killed by the gangsters who had trapped him into serving them. More grist for the story mill.

At home, she’d have to face Clark. Did he love her like she loved him? Or was he just comforting her? Was he just supporting her in her struggle with PTSD?

It was almost too much for her, especially her fears concerning Clark. But if she didn’t go home, she’d spend the rest of her life wondering. As scared as she was, the prospect of not knowing was worse than the harshest reality she could have faced.

But the thought of going home was almost unbearable, so she went to Cat’s place.

She opened the front door to see Cat angrily pacing the floor in front of Clark. After an instant of near terror, she realized that they were both fully dressed except for Cat’s stocking feet. She was obviously angry about something.

Clark’s head bent down until his chin hit his chest. He looked resigned to his fate, whatever that was.

Cat saw Lois as she closed the door. Lois couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen her friend so angry that she snarled like her namesake. “I just got off the phone with Perry,” Cat growled. “Apparently we’ve – and I quote – ‘lost our edge’ and ‘our performance has slipped,’ so we each have new assignments which are – and I quote again – ‘commensurate with our current demonstrated abilities.’”

Lois blinked and said, “Huh?” At least whatever was irritating Cat was work-related and not about a relationship problem with Clark.

Clark lifted his head. “You have the auto show tomorrow afternoon. I have the police academy graduation on Monday at mid-day. Cat has an interview tomorrow night with that hot young actress who thinks water has feelings. Perry called them ‘good little confidence builders,’ given the big story we just blew.”

Lois took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “We can’t be surprised by this. We knew something was coming.”

Cat raised her hands to her side, then dropped them. “Not something this stupid! This girl thinks water has feelings! That it’s alive! That we’re being cruel when we drink it without respecting it and paying homage to it! You two may have kiddie stories but I’m interviewing a mental patient!”

Lois almost laughed at her girlfriend, but then she remembered the auto show where she’d be bored to tears. “Great. Do we have a response from Shane?”

“I was about to check when the messenger from Satan called with our new assignments.”

Cat turned and clicked on the “check messages” tab on the email client. Sure enough, Shane Johnson had sent a return message. They crowded around the end of the table and silently read.

It wasn’t good news.

Shane agreed that their allegations were serious, but without some kind of hard evidence that the augmented fighters were dangerous to the other boxers, the commission wouldn’t stop the

scheduled fights. The binder they'd found wasn't admissible in court, which was where this case would end up if the commission stopped the fights without real proof of danger to the other fighters. Worst of all, he reluctantly agreed with the commissioners. As things stood, the contests that evening would go forward.

Lois' face hardened. "We have one more option. We have to use my dad."

Cat froze. "You know what you're saying, don't you? If Menken figures out what he's doing—"

"He won't. Daddy Dear can talk a hungry dog off a hot dog stand. How do you think he hooked up with all those nurses?" Neither Cat nor Clark said a word. After a long moment, Lois sighed. "The upshot of it all is that Menken won't have any idea what hit him when we drop the hammer on his head."

Lex Luthor knew he was a brilliant man. He understood that fact as well as he understood that the sun would appear to rise in the east in the morning, that summers in Metropolis would be all but insufferable without air conditioning, that the fights that evening would set pay-per-view records across the country, and that compared to him, Max Menken – despite his ability to get a job done as long as he was closely supervised – possessed the intellectual wherewithal of a colony of termites.

That last fact was currently frustrating him almost beyond control.

Menken folded the morning edition of the newspaper in his hands and put it on the corner of Lex' desk. "Nothin'," he smirked. "Not a word in the Planet, and if they ain't got it, nobody else does neither." He swaggered in front of Lex' desk. "I told you we got to Dianello before he talked."

"Excellent," Lex returned.

"Yeah, it's smooth sailin' now. Our boys becomin' the new world champions – everything we dreamed about is comin' true."

"It's a start, yes."

"A start? With all due respect, Mr. Luthor, with a champ in each division, there's not much more you can do."

"Is that what you think this is about, Max? Winning a few prizefights? Is that why I've invested millions in this project?"

Menken looked puzzled for a moment, then smiled and snapped his fingers. "Oh, I get it! After this we branch out into other sports, right? Football, baseball, golf, tennis—"

Luthor lurched to his feet. "Max!" He took a moment to collect himself, then calmly said, "We've created five men with inordinate human strength. Now suppose we can take these men and make them even more powerful? Fifty times as powerful? A hundred times more powerful? Perhaps even – dare I say it – invulnerable? Just like Superman!"

Once again, Max appeared to fail in balancing his checkbook, another task for which he was mentally unfit. Lex slowly moved across the office and tried once more to elevate his minion's aim. "Do you see the possibilities? An army of super-men – under my control?"

Either Max grasped Lex' vision or he didn't. It no longer mattered. Sam Lane was far more important to the project than Max was. It was time for Max to bring Lane further into his part of the plan. Other than that, Menken was expendable.

Something finally penetrated Menken's dense cranial bone structure. "Yeah. Yeah! I get it!" His face, which had brightened somewhat, fell again. "What about Dr. Lane? I don't know if he'll get on the bandwagon."

Lex smiled thinly. "You'll simply have to explain to him that he has a lifetime contract whether he actually signed one or not. And do remind him, Max, that the late Mr. Dianello had the same employment agreement, yet attempted to resign from the organization – unsuccessfully."

Max was a thug. Lex knew the man could communicate with

Dr. Lane on that level.

Cat liked the idea of recording Menken describing the illegal enterprise. She didn't like using a civilian in a major part of the operation. But it might be the only way to both stop the fights and begin a reconciliation between Lois and her father, so she reluctantly acquiesced.

Cat didn't like the plan to hand off the recording either, of course, but Clark and Lois together convinced her that Lois meeting her father alone for a bagel-and-coffee brunch was safer for all concerned than the four of them having a committee meeting in front of the gym. So Cat and Clark were already seated at the far end of the outdoor café, going over real notes for a real story – Cat's punishment story about the actress who thought water was alive, which Cat noted that Clark repeatedly forced himself not to laugh about – when Lois and her father came out with their meals and took a seat beside the door.

Cat also didn't like having her back to Lois' position, but she knew that Clark wouldn't let her be hurt. He could also scan the group surrounding them for concealed weapons – something he still didn't know she was aware that he could do.

Assuming she was right about him being Superman, of course.

As planned, three minutes into their meal Lois yelled "No! No more lies!" at her father and stood up. Cat turned as if reacting to the noise and watched. Sam grabbed Lois' right hand in both of his and slipped the WayneTech digital recorder into her palm. She jerked back and reached into her purse as if going for her weapon but actually releasing the recorder. She stood still, glaring for a moment, then spun and stomped away to the next street corner and turned out of sight.

Sam dropped his head and took a deep breath, then stood as if carrying the weight of his broken family relationships in his pockets. Any of Max' underlings who might be watching would believe they'd witnessed a family argument and a distraught father leaving in a cab. Also as planned, Cat and Clark finished their food and got up. They walked side-by-side in the direction opposite the one Lois had taken. After a couple of strides, Cat put her hand in Clark's and smiled up at him. A long moment passed before he smiled back. It made them look like a couple out for a romantic mid-morning stroll. Maybe, to any curious eyes, they appeared to be making up after a problem of some kind.

It was the only part of the plan at which Lois had narrowed her eyes. Cat knew she objected, and she knew why, but any of Max' people who saw them would report a coincidence instead of a backup plan to cover Lois. Those guys didn't think women were smart enough to fool them. That thought was the second reason Cat pushed for that detail.

The first reason was, of course, the chance to be close to Clark. And Cat knew that was the main reason Lois hadn't voiced her objections to the image they projected. Lois didn't want either of them to know she was jealous of Cat. Clark, being a what-you-see-is-what-you-get kind of man, might not believe it if it were the morning headline in the Planet, but Cat could read Lois like a first-grade primer.

The three of them sat at the news floor's conference table and listened to the end of the recording for the second time. "You killed Dianello, didn't you?" Sam's voice said.

Even on the recording, Menken sounded greasy. "It's a dangerous business, Doc. I'd hate to have to waste you too."

Lois' hand shook as she flicked the recorder off. "I knew he was into something bad but – this?"

Cat's heart ached for her best friend, but showing that here and now would just embarrass her. She put her pencil down and asked, "Clark, you read shorthand, don't you?"

"Yes, as long as it's not too fancy."

She pushed her pad toward him. "Can you read what's on

here?”

He looked at it for a moment, then nodded. “Yes. I assume you want me to type up a transcript for the commission.”

Cat nodded. “You’re the fastest typist among the three of us, so yes, please get started on it.”

Lois sighed. “My father’s not law enforcement or any kind of attorney, so Mayson may be able to get an indictment for Menken from this and make it stick. His lawyer can’t yell entrapment.”

“We’ll send her a copy, too,” said Cat, “but the boxing commission has to see the transcript and hear the tape as soon as possible. Lois, you call your guy at the commission, Clark will type up the transcript, and I’ll copy the audio file. The commission will need one, Mayson will need one, and we’ll keep a third copy and the original here for safekeeping.”

Lois reached for the phone, but Clark stopped her with a touch on her forearm. “Where’s your dad now?”

“I don’t know. We thought we’d both be safer that way. He plans to surrender to the DA’s office as soon as the fights are stopped.” She wiped her face with her hands. “We’re going to spend some time together when this is over. Assuming, of course, that – that Menken – that he—”

Clark touched her hand and she grabbed his wrist with an almost desperate fervor. “He’ll be fine, Lois,” Clark said. “You’ll see. You’ll laugh with him again when this is over.”

She closed her eyes. “Don’t let your mouth write checks your body can’t cash, Kent.”

“I’m not. I’m telling you how it’s going to work out.” He gently brushed a tear from her cheek with his thumb. “Trust me on that.”

Cat couldn’t take any more. She stood and said, “This needs to be in the afternoon edition. I’ll get started on the print story and call Perry so he can okay it. The fights are tonight, so we don’t have a lot of time.”

Her heart didn’t have much time, either, thought Cat.

There was a near-riot when the ring announcer told the crowd, the radio listeners, and the pay-per-view TV audience that the fights were postponed pending the outcome of the state boxing commission’s investigation and that Menken was suspended pending a ruling on misconduct charges. Luthor watched from his luxury box as Garrison all but went crazy at the news, demanding to fight Superman and refusing to leave the ring.

Menken had reported that Dr. Lane insisted that increasing the speed and power of the surgically enhanced fighters wasn’t healthy, that the men augmented in that manner would have serious self-control issues, that they would exhibit symptoms similar to various forms of arthritis, and would have drastically shortened life spans. Tommy Garrison was already the next thing to being out of control. He’d literally thrown three security officers, all of whom were former NFL players who were still in good shape, out of the ring to the concrete apron below.

Luthor lifted the paper and spoke out of the side of his mouth. “This is not good, Max. Not good at all.”

Max pressed his hands together and asked, “Now what?”

“I need you to do one more favor for me. After that, both you and the fighters will be moved to a safe location and suitably compensated.”

“Um – what’s the favor?”

“The only loose end – and the only witness – is Sam Lane. Get him out of the way and all this disappears.”

Max looked at the floor. “Well – uh – we don’t know where he is. He’s kinda already disappeared himself after this morning.”

Luthor smiled as he prepped a cigar. “In light of this story, would you not also vanish? Dr. Lane may be out of touch, but his daughter is not. We can use her to get to him.”

Garrison was still ranting about the stupidity of the commission, Superman’s alleged cowardice, his own ultimate

greatness, and anything else he could come up with as Max slipped out of the luxury box.

Luthor pressed a hidden button on the panel before him to activate a numeric touchpad, then tapped in the access code. A panel to one side opened to reveal a .25 caliber semi-auto pistol and full magazine beside it. He knew he’d probably need it very soon.

Lois decided that she could walk down the steps at work as easily as she could take the elevator, so she led the team down the last flight of stairs to the Planet’s lower lobby. Clark walked on her left side while Cat trailed the others. Perry had gotten their story in the evening edition and had promised to give them quality stories from now on, pending them completing their respective punishment assignments. Lois gave Clark a quick smile, then glanced behind them to see Cat’s body language tell Lois how much Lois’ blossoming relationship with Clark was hurting Cat.

As much as Lois loved Cat, Lois hoped she was right about her friend’s feelings. Sacrificing Clark to assuage Cat’s feelings would be too much to ask.

She heard the lobby door spin open and watched Lex Luthor stride across the lobby to her. “Miss Lane!” he called out. “I’m glad I found you. I was hoping these rumors about your father were unfounded.”

Lois fixed her eyes on his face. “I’m afraid not.”

Lex’ eyes grew intense and he leaned in closer to her. “Lois, your father is a visionary, and I have nothing but utter contempt for those who have led him down this path. That’s why I’ve come here today to find you and to make this pledge: I will do everything in my power to see that your father redirects his energies to help the injured and handicapped.”

Interesting, thought Lois, how quickly I went from “Miss Lane” to “Lois” in Luthor’s address to her. She put on her best grateful face and purred, “I don’t know what to say.”

She sensed Cat slip behind Luthor. She appreciated the support but didn’t think she needed it at the moment.

She also saw that Clark held his ground and let her handle the situation. He was close enough to provide backup but too far away to interfere with Luthor’s noble act.

And it was an act, not reality. She could see past the façade he put forth and realized how self-centered he really was. Now that the boxing story was put to bed, the three of them could focus on whether or not Luthor was somehow connected to “The Boss” of Metropolis. The information Menken could give them would help them immensely and probably reduce the time Menken would have to spend behind bars.

As that thought coalesced, Max burst through the garage access door. “Well, ain’t this touchin’.”

Lois noted the heavy bulge under his left armpit as Cat took a slow half-step around Menken’s position. “Hey, Max, I think someone’s looking for you. I think it’s the District Attorney. She’s a personal friend of mine and—”

Menken snatched a .357 Magnum Colt Python from his shoulder holster and yelled, “Awright, let’s nobody get heroic here!” He lurched at Lois and grabbed her arm. “Back off! She’s takin’ a ride with me.”

“Haven’t you caused enough trouble?” shouted Luthor.

Menken gave the rest of them a greasy half-smile. “Hey, I’m just warmin’ up.” He yanked Lois off-balance and dragged her outside.

She thought about taking his legs out from under him and stopping his hands, but if she missed the kick or didn’t hit him hard enough he might start shooting wildly. It wasn’t worth the risk to the others around them. Cat took a step toward them, but with her free hand Lois signaled Cat to back away and follow. In unison, as if they’d rehearsed it, Clark and Lex turned to each other and said, “I’ll go for help!” and ran in opposite directions.

Menken shoved her into a waiting car. “Drive north!” he ordered her. “Head for the gym!”

Clark stepped outside and swirled into Superman’s suit. He’d intended to follow Lois and Menken, but then he saw Cat in her Porsche not far behind them. He also heard Garrison inciting the crowd, screaming, “I want Superman! I want Superman! Where are you, Super-putz?”

The five enhanced fighters were pumping up both themselves and the crowd. He knew Cat would watch over Lois. He also knew that Garrison and his cohorts had the potential to seriously injure several people, maybe even kill them. That was unacceptable.

He slipped into the arena through an open skylight and landed in the ring. The crowd’s boos shifted to cheers almost immediately, and Garrison turned to glare at him. “Well!” he shouted. “The hero has decided to grace us with his presence! Love your pajamas, by the way. You goin’ to the opera wearin’ that cape?”

“You need to end this now.”

Garrison slammed his gloves together twice. “Oh, I’m ready to end it. You ready to go down, Super-dummy?”

Superman shook his head and crossed his arms. “Garrison, you can’t hurt me. Why don’t you just come along quietly and let the police take care of you?”

Garrison stared back, then broke into near-hysterical laughter. “Oh, really? Me come along quietly? You’re gonna be the quiet one in about a minute, all stretched out on the canvas.”

Superman sighed. “There’s no way to talk you into surrendering?”

Garrison lifted his hands into position. “No!” he snarled.

“Okay. Remember that I tried to talk you down. I’m sorry for what I’m about to do to you.”

“Sure,” he cackled. “Sure. Hey, we’re fighting Marquis of Queensbury rules, aren’t we?”

“Why not? Marquis of Queensbury rules, folks.”

Garrison lifted his hands and called out “Marquis of Queensbury!” then tried to sucker-punch his opponent.

His right cross bounced off Superman’s chin. The hero didn’t move an inch, although he did hear a bone in Garrison’s right hand snap. The boxer glared at his opponent, then launched a left hook at Superman’s right eye.

Superman easily dodged the fist and nudged Garrison in the chest with the heel of his open hand. The boxer staggered back a few steps, then tried to land another left.

The hero blocked this punch and captured the other man’s right wrist with his left hand. “I’ve seen this movie,” he said, “and I know how you think it goes. But John Wayne ends the last fight with something like this.”

Superman threw a right hand at Garrison’s face but stopped an inch from the man’s forehead. Then he flipped out his index finger and knocked Garrison out cold. Had there been the wooden doors of an Irish pub behind him, he would have smashed into and then through them onto the street.

The crowd went wild. Superman had to turn his enhanced hearing off to keep from being temporarily deafened. He lifted one hand and waved at the cheering fans, then signaled for the announcer’s microphone. “Folks,” he said, “thank you for your support. I have another appointment I need to keep, but don’t worry. I’ll be around.”

He lifted from the ring, followed by ear-splitting cheers, and exited through the open skylight.

Cat followed Lois and Menken in his car, her purse on the passenger seat. She’d picked them up about two blocks out – a simple matter, since she knew Menken’s destination, and since Lois was driving like a stoned teenager trying not to get pulled over by the police. When Lois stopped at a dark street behind the

gym, Cat went around them and took the next turn. She clipped the holster to her waistband and her weapon was in her hand before the car door shut.

She moved parallel to Menken, staying in the shadows of the poorly lit alleys, until he suddenly stopped as four of the enhanced boxers ran out of the gym’s side door. “Max!” one shouted. “Superman knocked out Garrison and he’s coming after us!”

“Then you guys take him when he gets here!” Menken snarled back.

Superman chose that moment to touch down and face them. “I suggest you gentlemen ignore that advice and surrender. It’ll hurt less.”

“Get him!” yelled Menken.

One of the boxers punched Superman in the back of the head and the hero stumbled forward a step. The other three began pummeling him as hard and as fast as they could as Menken secured his hold on Lois and pulled her away. Cat glanced at Superman, who’d straightened up and swept most of the blows to one side, and she decided he could take care of himself. She rechecked her pistol and slipped down the dark side of the alley, following Menken and Lois.

Before she moved out of sight, she saw Superman toss three of the boxers against a chain-link fence, spin it around them, and spot-weld it shut with his heat vision. The fourth man lifted his hands in a combat stance, but when Superman put his hands on his hips and shook his head, the man turned and ran like a sprinter.

She chuckled and kept going. Time to focus on covering Lois.

Superman glanced after the fleeing boxer and decided that it would be a better use of his time if he found Lois and saved Menken from her. He glanced around, using his x-ray vision, and discovered how much lead-based paint still adorned the walls of this part of the city. So he took to the air in the general direction of Menken’s path.

He flew until he heard a single gunshot.

Menken yanked Lois along the alleyway and yelled, “Will you get moving! I’ve got to meet someone and you’re making it harder!”

“You need to surrender, Max! All this will get you is a world of hurt.”

“Hah! The Boss will take care of us!”

Lois spotted Cat in the shadows, her weapon in both hands and pointing down. If necessary, Lois would break away and let Cat deal with the desperado. But that was the option of last resort. Lois didn’t want to risk having Cat kill someone.

It would be best if Max would just surrender, but he wasn’t going to do that. So Lois tried to fall so that she could knock Max down and take his weapon away. She braced herself and jumped at him the next time he yanked her arm behind him.

And, of course, her bad knee gave out and she went down to the asphalt facing Menken.

But rather than grab her again, Max stepped away from her and started to say something to someone else. As she pushed herself up on her good knee to face him, a small-caliber pistol snapped behind her.

Menken went down like a marionette whose strings had all been cut at once.

He lost his grip on his weapon and waved his hands aimlessly. Lois lurched to his side and saw that whoever had shot him had hit him in the left side of the neck, right in the carotid artery. She slapped her hands over his wound just as she’d been trained, even though she knew it was useless. He’d bleed out in seconds and she couldn’t stop it.

His blood pumped out between her fingers even as she sought to stem the tide. His breath became erratic and rapid as his heart and lungs fought to keep him alive.

The effort was futile. His eyes glazed over and his blood stopped flowing, then his entire body went limp. The last noise he made was a burbling exhalation that shook Lois to the core.

She'd lost another one. And maybe she'd lost too much of herself this time.

Cat watched as Lex Luthor slipped his gold-plated – given his financial status, what other material could the shiny yellow be – .25-caliber semi-auto into his coat pocket. Clark chose that moment to round the corner toward which Menken had been dragging Lois and approached quickly.

"Lois?" he said softly. "Are you—"

She leaped to her feet without looking at him. "Don't – don't touch me! I have – my hands – I'm covered in blood!"

"I believe Miss Lane has had a bad shock, Mr. Kent," Luthor said silkily. "I believe – yes, there is a police car and an ambulance rounding the corner."

Cat watched silently as Clark's fingers curled into claws. "That bullet better not have hit her," he snarled.

Lois shook her head. "I'm not hit. He – Menken – Lex shot him."

Clark slowly slipped beside her. "You still need to be checked out by the EMTs, Lois. Okay?" She didn't respond. "Lois, please come to the ambulance with me. They'll make sure you're okay."

"Mr. Kent, perhaps my personal physician—"

"How many times did you shoot, Luthor? How many bullets did you put in him?"

Cat holstered her weapon on her belt and stepped out of the shadows. "He only fired one round, Clark."

Luthor's head snapped around and his face showed total surprise for a brief moment. He obviously hadn't anticipated another witness to the incident, one who his attorneys couldn't discount due to emotional upheaval.

Then he resumed his thin, superior smile and nodded. "Thank you for verifying my account, Ms. Grant. For a moment I feared that Mr. Kent might assault me out of concern for Lois."

Cat glared at him. "I'm just telling the truth of what I saw, Mr. Luthor."

The police cruiser skidded to a halt and two officers popped out on either side with pistols drawn. "Everybody freeze!" the driver shouted. "Now slowly raise your hands!"

Cat, Lex, and Clark complied immediately. Lois lifted her gaze to the approaching officers once Clark whispered something to her that Cat didn't catch. Lois' hands rose haltingly, still dripping.

"Bob?" Cat said to the officer from the passenger side. "Bob Jenkins? It's me, Cat Grant. I can tell you what happened."

"You can, huh? Yeah, I recognize you now, Cat. Come on over here and tell me the story. Are you armed?"

"Yes. Smith and Wesson nine-millimeter auto on my belt, right side. Shall I bring it out slowly or let you come get it?"

"Stand very still and open your jacket slowly so I can see it."

She did as she was told. Jenkins slipped on one latex glove, then pulled her weapon out of her holster and checked the magazine and the chamber. "Leland? Mag holds sixteen, has fifteen, round in the chamber, but it hasn't been fired recently. Barrel's clean and cool to the touch. There's no odor." To Cat, he said, "I'll have to keep this for evidence, but if everything checks out you should be able to get it back in a couple of days. For now, why don't you sit with the other lady in the back of the ambulance? She looks kinda shook up."

"No," Lois said brokenly. "Let – let Clark sit with me."

Jenkins finished bagging Cat's weapon and turned to the 'other lady.' "Who's Clark?"

"That's me."

"If you'll hand me your weapon very slowly, sir, I'll check it out."

Clark shook his head. "I don't own any firearms and I'm not carrying one. May Lois and I go to the ambulance now?"

Luthor said, "I am armed, officer. I have a .25 caliber semi-auto in my right outside coat pocket."

Leland moved two steps behind him. "Clark and the lady with the short hair can go get checked out. I'll get this man's statement, Jenkins. You get the redheaded lady's story."

Cat watched Clark take Lois' elbows and guide her to the EMTs. She didn't look good at all. Menken's death, right in front of her, had obviously hit her hard, quite aside from the information the man had taken with him to the other side.

Other side? thought Cat. Now I'm thinking like Clark, talking about eternity.

Maybe that was better than just thinking about death.

As Officer Jenkins took Cat's statement, she got more and more antsy about the time it was taking, time she would have preferred to spend looking after Lois. She knew that Clark would watch over her like a guardian angel, but fear for Lois' state of mind began nibbling at the outer edges of her psyche.

The bites got deeper as the minutes passed.

For Lois, the next hour passed in a blur. She knew the EMT had taken her vitals and helped her clean her hands. She accepted the woman's gentle order to be strapped into the gurney in the ambulance, along with the thin nasal oxygen cannula she looped over Lois' face. She even remembered Clark holding her hand all the way to the emergency room.

He helped two nurses transfer Lois from the ambulance gurney to a bed in one of the ER cubicles. Then he stood beside her and held her hand until her eyes came back into focus and she could see and hear the monitors flashing and beeping beside her head. The red LED clock on the wall showed her that Menken had been dead less than two hours.

"Clark?" she whispered. "I think I'm okay now. You don't have to stay with me. I'll be fine. I'm sure Cat will be here soon."

He smiled. "She's here, waiting for me to leave so the nurses will let her in to see you. And I called Dana Friskin. She's coming, too."

"Good. Um – what about my dad?"

"As soon as you're ready to let me go, I'll put him in a safe place for the night. And I'm sure Lucy will try to invade the area soon."

Lois smiled and lifted his hand to her lips. "Thank you for taking such good care of me."

He stroked her hair and kissed her on the forehead. "It's my privilege, Lois. You just get some rest and get better."

She knew – or at least hoped – that she'd rest easier and heal faster if she believed that Clark loved her as much as she loved him.

Chapter Eighteen

Lois watched Clark walk briskly out of the ER cubicle, then looked at Dana Friskin. The therapist waited a long moment before asking the nurse if she could enter, and got a sharp sigh followed by an abrupt nod in return. Dana gently pulled the privacy curtain shut. She turned to Lois and said, "I'm here for you, so you can tell me what you want to talk about. This will be my temporary office, so we're bound by the same privacy rules and laws as we are when you come to my place of business." She lifted one eyebrow. "Just keep your voice down and don't expect the other patients or staff to adhere to those restrictions."

Lois nodded. "I understand." She lifted her hands and looked at them for several long breaths, then laid them across her belly with her fingers intertwined. "Do you know what happened to me tonight?"

"Not all of it. I know the fights were postponed and that you had some hand in that. I know that a man died while you were

trying to save him, despite the fact that he'd abducted you at gunpoint just a little while before. Is that a good summary?"

"Yes. But add in the fact that the man who killed my attacker was Lex Luthor. He claimed to be saving my life, but it felt more like he was just waiting for the right moment to plug a potential leak. We could have learned so much from Menken, like who he reported to, who was actually bankrolling the operation, whose idea it was to involve my father, who the 'we' was that he kept threatening my dad with, if Lex Luthor really was involved and how deeply – you see what I mean?"

"Yes. The man was a potential fountain of information for you, but his death leaves the story incomplete."

"Not just the story." Lois paused and sniffed. "It leaves my dad swinging in the breeze with his – with his backside exposed. It's possible the other person or people who were actually running the job will go after him and I – I don't know if I can afford to lose him permanently." She paused again and looked away. "We were close to reconnecting, Dana—" she held her index finger and thumb as near to the other as she could without touching "—we were that close to being father and daughter again! I don't want to miss any more of that relationship than I already have."

"Those are good points. But there's something else about this case that's weighing on you, isn't there? Something that's really bothering you."

Lois looked at the ceiling, then sighed deeply. "I – I thought I was done with shooting and killing and having wounded people die under my hands. A year ago – maybe just six months ago – I might have shot Menken myself without a second thought, but not now. Not today. I have something to look forward to, something to live for."

Dana gave her a subdued grin and lowered her voice. "I don't suppose the 'something' has a name? And might 'Clark' be that name?"

Lois didn't smile back, which concerned Dana. "I hope so. I couldn't stand it if he pulled away from me now because I'd shot someone. I think I might shoot myself if that happened." Lois looked to her therapist and friend. "If it means that I need to change something about myself to keep him close to me, I'll do it. Especially if it's something that society doesn't think is a good thing, like putting bullets in random citizens." She rubbed her face with her hands, then said, "On top of that, if I had shot Menken, it would have been for – I don't know, revenge? Anger? Fear about what might happen to my dad?"

"Any of those things would have been the wrong reason, Lois. And it's a sign of progress that you're thinking of circumstances in that way these days. But now I'd like to ask you about Clark. It sounds to me like he's very important to you."

Lois nodded. "He is. And I need him to think good things about me. I can't afford to lose him because I did something really stupid. Or something really bad."

Before Dana could respond, the curtain flew open and Lucy shoved past the nurse who was trying to hold her back. "Lois! Are you all right? Did that idiot Luthor really shoot you? How badly are you hurt?"

Dana held up her hand in a "Stop In the Name of Love" motion and intercepted the younger woman. "Lucy, I'm Dana Friskin, Lois' therapist. She's not physically hurt and nobody shot her. They're just keeping her overnight for observation because she's been through a traumatic experience."

"Traumatic? Really?" Lucy growled back. "Worse than live combat? She never needed a hospital any of those times!"

"Punky, calm down. I'm fine. It's just—" Lois stopped and wiped her face. "Having that man die while I was trying to save him kinda shook me up, even if he was a terrible person."

Lucy pushed past Dana to Lois' bedside. "But you saw people die in the Middle East, good people, some of them while you were trying to save them! Why is this worse?"

"I guess – maybe it's because – because I thought all that was behind me. I thought I'd never have to watch anyone else bleed out in my hands." Lois dashed fresh tears from her eyes. "I – it just hit me, you know? Snuck up on me. And I – I had his blood all over my hands and it – I saw his eyes go flat as he died and he – I just couldn't take it!"

Lucy put her head down on her sister's chest and hugged her. "I understand. Not like I was there, but I know what you mean. It's okay." She let Lois hang on to her for another few seconds, then whispered, "Daddy wants to talk to you too."

Lois' face showed sudden alarm. "No! He can't be seen in public! You have to keep him away from me!"

Lucy lifted her head and grinned. "It's okay. He's not here at the hospital. He's in a safe place with Clark."

"What? With Clark already? How'd he get there so fast?"

"I was at the admit desk when Clark and Daddy left. He stopped long enough to tell me where you were and that he was going to take Daddy to a safe place, and you know, you were right, if you act like you know what you're doing and be assertive you can get away with lots of things. Although that one nurse threatened to report me to security when I took a wrong turn and ended up in a cubicle where a woman was giving birth. New momma was up to the cussing stage when I shut the drape and came over here."

Dana put her hand on Lucy's shoulder. "I think that's enough about your trip for now. It almost sounds to me as if you were in more danger than Lois was tonight."

"Not true, Doc. The only person who aimed anything at me was the woman giving birth, and her finger didn't shoot anything at me."

The three of them laughed softly, then the nurse stepped in and pointed at the curtain. "Come on, Miss Lane. You can wait in the visitor's lounge or go home, but you can't stay here. My patient needs to talk to her therapist and then get some sleep."

Dana turned to see Cat Grant standing beside the curtain, her hands locked on the fabric and her face wet. That was not something the therapist expected to see.

She went to Cat and grabbed one hand to guide her to the chair beside Lois' bed. "Catharine," Dana whispered, "she's okay. She's not hurt. She just got a shock and she needs to sleep off the impact of it. Okay?" Cat didn't acknowledge Dana at all. "Catharine? Can you hear me?"

Cat redirected the stream of fluid from her eyes with a brush of her free hand. "Yes. I can hear you. I just – I need to make sure Lois is okay."

Lois reached out to her best friend and made a come-hither gesture with her fingers. "I'm fine, Thelma. We'll drive off in the red T-bird yet."

Cat almost laughed, then stood and moved to Lois' side. As she entwined her fingers with Lois', she said, "I'm driving, Louise, and don't you forget it."

Clark chose that moment to return. He put his hand on Cat's and Lois' joined hands. "Your dad is safe, Lois. I'm going to spend the night with him when I leave. I'm only here because he made me promise to check on you and make sure you were okay."

Dana didn't miss Lois' smile. It was easy to see that it was for Clark alone. "How'd you get here so fast?" Lois asked.

"I walked out of the hospital and Superman asked me how you were. I told him you'd be okay and he asked me what I was doing. When I told him I was going to put your dad in a safe place, he said he'd take care of that as long as I joined him. I said I would as soon as I brought you up to date."

Lois relaxed onto the bed again. "How'd Superman get mixed up in this?"

Clark shrugged. "He said he was already involved since he'd kayoed Garrison and captured the other boxers, and he didn't want anyone else to get hurt. He said he understands how painful it is to

lose a family member, so he's making a special effort to prevent that from happening to you."

She smiled and closed her eyes for a long moment. "That's nice," she mumbled. "He's a good Superman."

The nurse stepped between Lois and the rest of the group. "All right, people, I'm asserting my authority to take care of my patient. She really needs to sleep. Everybody out now." She pointed a stiff index finger at Cat. "That includes you, Louise."

"No," Lois all but moaned. "She's Thelma. I'm Louise."

"Fine! Whoever you all are, just get out of this area so whoever this patient really is can sleep." No one moved to go until her voice turned to obsidian and she said, "Now, people. Everybody out now."

Dana and Lucy left, then Clark stopped just outside the curtain and looked back. Cat's hand slipped from Lois' and she almost staggered to the passageway between the trauma beds.

Dana patted Lois' hand. "I'll see you again soon. Do what these nurses tell you, okay?"

Lois sighed wearily. "If I have to."

Lois watched through half-closed eyes as Dana stepped past Cat with a smile and an encouraging pat. Then, to Lois' utter astonishment, Cat leaned her head on Clark's shoulder. His arm gently surrounded her.

No.

It couldn't be!

But she'd seen it herself.

She must have caught them at an unguarded moment. Their joint posture told her that they'd gotten past whatever barriers had remained from their disastrous first meeting in college.

They'd gotten way past them. And, obviously, despite his strong hints to Lois about a relationship, Clark had made the choice between her and Cat.

He'd chosen to love Lois' best friend.

Obviously, what she'd seen in the newsroom, the two of them standing so close to each other, wasn't an anomaly. It had been a silent declaration.

They turned the corner into the hallway and she was glad she couldn't see them anymore. In Lois' mind, Cat was now in her spot in Clark's arms, accepting his comfort and his embrace. She didn't think they'd kiss passionately where Lucy could see them – at best, Lucy would yell and separate them, and at worst she'd try to put one or both of them in the emergency room.

But it didn't matter. Lois knew she wasn't worthy of Clark's love and devotion. She'd always known it. She loved him and had desperately hoped that he'd stay with her, but she'd always recognized that she wasn't good enough for him. He needed a woman who didn't have a hair trigger on the weapon she always carried with her, someone who might shoot him with little or no real provocation. He needed a woman who could love him openly and fully, one who'd make him the most important person in her life.

That was something she didn't have inside her anymore, assuming she ever had.

It was better this way. Cat could give him a healthy, loving heart. All Lois could hope to do would be to give him a damaged, limited heart and be an albatross around his neck.

She wiped her eyes and turned over in the horribly uncomfortable bed. He deserved more than she could give him.

She told herself, over and over, that she'd learn to live with it. She didn't convince herself.

Lucy walked to the main ER door and paused. Behind her, Clark was escorting Cat from Lois' bed with his arm around her. Her outside hand was holding the hand he'd wrapped around her shoulder, and her inside hand wiped away tears. Her steps were uneven and unsteady.

Clark nodded to Lucy as they approached the door. Lucy replied, "Cat, are you sure you don't need your own room? You don't look so good."

Cat stopped and put one hand on Lucy's shoulder. "I – I'm okay. Really. I – just got scared about Lois."

Lucy let out a long breath. "Me, too. The cop who called me just said that there had been a shooting, that my sister was involved, and that she was being transported to Metro General. He did say that her life wasn't in immediate danger, but he obviously didn't have all his ducks in a row."

Cat almost smiled. "Yeah, that sounds about right."

Lucy turned firm eyes to Clark. "Speaking of something sounding about right, I seem to recall Lois telling me that you told her you wanted to date her and didn't want a romantic relationship with Cat."

His eyebrows rose and his eyes widened. "That's right. I told her that."

"Oh? Then what's the deal with you two hanging on to each other like two ticks on a hound dog?"

Clark almost grinned as his hand floated away from Cat's shoulder. "You've been taking vocabulary lessons from Perry, haven't you?"

Lucy stepped closer to them and snarled, "Never mind! Just answer the question!"

Cat straightened and took a half-step away from Clark. "There's no deal, Lucy! Clark and I are just friends! Honest! I was just using him to keep from falling down! That's all!"

"You didn't look like 'just friends' a minute ago!"

Clark put his hands on his hips and leaned toward her, glowering. "What Cat said is the truth. We absolutely do not have any kind of romantic relationship going. The only woman I'm that interested in is Lois, and I've told her that, too." He dropped his hands, then stepped closer and loomed over Lucy. "And if you do or say anything that screws up the relationship between her and me, I will find you wherever you are and convince you that you should have kept your mouth shut."

Lucy looked into his "chocolate brown eyes," as Lois had described them, but saw only black obsidian and cold flame. She was convinced – Clark and Cat were definitely not a couple. Friends, yes, close co-workers, yes, special to each other, probably, but no romance there.

She blinked first. "I get it, okay? And I won't say a word to Lois, I promise. I don't want her to tie me to a stake and use me for target practice."

Cat lifted one eyebrow. "You mess with that relationship and you won't have to worry about Lois. I won't give her a chance at you."

Lucy lifted her hands in surrender and nodded once, convinced that she'd misread the Clark-Cat embrace completely wrong. Lois' heart was safe with these two.

Not long after midnight, Lois was moved to a private room two floors up. The food service people had served her what they laughingly called "lunch" before the hospital shrink examined her on his rounds. "How come Dr. Friskin can't release me?" Lois grunted. "She knows my case better than you do."

The shrink, who strongly resembled the man who'd played Marcus Welby on a TV series from the 60's, smiled broadly. "Because she's in private practice and doesn't have privileges at this hospital. She's allowed to see her patients who are admitted here, patients like you, but she can't discharge them. And she can't prescribe meds through the hospital, either, although she and I usually agree that drugs aren't nearly as effective as good therapy in the long term."

"So when are you letting me out?"

The doctor chuckled. "As soon as the internist tells us that you don't have any physical injuries or symptoms. As far as I'm

concerned, Miss Lane, you're asymptomatic. Just take it easy for two or three days, and if you start to feel as if there's a problem before your next scheduled session, I recommend you contact Dr. Friskin. You probably should have a session with her soon anyway. Ah, speaking of the internist, here's Dr. Matthews."

Cat sat outside Lois' room early that afternoon and fidgeted. She sat on the semi-comfortable couch and bounced her heels on the floor, got up and paced the waiting area, bought and consumed more candy and soft drinks from the vending machines than she should have, and made a young mother with a six-year-old nervous about being around her. Cat's usual bright smile had given way to a taut mask of fear for Lois.

She'd been doing so well, thought Cat. She hadn't drawn her weapon in weeks, hadn't lapsed into uncontrolled anger, hadn't donated to the cuss jar, hadn't snarled at someone in the newsroom making a joke at the wrong time, none of that. Yet having Menken die under her hands seemed to have undone so much progress.

It wasn't something to be ignored, nor could Lois just forget about it. No one could. Anyone would be deeply affected. But somehow the effect on Lois was more pronounced. It seemed to bring back too many memories from her combat experience, memories that threatened to put her progress in jeopardy. Cat was afraid that Luthor shooting Menken while Lois was that close to him might exacerbate her PTSD and make her harder to deal with. It might even put a serious crimp in her future recovery.

The day nurses, a man and woman whose names Cat didn't know, strode into her room with a clipboard and a wheelchair. Lucy had already dropped off fresh clothing before accompanying Jimmy to the auto show. He had asked her to go with him the week before as a fellow spectator, and now they were subbing for Lois. It wasn't much, and there would surely be lots of photos of the latest hot cars and future concept models accompanying his article, but it would be his first solo byline.

Lucy had also griped that Lois had asked Cat to take her home instead of Lucy driving Lois' Jeep. There was some truth Lois' claim that she didn't want anyone else driving her precious baby, but Cat thought there was something else, too. So she'd drive Lois home in the Porsche.

No speed records this trip, either. Cat would make sure that Lois arrived home safely.

The nurses helped Lois into the chair with no complaint from the patient. Lois grabbed the plastic bag with her hospital souvenirs and held it stiffly in her lap.

Maybe letting Cat drive her home wasn't the best idea she'd had recently. The image of Clark holding Cat as they'd left her in the emergency room wouldn't go away.

The male nurse pushed the wheelchair bearing Lois through the doorway to the room and turned toward the elevators. The female nurse nodded to Cat. "Hi, Ms. Grant. Is your car at the main admitting desk?"

Cat shook her head. "No, but it will be by the time Lois gets to the door. Unlike Ms. Slug-A-Bed here, I have a work assignment tonight and I don't have time to waste." She turned to Lois and smiled. "You ready to go?"

Lois couldn't look at her best friend. She knew that all she'd see was the woman who'd taken Clark away from her. "Let's get out of here."

Cat nodded, then turned and all but ran to the stairwell. Lois, being in the wheelchair with the nurse pushing, had to wait for the elevator.

Lois loved Cat. And she hated her.

Lois wished Cat all the success life could give her. And she also hoped Cat fell on her face every day for the rest of her life.

Lois had never loved anyone and hated that someone with equal intensity at the same time. Not her father, not Claude, not

Paul in college, not Irish Patrick, not anyone. Not even Lucy. The intensity of the paired emotions threatened to tear her heart apart. She wasn't sure she could take this pain.

Chapter Nineteen

Lois watched Cat drive as carefully as if the car had kittens strapped on either side. Riding with Cat Grant wasn't normally all that different from riding in a LeMans racer, so the contrast was noticeable.

Lois couldn't decide if she was grateful to Cat or if she hated her even more for being this kind.

Cat tried to make small talk with her. "Clark is making a late lunch for you, or maybe it's an early dinner. Said he knows how unimaginative hospital food is. He's doing some housecleaning, too, but he said there's not much to do because your apartment is already spiffed up within an inch of its life."

"Uh-huh."

They drove silently for a while, then Cat tried again. "Jimmy is covering the auto show for you. He really jumped at the chance for a byline."

Lois kept her eyes facing forward through the windshield. "I know. Good for him."

"Lucy's with him, too. Those two seem to be hitting it off well."

"Yeah, she told me."

From the corner of her eye, Lois saw Cat flash a worried glance at her, then Cat appeared to give up on starting a conversation with her for the duration of the ride. Neither woman said another word until they entered Lois' apartment. "Clark?" Cat called out. "Is that Lois' dinner I smell?"

He appeared from the kitchen. "It's simmering on the stove now. Should be done in about twenty minutes."

"Good. Wish I could stay, but I've got work to do."

He nodded. "I know."

Cat leaned in and hugged her friend. "Lois?" Cat whispered.

Lois returned the hug, knowing that it might be the last time. She leaned back and looked at her best friend and wondered if they'd be able to remain close after she and Clark got together.

Cat licked her lips and hesitated. "Look, you need to listen to Clark. He has something important to say to you." Cat let her go and turned to pick up her windbreaker. "I offered to be here for you, but he thinks he ought to say this by himself." She assayed a wan smile. "Plus I have to go interview the modern idiot."

"Uh – sure, yeah." Lois wanted to run to the bedroom but her feet were glued to the living room floor. It was time for The Talk. The Talk where Clark told her that he and Cat wanted to be together, that they had the "forever and a day kind of love" his parents had told him about, the love that Clark had told Cat about during her Met U undercover assignment, the love Cat had described to her. She wondered if Cat would ask her to be in the wedding party and how could she possibly refuse.

And how much damage her heart would endure watching them exchange rings.

They both watched Cat walk through the front door and close it without looking back, then he gently took Lois' hand in his. "I – Lois, I have to – I need to – we have to talk."

"Talk?"

"Yes."

"Just talk?"

"Yes. Just talk."

Here it was. The Big Goodbye Talk. The one where he told her he thought highly of her but didn't love her like he loved Cat. The one where he suggested that they could "just be friends." The one where—

He'd said something she didn't quite hear. "What did you say?" she asked.

He moved closer and spoke directly at her face. "I asked you if

we could have this conversation on the roof. It'll be more private up there. And the question I have is pretty private." When she hesitated, he added, "I put the stove on simmer so it wouldn't start a fire or burn dinner."

"Sure," she muttered. He could end it with her up there as well as he could down here.

He led them up the stairwell until it ended at open air. Clark led her a few steps from the door housing, then took Lois' hands in his and looked deep in her eyes. "Lois, before I ask you that question, I – I have something to tell you. Something really, really important."

He's going to tell me he loves me but doesn't want to be with me forever, she thought, and I'm not sure what to say to that. He's going to tell me that he wants to be with Cat forever, and I don't know what to say to that one either.

She decided to preempt him. "I know."

"You know how – wait, what is it that you know?"

"How you feel about me."

He blinked a couple of times and frowned a little. "You already know how I feel? About you, I mean?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, that saves some time, I guess."

"It does. I just – I want to tell you that – that I hope you and Cat are happy together."

"W-what?" His eyebrows lifted to their limits. "Happy together? Me and Cat?"

"Of course. I mean, it's not the outcome I was hoping for, but I've known all along that you and she—"

He waved his hands between them. "Okay, stop right there and listen."

She turned away to wipe her cheeks without letting him see her do it. "It's okay, really. I've actually been expecting this."

"Expecting this?" He raised his voice. "When have I given you the idea that Cat and I are an item? What did either of us do to make you think – whatever you're thinking?"

"Oh, come on, Clark! Everybody's seen the way you look at each other, the way you two talk so quietly, how well you treat her! And I've seen the way she looks at you when you aren't looking and her heart drains into her belly!" Lois turned to face him again. "She's so in love with you that she'd take a bullet for you!"

"That's ridiculous!"

"Of course it is! But she'd do it anyway and be glad to do it! There's very little Cat Grant wouldn't do for you!"

"Lois, you've got the wrong—"

"And she's a complete person, a healthy and mentally stable woman! Of course you'd rather have her than – than have broken old me."

He spun on one heel and stepped away, then closed his right hand into a fist. For a long moment, she thought he would punch the roof access door, but after several deep breaths he calmed down and turned back to face her. "Why do we do this?"

"Do what?" she barked.

"Why do we fight so much when one of us tries to say something tender?"

The tears threatened again. "My – my therapist would tell me that I'm – I'm using anger to push away pain."

"So being alone with me hurts you?"

"No, it – yes."

He turned to face her. "Why?"

She sniffed and hid her face in her hands for a moment, then wiped her cheeks. "Because I'm scared. And because I – because I feel – very strongly about you."

"You've already told me that you love me."

She closed her eyes for a moment, then said, "I'd never stand in the way of your happiness. But – yes, I've said that. And I meant it."

His soft smile would have banished a thunderstorm. "That's good to know."

She nodded and looked away but not so far that she couldn't see him in her peripheral vision. "I'm glad that's out in the open but you're not cheating on Cat with me, not ever. Can we go back inside now? I'm getting a bit chilly."

"If you really want to. But we haven't gotten to the reason – two reasons, actually – I wanted to talk to you."

She swallowed and took a deep breath. "Go ahead, Clark."

"All right. But you have to understand that I haven't told Cat anything about this, not one word. You're the first person who's heard this from me."

She braced herself mentally. Now it was coming. Now he would tell her that he loved Cat but still wanted to be friends with her. Now she'd get to congratulate him on his choice of partner – shoot, she thought Cat was pretty wonderful too. It was a good thing Lois was straight or there might be some serious relationship confusion ensuing.

He seemed to tense up as he took in his next breath. He pulled off his glasses and slipped them into a jacket pocket, then hesitantly said, "Lois – I'm Superman."

She exhaled. Her shoulders slumped and she said, "I understand how you feel, Clark, and I – wait – what did you just say?"

"I said, I'm Superman."

Her head spun to face him. "Superman," she repeated.

"Yes."

"You're telling me that you're Superman?" she demanded.

He reached out and took her hands. "That's what I'm saying."

"That's not funny, Kent!"

"I'm not trying to be funny. I'm telling you the truth about myself."

Her jaw fell open and she yanked her hands away. "You're – you're Superman?"

"Yes."

"No – no you're not. You're not him, you're you. You can't be him!"

"Actually, I can be him, because he's me."

"No."

He reached out to her again. "Yes."

She lurched backward and her vision narrowed. "No! You can't be someone you're not!"

"Lois, listen to me." He stepped closer and grasped her upper arms. "I am Superman. But Superman is only what I do. He's not the real me. Clark Kent is who I really am."

It was a good thing that he was holding her arms, the rational part of her mind whispered, or she might turn and run mindlessly right off the roof. The rest of her mind became a whirling maelstrom of confusion. She knew she was getting hysterical but she couldn't control herself. "No! NO!"

"Lois, please take it easy—"

The frantic hysteria came out in ascending volume. "No-no-no-NO-NO-NO-NO—"

His arms surrounded her and her feet left the rooftop.

That didn't quite go as planned, Clark muttered silently.

But he'd had no choice. He couldn't let her stand there and become hysterical. Once in the air, he had to land someplace where no one would hear her, so he headed just north of the Canadian border to his favorite wooded hideaway. And he had to land quickly – she'd stopped breathing evenly.

The only upside was that she was no longer screaming in his ear.

He set down just below the crest of a small rise surrounded by pine trees. When he opened his arms, she stumbled uphill and went to her knees on a bed of pine needles.

Clark sat down on a fallen log about five feet from her and

sighed. “You can breathe now.”

She inhaled, then coughed, then took two deep breaths. “What – where – where is this?”

“Just across the border into Canada from New Troy.”

“Canada?” she burst out. “Why?”

He waved his arm around as if showing off a herd of cattle.

“It’s my favorite place near Metropolis. I come here when I need some peace and quiet. And I didn’t want you to continue being – um, kinda crazy in a place where people could hear you.”

She looked around. “You – I don’t feel drugged.”

“You weren’t. I flew you here.”

Lois lifted herself to her feet. “Because you – you’re Superman.”

“Yes.”

She picked up a handful of pine needles and stared at them. “Why?”

“Why am I Superman?”

“No. Why did you bring me here?”

“I just told you.”

“Tell me again. Pretend I just suffered a major shock and I want to make sure I’m not hallucinating.”

“Oh. Um, well, I told you I was Superman, and you started working yourself into a pretty good lather, and I didn’t want anyone to hear you and get the wrong idea. Or the right idea, for that matter.”

“I see. What if I start yelling here?”

“There’s no one around for close to fifteen miles. If you shouted at the top of your lungs, nobody would hear you. Other than me, of course.”

She looked to the west where the sun was almost touching the treetops. “How long will I be here?”

“Until I’ve said what I need to say.”

“Huh.” She brushed her hands clean. “Why didn’t you say it in Metropolis?”

His eyebrows drew down and he tilted his head to one side. “I tried, remember? You went just a little bit nutso and wouldn’t listen.”

“And you’ll take me back when you’ve said what you want to say?”

“Yes.”

“I assume you have a question of some kind nested in this conversation.” He didn’t say anything. She waited about ten seconds before continuing. “Does my return to Metropolis depend on the answer to this question?”

He shook his head. “No, it doesn’t. I’ll take you back no matter what the answer is.” He gave her a tiny smile. “Besides, I don’t want to overcook your dinner.”

“Well, yeah, there’s that, too, I guess.” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Am I allowed to ask questions of you?”

“Yes, of course. Whatever you want to ask.”

“Good.” She closed her eyes for a moment, then locked them on his. “Why didn’t you tell me before now? That you’re Superman, I mean.”

“Um – the subject didn’t come up?”

Her voice went flat. “The subject didn’t come up?”

“No, it didn’t.”

“What were you waiting for?” Her voice went up several decibels. “Were you planning on sending me a registered letter?” She stomped around in a circle as she got even louder. “Were you going to wear a Superman suit come Halloween and tell me then?” She stopped in front of him and put her fists on her hips. “Please enlighten me, wise guy! When?”

He stood, then put his face inches from hers and snarled, “When I was sure you wouldn’t print it!”

She rebounded from him as if she’d been clubbed. “When I – you were sure I – how could you even think that?”

He almost snapped at her again, but the fresh dew in her eyes

stopped him. Gently, he said, “I’m sorry, Lois, really sorry.” He slowly reached out and cupped her face, afraid that she’d dodge him – but instead she pressed her cheek into his palm, then turned her head and nuzzled his hand. He sighed. “I should not have said that.”

She swallowed once and said, “Even – if – if it’s true?”

“Even then.”

She grasped his hand in hers and sniffed once, then straightened. “No, you did the right thing. There was a time I would’ve sent the story in, hugged the Pulitzer, and invented a victory dance. I think – no, I’m pretty sure that if you’d told me before the Carlin Building was bombed, I would have done exactly that. But I remember how attentive and – and caring you were to me after I got that nick in my forehead.” She pushed her hair back. “See? It’s the reminder of your love for me.”

“Makes me wish I’d told you earlier and run the risk.”

She dropped her hand and shook her head a little. “If you’d told me after that day, I would never have said anything to anyone. No risk at all.”

“Because of your respect for Superman?”

“No. Well – maybe a little. But mostly because it would have hurt you.”

Her words stunned him. Maybe he could discuss the “forever and a day” thing with her while they were there. Maybe she didn’t just care for him – maybe she loved him as much as he’d hoped she would.

First, though, he needed to get through the rest of her list of questions. “Thank you, Lois. That means a great deal to me. If there’s anything else you want to ask me – anything at all – please feel free to put it out there. I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

She frowned a little, then said, “You know, I never suspected. I never had any inkling you were – him. The thought never occurred to me, not once.” She looked down and said, “Am I really that blind?”

“No. You aren’t blind. It’s just – look, I’ve hidden the special things I can do for most of my life. The only people who know besides you are my parents, and they watched me discover and grow into my powers. My dad spent a lot of hours talking to me and helping me control what I can do. There were a few times when I thought I was going nuts.”

She looked up again. “I can only imagine how you must have felt.”

“Sometimes I still feel that way.” He waited for Lois to say something. When she didn’t, he continued, “I’m taking a big risk telling you. Not that I think you might give me away, even accidentally, because I don’t think you would, but—”

He stopped, unsure how to finish. He finally added, “Now that you know, it brings the total number of people in the world who know my secret up to four. Just – four people, including me. I know it’s a big burden, but there was no way to ask you if you wanted to know this secret before I told you what it was.” His shoulders slumped. “If this is too much, I’m deeply sorry.”

“No,” she answered softly, “it’s not too much. It’s a lot, yeah, but it’s not too much.”

“Thank you. Um, I’m sure that’s not all you want to ask me.”

“It’s not.” He wondered why her hands tightened into fists and her eyebrows drew down. “I have another question for you.” Her voice tightened and came out in a lower register. “How many?”

“Uh – how many what?”

“How many women?”

He blinked twice and hesitated before saying, “Not a question I anticipated hearing.”

“It’s the one I need answered.”

“Okay. I assume you’re asking me how many women I’ve slept with.”

“Yes.”

“Just one.”

“No, I mean besides Cat.”

He was startled for a moment, then relaxed and shook his head. “Sorry. For a second I forgot you knew about me and her.”

“Uh-huh. We’ll get to the ‘how many times’ question in a minute. Who was this other girl?”

“What other girl?”

“The other girl you slept with, idiot!”

“I thought we talked about this at the hotel when we were fake newlyweds.”

“That was before we started discussing a relationship! Now talk!”

He lifted his hands palms out and shook his head. “Let me cut to the chase and try to fill in all the blanks. I have never been intimate with any woman other than Cat, and I knew her as Margaret Mayfield when I was a freshman at Metropolis University. And it was just the one time. I wrongly thought that I was in love with her, and it turned out to be a big mistake on my part, one I still deeply regret. And I don’t regret being with Cat specifically. I regret thinking I was mature enough to handle an intimate relationship with any woman. I couldn’t have been more wrong if my nose were attached to my belly button instead of my face.”

He ignored her brief snort of amusement and pressed on. “Not sleeping with a long list of partners – or even a short list – is a conscious decision I made after that night with Cat. I didn’t want to carve off little pieces of my heart and leave them with a bunch of different women. I didn’t want to father a bunch of kids who might also have my powers. And I didn’t want to leave a bunch of women without a full-time father for those children, assuming that I can make babies with human women.”

She blinked. “Human women?”

“Yeah. See, I’m – not from around here. As in, not from this part of the galaxy.”

“So why are you here?”

He grimaced. “My planet was dying – the historical record I saw said it exploded – and my parents sent me to Earth so I’d survive. As far as I know, I’m the last surviving Kryptonian.”

Lois stared at him blankly for a long moment, then finally said, “Yeah, nothing like smacking a girl in the head with a data dump.”

“I’m sorry about that. I didn’t want you to think I was dodging your questions or trying to keep you out here after dark when the temperature drops.”

“That wouldn’t bother you.”

“It would bother you. And it gets me to my follow-up question a little quicker.”

“Huh? Oh, right – the follow-up question.”

He grinned a little. “You forgot about that, didn’t you?”

“Can you blame me? I mean, finding out that you – that you’re – you’re Superman – boy, that’s still hard to say.”

“I know. It’s hard to wrap your mind around. Try thinking about finding out that you can do all these weird things and that you can’t control them. And that you can’t tell your friends about any of it or you might end up in the booby hatch.”

Her face changed again. “Oh, good, something else to think about. No, please, don’t back away. I get where you’re coming from. It’s not unlike when I came back from the rehab hospital in Germany. All my friends and family, except maybe Lucy, and then Cat when I went to work at the Planet, treated me like they were afraid of me in about ten different ways. After all, I – I’d shot people in combat. My mother still can’t touch me without flinching just a little – or maybe a lot – and she all but jumps out of her skin if I accidentally sneak up on her.”

He frowned a little. “They’re afraid that touching you wrong or saying the wrong thing might set you off, might send you on a killing spree.”

Lois’ voice softened and she took his left hand in both of hers. “And you know that’s the last thing you’d do, but their fear makes you think about it like the pink elephant in the room.”

He bent and kissed her hand. “I love it that you get me that way. I don’t think anyone else would, beside my parents.”

She nodded and lifted his hand to kiss his knuckles. “And I love it that you understand that part of me. It usually takes another veteran to understand.”

He lifted his head, knowing that his eyes were damp. “This isn’t the question I planned to ask you, but I think it’s appropriate. May I?”

“Yes.”

“If I need someone to talk to – someone to unload on, someone who can take a data dump – can I talk to you?”

She smiled and gently rubbed his hand. “Yes. Just call out my name, and you know wherever I am, I’ll come running to see you again. You’ve got a friend, Clark.”

He smiled back. “I’ll call you or James Taylor, whoever’s available.”

She chuckled. “Taylor might have made it a big hit, but Carole King wrote it.”

“How about we make it our song?”

They laughed together, then Lois said, “I’m getting chilly. I think you should ask me the question you planned to ask.”

“You’re sure? I mean, this is already a lot to take in.”

“My therapist and I will have some long non-identity-specific chats about you in the near future, but I think I’ve taken it in as well as anyone could. Please, Clark – ask the question.”

“All right – here goes. And remember, on this subject I’m just as vulnerable as you are.”

He gathered his thoughts and tried to organize them, but Lois broke in and said, “We don’t have all night, Kansas.”

Startled, he looked at her, but her expression was warm and – if he pretended hard – loving. He’d seen her face just before she’d clobbered someone, seen her trying to hold in rage, seen her sharing a good laugh with Cat, but he’d never seen her look this tender.

It almost broke his focus, but he plowed ahead. “Lois, I haven’t said this flat out unprovoked before because I’ve been scared to say it to you but – but I love you.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “And I think I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you – do you think you might want to discuss marrying me?”

“Ah. Do you mind if I think about it a while?”

“I don’t mind a bit. I’d rather hear how you really felt than what you think I might want to hear any day of the week.”

“Good.” Then she fooled him and smiled. Had it been possible, that smile would have split her face in two. A tear glistened on one cheek and she kissed his hand. “I – I’m honored beyond anything I could imagine. Really honored that the wonderful man who is Clark Kent would even consider asking me to share his life. But I’ll really have to give this some thought.” She lifted his hand to her mouth and kissed his knuckles again. “Some very thorough thought.”

He opened his mouth but made no sound. After a long moment, he managed, “Uh – okay.”

She put her arms around his chest as far as she could reach. “Please don’t think I’ll be spending however much time I need just to figure out a good way to tell you ‘no.’ I really need to look at this from every angle I can think of. It’s not unlike being the wife of one of the early astronauts. I did a profile on Louise Shepard and Ann Glenn for one of the base magazines. Those women were terrified every time their husbands went anywhere near Florida, much less went up into space. There was no guarantee they wouldn’t die when the rocket engines ignited. The pressure nearly broke some of them.”

“Huh. I never thought of it like that, but I guess you’re right.”

She kissed his hand again. “Every couple brings their joined pasts into the relationship, but being Superman’s wife, even if that’s not your primary identity, has to be a heavy load of baggage to carry around.” Her head nestled against his shoulder as she embraced him again. “And I’ve got more than enough emotional baggage for both of us.”

He put his left arm around her lower back and stroked her hair with his free hand. “I understand. I can’t say that I like it, but I understand.”

“I’m not sure you do.” She straightened and put both hands on his jacket lapels and held on. “I need to be certain that I love you like you should be loved. And that you can handle being married to an insecure, damaged combat vet with a hair-trigger on her weapon and PTSD looming in the background.”

He smiled. “I think I can help you face those fears and defeat them. Besides, you’d be Lois Lane no matter whose bride you might be.”

She leaned back and softly glared up at him. “I hope you don’t expect me to come when you call me like a housebroken and well-trained puppy.”

“Oh, right. I doubt I’ll be calling to you ‘Hey, Lassie’ and telling you that I’ve fallen in a well and you need to find Timmy to get me out.”

“And you can’t protect me from all the danger in the world. Remember, I’ve done pretty well without you so far.”

“Don’t worry. I promise to let anyone who wants to risk his or her life to shoot at you at least twice. Three times, even, if it’s really long range.”

Her lips thinned in mock irritation, but she couldn’t maintain the expression. After about two seconds, she laughed and buried her face in his chest. “It’s really getting chilly out here. How about we go back to the big city now? I’m ready to eat that delicious dinner you left simmering on my stove.”

He wanted to kiss her, but he didn’t want their first almost-lovers’ kiss to live in their memories under these conditions – cold, dark, and standing in a bed of pine needles. Instead, he moved back so that he stood in front of her, put one hand on each side of her face, then lowered his head and gently guided her forehead to touch his.

She seemed to know what he wanted, or maybe she wanted to experience it that way as well. With their heads still touching, she asked, “Clark, can you take me back to the rooftop where we took off? It will make this whole experience – um – I don’t know how else to describe it – stolen time, I guess, a part of reality that’s ours and ours alone.”

He grinned. “Of course. I’ll have to travel pretty fast to keep us from being seen, so make sure you get a good deep breath. And you’ll need to be as close to me as you can be to keep you inside my protective aura.”

She smiled and put her hands on his chest again. “That won’t be a hardship at all. On three?” He nodded and she took three deep breaths as if she were about to free dive into the ocean, then held the last one as he counted off.

“One – two – three!”

And they were airborne again.

Except this time she smiled as they flew.

Chapter Twenty

Lois knew how much she needed the exercise, but she still hated working out at the gym she and Cat belonged to. She even hated Cat on the days when her knee didn’t want to get with the program.

Like today.

“Come on, Lois,” Cat urged her, “just four more reps and you can yell at me to do mine.”

“Rrrrggghh!”

“Great! Three more knee extensions and you’re done!”

“Arrrrr you better run – when I get finished!”

“Two more, Lois. Bring it!”

“You’re a – dead woman – Grant!”

“One more and don’t drop it! Ease it down – easy – yay! You did it!”

Lois panted for several seconds, then gasped, “If you – weren’t my best friend – I’d drop – a piano – on your head.”

“Ooh, I’m terrified. Here, wipe your face.”

Still panting, Lois grabbed the towel Cat offered her. “I think I’m going to kick – the side of your knee – really hard – and see if you can – take the pain. Then you can do the leg lifts at your – your max weight.”

“Now I’m even more terrified. Hey, how come Lucy hasn’t been joining us lately?”

Lois took a long swig from her water bottle and three deep breaths before answering. “She’s been spending an inordinate amount of time with Jimmy. If he’s right, they’re – wow, I can already tell that’s never going to get easy to say – they’re dating exclusively now.”

“Good for them! It’s time your sister started looking toward the future.”

“Yeah, well, he better treat her right. That’s all I have to say about it.”

“I’m pretty sure he’ll treat Lucy at least as well as Clark treats you now.”

Lois was still uncomfortable talking too openly about her love for Clark. It was too new, too tender, too scary for her to be casual about it. She still wasn’t sure she was the best choice for Clark, even though she knew she’d never find so good a man if she looked for the rest of her life.

It was time to change the subject. She stood with a grunt and moved so Cat could use the machine. “What about you? What future are you looking toward?”

Cat didn’t answer for a moment. Then she reset the resistance, settled in the seat, and began straightening her lower legs against the machine’s weights. “I don’t know. If Clark – hadn’t fallen so hard for you, I’d – oof – probably be chasing him.”

Lois went cold. Despite their professed love for each other, despite their still vague and unformed plans for the future, if Cat Grant were to go after Clark and really set her mind to the task, he didn’t stand much of a chance to resist her. And Lois might not be able to take it if she lost him, not even to her best friend.

Cat finished her first set of leg lifts and paused to breathe. She turned to Lois and smiled. “Don’t worry about me. Or him. He’s so in love with you that to him all the other women in the world are either platonic friends or potential interview subjects. Even if I threw another forward pass at him, he’d run the other way to keep from catching it.” She started her second set. “He’d – do the same with – any other woman. You’d have to – urrrgh – hit him with an asteroid to drive him away, and even then – mmph – I’m not sure that – that would do the trick.”

Lois put her hand on Cat’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

Cat finished the second set and adjusted her hair restraints.

“For what, recognizing the truth? He’s yours if you want him, and even if you don’t he’s not going anywhere or to anyone else, not even hot and sexy me.” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then began her final set. “Besides, he probably wants a – whoof – a bunch of kids and a wife who – grunt – doesn’t throw herself into the middle of every – every firefight she sees the way I do.”

“I do that,” came the soft answer.

“Yeah, but you’re – smarter about it than – I am. And – oof – way more consistent. You know when to – to dive for cover and when to back off and do – ahhh – do recon. I don’t want kids, which is – huhh – weird, I know, especially given my good family background. I’d be surprised if – if Clark didn’t want – a whole bunch of – little ones.”

Cat finished the set and leaned forward with her hands on her knees, panting deeply. After a moment, she continued. “My parents don’t get it, and I’m not sure I do either. I just can’t see myself as a mommy.” She straightened and stood clear of the machine. “A wife, yes, but not a mother. Hard to find a really good man who thinks the same way I do. And there aren’t many great guys like Clark around to start with. You’re so very lucky to have him. Hand me my towel, please.”

Lois sighed. “I know how you feel about Clark. And I’m grateful that we aren’t competing with each other for his affection. I’m sorry you’re going through this, Red.”

“Don’t be. I’m sure he wants kids and I don’t. Bad match, that. If I did have kids, I’d be a lousy mom, but I think he’d be a terrific dad.” She wiped off some of the sweat from her brow. “And I still say you’ll be a wonderful mother someday.”

“Me, a mom? Much less a good one? Now you’re scaring me.”

Cat flashed her friend a quick smile. “You say that every time we get on this subject. Come on, let’s finish up our workout so we can go grab dinner.”

“Close with this. ‘I’m quite pleased with the progress your division has made over the past quarter. The FDA has formally approved the new diabetes medication, so you’ll need to change this product over from R & D to production. I foresee a bonus in the next few months for you and your team.’ Lex Luthor, CEO LexLabs, etc. Send copies to the usual recipients.”

“Yes, sir. Are there any more letters you wish to dictate – before I—”

Lex looked up from his notes at his secretary and followed the direction of her eyes. Of course. Superman was dropping by for yet another unannounced visit, hovering just off the balcony railing, his cape billowing majestically in the evening breeze.

“That will be all, Miss Thompson. You can go now.” The young woman swallowed but didn’t stand. Lex sighed and very slowly and clearly said, “Miss Thompson? You may go home after you type up those letters and put them in the outgoing mail.” He waited a moment, then added, “Please respond if you understood my instructions.”

The young woman slowly rose and nodded jerkily, her eyes locked on the Man of Steel as he slowly landed just inside the office balcony. She stumbled backward through the doorway leading to her office and shut the door behind her.

Lex sighed. “Thank you for discomfiting my personal secretary, Superman. I’m not even going to suggest that you call her to set up an appointment with me.”

He didn’t continue their usual banter. “You made a bad mistake the other day, Lex.”

“And what mistake would that be?”

He stepped forward. “You killed a man in front of Lois Lane.”

Lex crossed his arms and frowned. “That man was threatening Lois with a pistol. There is no telling what violence he might have done her.”

“According to Ms. Lane’s complete statement – which you apparently haven’t read and didn’t hang around long enough to hear – she was about to apply her military training to the situation and disarm Mr. Menken. She then planned to question him quite enthusiastically and thoroughly about his involvement with the enhanced boxers.”

Something I could not have permitted, Lex mused, hence the bullet in Menken’s neck. Aloud, he said, “I am not as sanguine as you are about her chances of disarming an armed and desperate thug without being injured. As I saw the situation, my involvement was both timely and propitious, not to mention necessary.”

“There was a risk in Lois acting, that’s true, but there was a greater one in you shooting a man not two feet from her from twenty feet away in a poorly lit alley – especially since you were

showing off by shooting from the waist with one hand. And you almost missed him completely. If you had waited for fifteen seconds, the situation would have been resolved without bloodshed. You were behaving either as an egotist with a personal agenda or as a person trying to hide something.”

That was too close to the truth to ignore. “That’s hardly something you could possibly know unless you—”

“Unless I know you better than you think I do. Let me repeat my warning from a few weeks ago and expand on it. You must – and yes, it’s tantamount to an order this time – you must stop any and all illegal activity in which you are involved.” Superman crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. “And I mean as of yesterday, Lex. Am I being clear?”

“You have no right to dictate—”

The muscle-bound hero crossed his arms over his chest and slid silently across the floor without moving his feet. “I asked you a question and I expect an answer. Am I being clear on what I’m demanding that you do?”

Lex almost stepped away from Superman. The blue-clad aerialist suddenly appeared larger and angrier than Lex had ever seen him. “I thought you told me that your ethics prevented you from forcing your will onto people.”

“That was wholesale. This is retail.” Superman lifted from the floor a few inches and narrowed his eyes. “Being a – a good businessman, I’m sure you understand the difference.”

Lex took a moment to compose himself, then said, “Without admitting any guilt or responsibility for any illegal actions which you seem to believe I have performed or been involved in, yes, I’m clear on your high-handed demands.”

“Good enough. Be sure to pass it on to your business buddies. I’ll see you around.” Superman rose from the floor and floated through the balcony window. A moment before he disappeared, he looked over one shoulder and said, “You almost surely won’t see me, though.”

A whoosh and a sonic boom later he was gone.

Lex sat back down in his chair, his calm demeanor a flimsy façade. He doubted that his organization could survive with a thick-headed but relentless superhero breathing down the back of his neck. The situation called for drastic action.

He opened a drawer and selected a cheap burner phone, then dialed a memorized number. The phone would be used only once more, then it would meet its planned fiery demise in one of his steel mills. As he waited for the other party to answer, he turned on a white noise generator, which would – in theory, at least – prevent Superman from eavesdropping on the conversation.

“This is The Boss. Can you speak freely? Good. The timetable for Project K must be advanced. The new completion date is two weeks from tomorrow. I know it’s a tight window, but you must make this your top priority. No, not here. The alleged landing zone. Very well, the landing zone, no qualification or equivocation. Your cover will be that of an EPA operation looking for systemic pollution of farmland. Questions?”

Lex listened for a moment. “I can’t give you any more support than that, logistical or otherwise, except to provide an airtight legal cover when the operation is successfully completed. Yes. A place of your choosing, Colonel. No, I’ll release the necessary information to direct the targets to you. If you succeed, you’ll never need to work again. You have complete authority in this instance, Colonel Trask. I wish you success.”

Lex turned off the phone and set it on his desk. If Trask were to fail, he’d have to make sure the man didn’t survive to implicate him. Just as he had done with Menken.

A week after Superman’s visit to Luthor, Perry sat in his office re-editing another one of Ralph Veeder’s columns and trying not to swear at the hiring practices of certain members of the Planet’s board of directors. To distract himself, he wondered how his

favorite reporting trio would react to their next story assignment.

He was sure that Clark, Cat, and Lois all came to work that morning, gleefully anticipating their next assignments, whether as a three-person team or as individuals. After the morning meeting, they all strolled into the editor's office and sat in front of his desk, just as Perry had instructed them. All three of them smiled until Perry told them where they were headed next. "Smallville?" barked Lois. "You're sending us to Smallville?"

Clark tried to hide a grin as Lois stood abruptly and all but leaned over Perry's desk. It seemed the young man was glad that her intensity was directed at someone else.

Then Perry wondered briefly how Smallville would receive Lois Lane in pedal-to-the-metal mode.

Perry refocused and nodded. "The EPA is doing something fishy out in Kansas and we need to know what's going on."

"But all three of us? Now? We broke the cyborg boxing story and made up with Mayson Drake! Those two showoffs even turned in their penalty assignments!"

Cat stifled a giggle. Clark managed to hide his laugh in a muffled cough. "And that's why all three of you are going to Kansas, Lois," Perry replied. "Y'all did such a good job, I want those talents in flyover country to sniff out what's going on out there."

"But you can't send your three best investigators halfway across the country just to check out a rumor about an EPA operation! We're needed here!"

She didn't understand – didn't want to understand – why he was sending them out of town, so he had to throw it in her face. Perry's honeyed tones stiffened. "You're also targets here. The cops didn't get everybody involved in the boxing scandal yet, including one of the fighters, and at least one of those low-level morons is liable to get the bright idea to solve their problems by killing one or all of you. I don't want that to happen. And I seem to remember that the journalist who broke the Love Canal story – who in the beginning probably felt as you do right now – won a Pulitzer Prize for that series."

She paced back and forth in front of his desk. "Come on, Perry, be reasonable! We got the Toasters and the Taylor gang less than a week ago! The feds are tripping over each other to prosecute them! We have enough for an entire series on them, and I'll really enjoy watching Toni Taylor squirm like a worm on a fishhook to stay out of prison when the DA presents the evidence we put together! There are enough active stories right here in Metropolis to keep us busy for months!"

The editor leaped to his feet. "And their low-level guys are gunning for you too!" he shouted. "I'm trying to get you three out of the line of fire without wasting your talents!"

"In case you hadn't noticed, I can defend myself pretty well!"

"I know that, Lois, but are you going to lead Cat and Clark into a firefight too? Will you be responsible for their lives?"

Lois stopped and took an unsteady step backward. No longer enjoying the moment, Clark stood and said, "That was a cheap shot, Perry."

Cat stood behind Lois and grabbed her shoulders to support her. "We're going, Chief. Lois was just letting off steam and you know it. You don't need to hit below the belt."

Perry put his hands on his hips. "I'm only doing this because I care about all of you and I don't want to lose any of you for any reason. If I didn't think there was any real danger, I'd have you digging up dirt on a whole bunch of juicy stuff right here in the city." He dropped his hands and seemed to deflate. "But I've lost too many good people over the years, sometimes because I made the wrong call. If I can protect you three without cheating the paper or the city, I'm going to do it."

"Chief—"

"No, Cat." Lois turned and grabbed her friend's hand for a moment. "Perry's right. And if I were sitting in that chair, I'd

probably make the same kind of decision." She released Cat's hand, then dropped her head and stared at the front of his desk. "Except I'd try to find some scandal in Antigua or the Bahamas for us to investigate."

Perry glared at her for about two seconds, then chortled. "Let me have that assignment when you get my job, Lois. Alice and I could probably uncover something there. Might take us a few weeks to double-check everything, though."

The tension in the room slowly eased until everyone was smiling. Cat patted Lois' shoulder and turned to leave, then glanced at Clark and said, "Hey, did you notice she called us Perry's 'three best investigators?' We have it from the horse's mouth – we are her equals!"

Clark's face cleared. "Does that mean that the other reporters have to bow down and genuflect to us?" he asked.

"My name still goes first on the byline," answered Lois. "You two may get 'Minor contributions from' in front of your names – if you're lucky. And no genuflections unless it's to me."

Cat glared at Lois and said, "Oh, girlfriend, it's on! You goin' down hard!"

Clark followed them to the doorway and paused as they exited. "You see what I have to contend with, Chief?"

"I wish you good luck. See Cathy in Travel for your itinerary, tickets, and vouchers. Stay together until all of you are on the plane tonight. Bring back a good story, Clark, but most of all bring everybody back with you. Those women are in your charge now."

Clark grimaced. "Don't tell Lois I'm in charge. I'd never hear the end of that."

Perry smiled once the young man had left. It was a good thing Clark was so easy-going. The boy would be smart and pick his battles with her. Probably even win a few of them, too.

Well after dark that evening, Clark walked through the airport gate with Lois on his left and Cat on his right, both of them just ahead of him. Just as they walked past a cloud of gnats swarming around a trash can, he muttered, "I hate flying."

Lois just gave him an I-don't-believe-you glare, but Cat coughed as if she'd bitten into a rotten peach and stumbled into him. She pounded on her chest and ground out, "Sorry, swallowed some gnats back there."

"Tastes great, less filling, right?" Clark asked.

Before Cat could snark back at him, Lois said, "Over in the Middle East, I had a master sergeant attached to my company who'd been an E-2 in Nam. He told us you could tell how long a guy had been in-country by the way he ate his field ration of rice."

None of them spoke for a long moment, then Clark said, "Okay, I'm asking. How could you tell by how he ate his rice?"

He thought he detected a slightly evil look on her face. "According to Sergeant McDaniel, the rice in the field ration was usually served with these three-inch trophy-winning roaches in it because it was impossible to keep them out. If the guy took a look at his rice and turned green and threw it away, he was new. If he ate the rice after picking out the bugs, he'd been there a little while. If he ate it without picking out the bugs, he'd been in-country long enough to eat Vietnamese style. And the guys who really needed to go home were the ones who'd pick out the rice and eat the bugs."

Clark made a disgusted face. Cat gagged. As they passed through the gate to board the flight, Lois, who'd led the parade through the covered access ramp, asked the first flight attendant she saw if rice was on the menu for this flight.

The flight attendant gave her a neon smile and said yes, they had a brown rice pilaf as a side dish for dinner. Cat put her hand on her stomach, looked at Lois, and burped daintily. "You are evil personified, Louise," she mumbled.

"Do I get to drive now, Thelma?" Lois responded.

Cat only quickened her pace onto the plane. Clark mused that

he was glad most of his nourishment was gleaned from sunlight.

He still checked in every direction for possible danger. All he saw was a plainly-dressed young woman reading a movie fan magazine. No weapons, just pop culture, no danger there.

Trask flipped his phone shut. He'd been uncertain as to just how many of the thorns in his side were coming to cover the fake EPA dig, but his Metropolis contact had just texted him that all three would be landing at Wichita Regional Airport just before eleven that morning. The best-case scenario was that the alien would come with them, perhaps in disguise, but at least he had the three traitorous humans who were in the alien's thrall all in one unfamiliar place. The three city people would be sitting ducks for his team, and this time they wouldn't miss. Trask had the entire state of Kansas to look through to find them, and most of the state was flat as a table.

They still owed him for stymying his interrogation of them all those months before. He'd enjoy taking care of them – and using them to destroy Superman.

He didn't know how his boss had acquired the green crystal the Boss' chemists insisted would harm the alien, but he didn't care. He also didn't care who his Boss really was or why he was funding Trask's efforts. All he cared about was using it to destroy the blue-suited fake. Maybe this invading force would think twice about establishing a beachhead on Earth after humans took out their advance scout. It was too dangerous to let the first scouts survive and report back on human combat capabilities.

He hoped to make this a brief operation. He was running low on disposable mobile phones.

The three reporters sat in the rental car watching the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe freight hauler lumber past them. Cat leaned her head against the headrest on the seat in front of her and muttered, "Metropolis before midnight to Chicago on the big jet, a three-hour layover, Chicago to Wichita on a twin-prop puddle jumper, and Wichita to wherever this is in a non-descript four-door convertible we had to let them clean before we sat in it. Nuts!" She pushed herself up to a sitting position. "I'm tired and I've got travel grime and I hate waiting. Just how long are we going to sit here?"

Clark grinned. "It takes as long as it takes, Cat."

From her perch in the front passenger seat, Lois shook her head and tried not to grin back at him. "I didn't realize that Kansas was one of the homes for Zen masters."

"It always takes city folk some time to decompress in farm country, ladies," he responded. "But fear not! We have arrived at a propitious time. This week is Smallville's annual Corn Festival. We'll get to see the Corn Queen pageant, the husk-off, the Corn-O-Rama, popcorn, creamed corn, corn on the cob – it's the physical embodiment of Kansas farm culture. You'll have fun, I promise. Assuming, of course, that you allow yourselves to do so."

"Why wouldn't we?" Cat grumbled. "Who knows, maybe I'll even find a nice guy, settle down with him, and build the two of us a house with my own two hands. I'd even paint the picket fence white all by myself."

He chuckled. "I hear the Smallville Post could use another beat writer. And my mom told me that old Mr. Ellison has been talking about retiring. You could succeed him as editor before too much longer. And they always have room on the front page for a good goat exposé."

Cat opened her mouth to respond, but then shook her head and flopped back in the seat. "I refuse to ask you how goats can be a headline story. And don't volunteer an answer!"

Just then the last car on the train slowly rolled over the crossing. "Eighty-seven cars and four locomotives," Clark announced proudly.

"Isn't that pretty long?" Lois asked.

"About average for this part of the country," Clark answered. "Lotta goods to move to marketing and shipping points. And this one had quite a few open-top coal cars. They're pretty heavy when they're fully loaded. Hey, did either of you know that a train with just a string of loaded coal cars is called a black snake?"

Cat huffed as Clark restarted the car. "I don't care what it's called. I just want to get this story finished and filed. Get me back to my apartment and my neighborhood market. There's a bunch of organic grapes there with my name on the package."

"Let's go, Farm Boy," Lois urged. "Remember, the only reason you're driving is because you supposedly know where we're going."

"As you wish," he replied.

"Please!" Cat called out. "My stomach is still upset because of Lois' rice story. Don't pour sugar on that open wound, okay?"

Carol Sherman looked around at the wreckage of the Wayne Irig farm and frowned. Their assignment was to analyze the grounds for long-term damage caused by dangerous or illegal pesticides, but this was over the top. She was a junior member of her team, little more than the public relations liaison for this job, but the level of destruction was far and away more than necessary for such a search. At most, they should be drilling down in spots a dozen feet or so apart using multiple three-inch holes. These guys were stripping the land with bulldozers and backhoes, taking off six feet of topsoil and clay if not more. Whatever they were actually looking for, it wasn't pesticides.

But she went along with the program, whatever it really was. Not only was the bonus money combined with her per diem almost twice her normal salary, the EPA was picking up the tab for her lodging and transportation. The government didn't normally throw big dollars at public relations flacks like her. The only reason she was being paid as much as she was had to be that something less than legal was happening here. Her conscience bothered her from the moment she awoke at sunrise to the late hour she finally dropped off to sleep – or, as the Smallville residents had said when they were still talking to her, from can-see to can't-see. If she hadn't needed the money so badly, she would have walked away days ago.

She checked off yet another quarter-acre section on her clipboard as having been searched, then looked up to see a convertible with a man and two women in it, all in business clothes – although, on second glance, she wondered just what business the redhead in the back seat was actually in. But it was part of her job to control the curious and limit access to the farm. They stopped the car and opened three doors. Carol raised her hand and stepped in their direction. "Sorry," she called out, "no civilians allowed."

The frowning brunette said, "We're not civilians, we're with the press."

"We've already given out a statement to the local papers," Carol told them.

The redhead gave her a mirthless smile. "We're not local. She's Lois Lane, he's Clark Kent, and I'm Catharine Grant. We're with the Daily Planet."

That wasn't likely. "I wasn't aware that the Daily Planet had a bureau in Smallville."

"We don't," said the tall young man. He fished out a press pass as he spoke. "We landed this morning in Wichita. Could we have your name?"

This was a real press ID, which meant that they were real reporters. The Colonel would not be pleased. "Carol Sherman, EPA field liaison. What's a paper like the Planet doing here?"

The redhead drifted to Carol's right as she handed back the man's press badge. "We cover the world, Ms. Sherman," Kent answered, "hence the name 'Daily' Planet."

"Plus Smallville," the brunette added. "What exactly is going

on here?”

Carol went into her familiar spiel for the public. “What is going on is an ecological risk assessment. The owner used a lot of pesticides during the 60’s, and we’re concerned about seepage into the local groundwater.”

The man who’d been introduced as Clark Kent wandered to Carol’s left and played with his glasses, causing her to split her focus among three people – which was surely what they were trying to accomplish. The brunette asked, “So people are getting more at the dinner table than they bargained for?”

“That’s it. No big mystery, no big story, just a public safety issue.” She turned and barked at Catharine, who was getting too close to the temporary fence around the site. “Hey! You folks need to leave now for your own safety.”

The Grant woman stopped, then gave Carol that mirthless smile again. “We need to talk to the property owner.”

Carol frowned. If nothing else, these three were persistent. “I don’t know where Mr. Irig is. We gave him relocation money, and he took off for parts unknown. I can only assume that he rented an RV and went on vacation.”

Kent pulled her attention to him and gave her an aw-shucks grin. “Well, I’m sure you have that information in your records. We’ll be back in a day or so to get it from you.”

Carol couldn’t help but be charmed by the handsome young man, but she still recognized a firm demand no matter how many layers of velvet it wore. She tried giving him back her best grin. “Then I’ll see you folks when you swing by again.”

They got back in their car and drove away as if everything were just peachy. But it wasn’t, and Carol knew it. The Colonel needed to know about them immediately.

She pushed into front flap of the main tent and was surprised to see Wayne Irig sitting across a folding table from the Colonel, wiping his face with a bandana. She stopped to listen.

“I know you found a glowing green crystal on your land. I know you sent a piece of it to the Kansas State science department for analysis. They couldn’t figure it out, so they sent it to scientists at STAR Labs. They were very interested – and my associate found out about their results.” Trask leaned toward Irig and hissed, “The way I see it, there are only two possibilities. Either you buried it somewhere on your farm or you gave it to someone to hold for you. Which is it?”

Irig looked scared but determined. “There weren’t no more of it! That was all there was! I don’t got any more!”

Trask leaped up, loomed over the table between them, and barked, “Wrong answer!” One of the armed guards in the tent cleared his throat and Trask glanced in Carol’s direction. “Problem, Ms. Sherman?”

Her pulse rate jumped up and she felt cold sweat dripping down her back. This was not the way the EPA ran its business. “You – you told me that Mr. Irig had been relocated!”

Trask stood and leaned over the table. “He has been relocated. This happens to be his new location.”

She needed more information, and she also needed to protect Mr. Irig as well as she could. “Since – since when does the Environmental Protection Agency do interrogations?”

“It doesn’t, but Bureau 39 does.”

“What – what is Bureau 39?”

“That information is available on a need-to-know basis, Mrs. Sherman. And you don’t need to know.”

“Hey, man, I needed a job, but not this badly! I will not be a part of this.”

Trask stood and faced her. “Oh, I’d reconsider that. No one living has ever quit Bureau 39. It’s – it’s kind of a curse. And you did say that you had a daughter to raise – didn’t you?”

She was stunned by the veiled threat and didn’t respond. He put on what he apparently thought was a caring expression. “But, if you’re determined to leave, I’ll accept your resignation. With

regrets, of course.”

The quiet threat to her daughter tipped the scales. “No,” she said softly. “I’m just fine.”

The frisson of danger from Trask ebbed but didn’t vanish. “Good choice. Now, I assume there’s something else you wanted to tell me?”

She hesitated, then said, “I just talked to three reporters from the Daily Planet. Clark Kent, Lois Lane, and Catharine something —”

“Catharine Grant?”

“Yes, that was her name. They just drove off together.”

A fanatic’s flame lit his almost demonic features from within. “Perfect,” he purred. “If they’re all here, it means that Superman can’t be far behind.”

Carol looked at Irig’s face. The man looked sick. And scared. She didn’t feel very good either.

Chapter Twenty-One

The live band in the town gazebo looked as if they were having fun as they played clean as country water, mild as Mountain Dew. Cat could feel herself relaxing slightly. Clark, holding Lois’ hand, led the women into the square, then he inhaled deeply. “Boy, I love these visits, especially in the fall. It’s so good to have a change of pace.” He turned on his heel and walked a few steps backward. “Metropolis is my home now, but coming back here just feels wonderful.”

Cat frowned at the band. “We’re still on assignment, Clark. This isn’t a vacation for any of us, remember?”

He nodded at her and turned again to walk forward. “I haven’t forgotten. If Wayne Irig is somewhere around here, someone will know about it. That’s one of the great things about a small town – secrets don’t stay hidden.”

Cat crossed her arms and edged closer to Clark. “What’s the matter?” he asked her.

“I feel like Dorothy. Shouldn’t a tornado be touching down and taking me to Oz pretty soon? And don’t tell me that Dorothy wanted to return to Kansas. Yow!” She grabbed Clark’s shoulder and lifted one foot, then pulled a long strand of hay from her high-heeled shoe. “Nuts! I’m not dressed for this.”

A medium-tall redheaded young woman in a police uniform drew Clark’s attention. He walked toward her and called out, “Rachel?”

The young cop turned into a squealing fangirl before Cat’s astonished eyes. “Eeeeeee! Clark! I’m so glad you’re here!” He picked her up and spun her around as she kissed him on the cheek. When she pushed back and he put her down, she said, “Hey, don’t let the uniform fool you. I can still two-step and tush-push better than anyone in this town!”

“I’m sure you can. You look good, even in the uniform.”

“Thanks.” She lowered her voice and leaned in again. “I’ll show you how good I still look tomorrow night. For old times’ sake.”

He shared a laugh with her, then turned and waved a hesitant Cat and an amused Lois over to them. “I want you to meet the other two best reporters on staff at the Daily Planet, Lois Lane and Catharine Grant. Cat, Lois, this is Rachel Harris – excuse me, now it’s Sheriff Rachel Harris.”

Rachel grabbed each woman’s right hand in turn before either one had a chance to open her mouth and said, “Howdy there, Catharine, Lois! I guess y’all came from Metropolis with Clark.”

As a surprised Cat put her hand behind her back and flexed it to make sure all her digits were still intact, Lois asked, “Old times’ sake?”

She grinned Cheshire-like at Cat. “Yeah, Clark took me to his senior prom. We had a blast.”

Cat suddenly realized that she was jealous, which was ridiculous and not a little bit embarrassing. She and Clark didn’t

have a close personal relationship – at least, not the kind she'd once envisioned. She crossed her arms and took a small step away from him, trying to indicate that to the sheriff.

Rachel played with her hat for a moment, apparently checking out the geometry among the three of them, then gestured at Clark and Lois. "I see. So, when did you two – um – how long—"

Clark blushed a little. Lois answered, "Oh, not long. We're still just kicking the tires and deciding on the color. Haven't even gone for a test drive yet."

Rachel's mouth stuck in an open position, and Cat wanted to burst out laughing. Clark's blush deepened and he blurted, "TMI, Lois! Rach, we're actually here on a story. You know about the EPA at Wayne's place, right?" She closed her mouth and nodded. "We need to talk to him. Would you happen to know where he is?"

She shook her head. "Nope, I don't. But you know how he likes to keep to himself." Her belt radio went off and she shook her head. "Sorry, y'all, but duty calls. Catharine, Lois, we'll have to get together real soon and swap some Clark stories."

Lois nodded. "Sure. I'd like that. Just call Clark's parents and they can get in touch with us. That's where we'll be staying."

Rachel pulled her radio out of its holster and responded to the message as she walked away. Clark shook his head. "The three of you swapping stories about me? I might have to take an early flight home."

Cat snickered. "Does 'tush-push' mean what I think it means?"

Lois peeked around Clark and said, "Depends on what you think it means. Describes a country dance that can get pretty personal, especially in private. It's usually no worse than a PG-rated activity in public, though."

Clark gently took the near arm of each woman. "Why don't we see if we can grab a taste of the local hospitality?"

Cat tugged her arm free and stopped. "You two go ahead. I think I'll just hang around here and soak up the atmosphere."

Clark lifted his free hand and waved it around. "Aw, Cat, c'mon! You just can't stand how normal it is here."

"Normal?" the redhead replied. "I've heard about these small towns. Normal for them is like attending a mixer at the Bates Motel." She pointed at one of the cooks. "You see that guy over there at the grill? The one turning the burgers?"

"Yeah," Lois said. "So?"

"I'd bet real money he's a cross-dresser."

Clark suppressed a laugh and asked, "Really?"

"Yes. I'll even give you three-to-one odds."

Before he could respond, another woman called his name. "Clark! Over here!"

He moved toward her and called out, "Mom!" then enveloped her in a bear hug.

"Oh, honey!" she purred. "It's so good to see you!" The older woman turned to Lois. "Hi! You must be Lois. Clark's told us so much about you. It's good to finally meet you." To Cat, she said, "And hello to you too, Catharine! Clark's told us about you too! I'm so glad you're both here with him."

Lois barely beat Cat to the draw. "We both thank you, Mrs. Kent."

"Pshaw! Both of you, call me Martha. Mrs. Kent was my mother-in-law, God rest her soul. She was a wonderful woman, but a lot more formal than I ever was." She put a hand on either woman's elbow and said, "You ladies must be famished! Those airline meals have such small portions, they must think they're feeding mice. Do you prefer burgers or—"

"Mom, wait. I don't know if that's such a good idea. Cat – um – Cat's concerned that the cook might be a cross-dresser."

Martha glanced at the grill and laughed. "Oh, honey, that's Clark's father! I can't get him to buy me a dress, let alone one for himself!"

It was Cat's turn to let her jaw hang open. Lois reached behind her and pushed her forward, saying, "She was just illustrating a

point, Martha."

Clark stuck his hands in his pockets and grinned. Cat's teeth audibly clapped together, then she leaned toward him and whispered through clenched jaws. "I may just kill you. Wait till you're asleep tonight. I'll get you – and Lois will help me hide the body."

Martha didn't hear the exchange – she was still laughing too hard.

The five of them – Clark, Lois, Cat, Martha, and Jonathan – entered the Kent home, laughter preceding them, and flipped on the light. Cat and Lois looked around at the décor – Cat with a polite smile, Lois with a real one.

Lois hadn't felt this comfortable around a nuclear family since her pre-teen years when her father was still living with them and the arguments were far fewer and far less intense. "Martha," she almost gushed, "your home is beautiful. It really feels lived in."

"Oh, Lois, it's just an old farmhouse, but it's home. We certainly love it."

"I can see why. And now I understand why Clark enjoys his visits here. In fact, there are times when we can't get him to shut up about Smallville already!"

Everyone laughed again. Lois looked around until she noticed a painting on an easel. She tilted her head to one side and asked, "Who's the artist?"

Martha smiled. "That's my latest. What do you think?"

Lois grinned and shook her head. "I'm the wrong person to ask. I think the twenty-five-millimeter automatic cannon on a Bradley armored personnel carrier is beautiful."

"That's right!" put in Jonathan. "You were awarded those medals for your service in the Middle East."

"My dad's a veteran, too," Clark said proudly. "He served in Korea from late 1951 until the treaty was signed. Has combat ribbons and a Bronze Star. He was his company's sergeant major."

Lois all but came to attention in front of him. "Thank you for your service, Sergeant Major. Your son is certainly a credit to your character."

Jonathan also straightened. "Thank you, Specialist. But I left the Army and the rank behind me in 1954 and came back to Kansas to be a farmer, so please don't stand on ceremony."

Martha put her bag of corn on the table. "Hey, my artwork is right here, and it doesn't like being ignored."

Cat turned to it and tilted her head as if examining it critically. "It's almost impressionistic. Good use of color, too. What does it represent?"

Martha smiled at her. "It's a bowl of fruit. I haven't given it a formal name yet."

Cat nodded. "If watercolor is your artistic medium, you'll name it soon."

"Are you an artist too, Catharine?"

"You'll save a lot of time and syllables if you just call me Cat. I don't paint or sculpt, but I do enjoy taking photos. I don't get many shots printed in the Planet, but I can get by in a pinch. In fact, I'm the photographer on this trip."

Martha smiled and nodded. "Well, let's talk sleeping arrangements. We'd like to put you two ladies up in Clark's room – he's had a queen bed up there since his sophomore year in high school. Got a lot of his height early. Unless – Cat, would you be more comfortable on the sleeper sofa? By yourself?"

"Mom!" Clark scolded. "As Lois so frankly confessed to Rachel Harris today, she and I are a couple but we're just kicking the tires. No test drives yet."

Lois turned scarlet and slapped his shoulder with an open hand. "Clark Jerome Kent! This is your mother you're talking to!"

"Ow! You said about the same thing to Rachel!"

"That was so she'd know there was a fence there! Your mom isn't about to get you on the dance floor and – and – push your

tush!”

Cat covered her mouth with her hand and turned away. Martha leaned in close to Lois and quietly said, “Honey, I can still boot-scoot pretty well as long as I’m dancing with Jonathan. How about the three of us girls getting together one evening and have a long and involved discussion about men?”

Lois nodded, an evil glint flashing in her eyes. Clark’s eyes widened and he chose that moment to change the subject. “Mom, we’re expecting a fax in the morning. Is that okay?”

Martha assumed a pensive pose. “A fax?”

“It’s short for ‘facsimile transmission,’ Martha,” Cat said. “Lets you send documents as easily as making a phone call, assuming the recipient has a machine too.”

Martha waved at her. “Oh, sweetie, we know that. I was just thinking about how much paper we have and if there’s enough already in the machine. We couldn’t run this operation without faxing stuff back and forth. It’s a thermal machine, not one of those expensive ink jet or laser systems, but I don’t know how we got along without one for as long as we did.”

“Oh.” Cat stood in place for a long moment, then said, “I’m going to have to borrow a towel, Martha.”

“A towel? Whatever for?”

“To dry off my foot. It’s been in my mouth way too often today and it’s soaking wet.”

Martha had shown her female guests to Clark’s room and told them exactly where the bathroom was and what time to expect breakfast before smiling and heading downstairs again. Cat put her suitcase on the bed and sighed. “This is not what I was expecting.”

“Maybe not, but it’s nice. The Kents are wonderful people.”

“They’re wonderful to you because you’re Clark’s girl. Me, I’m a third wheel, and I’m not used to that. And you’d better watch out for that redheaded sheriff. She wouldn’t mind sneaking off behind the Tastee Freeze with Clark.”

Lois laughed. “Oh, come one! Rachel is just a plain old country girl under that uniform. I bet we could be good friends if I lived out here.”

Cat opened the top dresser drawer and began loading her clothes in it. “Maybe you could live here. I couldn’t. This place is just too quiet and too much open space for me. I already miss asphalt and Centennial Park and city busses and honking horns.” She shoved her underwear to one side. “And I saw you giving that brown dress with the polka dots the eye when we walked by the clothing store. You were envisioning how big Clark’s smile would be when he first saw you wearing it.”

Lois opened her suitcase next to Cat’s and smiled softly. “Actually, I was. You’re very perceptive.”

“You wouldn’t catch me seriously wounded in that dress.”

“Of course not. But I bet you’d look great in those tight jeans and the matching sleeveless blouse, especially with those high-heeled sharkskin boots. There are lots of guys here who’d forget to breathe if they saw you in that outfit, plus all of those guys who’d give themselves hernias trying to win a prize for you on that bell-and-hammer thing at the carnival.”

Cat smiled thinly. “Thanks, Louise. You’re a trouper. Don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You’d come up with something, Thelma. You always bounce back.”

“Yeah, well, you’d better hurry up and marry Clark while I’m still young enough to make it down the aisle and stand up next to you.” She picked up a pajama top and her personal kit, then walked toward the bedroom door. “Dibs on being first in the bathroom. Shouldn’t take me more than ten minutes, and we can swap tomorrow night.”

“Okay. See you when you get back.”

“I’ll see you, too. Unless you sneak off downstairs to visit Clark.”

Lois blushed. “Come on, Cat! His parents are right here in the house!”

“Yes, but farmers are ‘early to bed and early to rise’ people. I bet they’ll be asleep five minutes after they turn out their bedroom light.”

Lois blushed again. “I’d still rather his mother not know what I’ve been thinking about. Besides, it seems to me that they tend to think about each other along those same lines.”

Cat smiled. “Sounds like my parents when I lived at home. Whenever I hosted a girls’ sleepover, I always made them promise to behave themselves. And my mom would always sigh and act disappointed, then pinch my dad’s rear end where my friends could see it.” She chuckled as she stepped out the bedroom door. “It always made the evenings fun, even though I always acted embarrassed for them.”

She didn’t tell Lois that the love her parents showed to each other and to her had been one of the things that made her want a life with Clark. She knew he’d love his wife like that. And she wanted to be loved that way.

She also knew that he loved Lois that way, not her.

Cat closed the bathroom door behind her and sighed. She never thought she’d lose that kind of competition to Lois.

Thinking of the morning schedule on a farm, Clark turned to his father and smiled. “Y’all still get up with the chickens? If you do, Lois is in for something of a shock.”

Jonathan’s face cleared. “I was expecting you to come alone. Didn’t realize you’d have company this trip.”

Clark’s voice lowered dramatically and his smile vanished. “Why? What’s going on?”

“I need to show you something. Come with me to the barn.”

“Okay. But what’s going on?”

Jonathan shook his head and turned toward the door. “Not in here, Son. In the barn.”

Jonathan led his son into the barn and looked around outside before sliding the door shut. “Wayne broke off a piece of this glowing green rock and sent it to a lab at KU for analysis. Then he got nervous when he didn’t hear back from them and brought the big piece to me to hide. He said he’d tell anyone from the government who asked about it that the little piece was all there was.” He lifted a heavy toolbox from beneath an overturned wheelbarrow and set it on his workbench. “The original piece is in here.”

“It’s a green glowing rock?”

“Yes. My guess is that it’s some kind of crystal, but neither your mother or I have ever seen anything like it before.” He unsnapped the latches and pulled the lid back. “We think it might be some kind of space – Clark! What’s wrong, Son?”

Clark’s knees buckled and he groaned in shock. “Uhhh! Close it! Close – close the box!” He gasped and fell to the barn floor on his side.

His father latched the box shut and Clark’s pain lessened, then seemed to vanish. “Don’t – don’t open it around me again. Please.”

“That hurt you! How can it – you’ve told us dozens of times that nothing can hurt you!”

The younger man’s breathing eased and he lifted himself to one knee. “Apparently I was mistaken, because that really hurt. A lot.” He tried to stand and failed. “I’m – going to need some help – getting back to the house.”

His father leaned down and put one shoulder under Clark’s arm. “Ready to try it again?”

Clark nodded briefly and counted off. “On three, okay? One – two – three! Ahhh!”

They headed for the side barn door. “Any better yet?”

“A – a little. Don’t let me go, though. My balance – is way off and – I’d fall over.”

“What about your powers?”

Clark shook his head. “Not right now. That green crystal, whatever it is – uh – has sucked them right out of me.”

Jonathan pulled the barn door shut behind them. “That brings up another point. Do either of those young ladies know about Superman?”

“I told Lois. Cat doesn’t know, or at least I haven’t told her and I seriously doubt Lois has. Lois knows that you and Mom know, of course, and – whoa, still not walking straight.”

“It’s a good thing you’re sleeping downstairs. I don’t think your mom and I could carry you up to your room.”

Clark’s chuckle turned into a groan. “As narrow as that stairway is, probably not. Do you think we can make it to the couch?”

“You haven’t unfolded it yet, have you?”

“Didn’t have the chance. Just – just help me get there and let me sit down.”

Martha came to the back door, smiling – until she saw her son being supported by her husband. “What happened? What’s wrong with Clark?”

Jonathan shook his head and gasped, “Help me – get him to – the couch!”

Between them, they managed not to drop him on either the floor or the couch. Martha ran to the kitchen and brought back a towel, then wiped her son’s face with it. “Whew!” Jonathan exhaled. “You are heavier than you look, son.”

A woman’s alarmed voice rang out from the staircase. “What’s wrong with Clark? What happened to him?”

Martha glanced at Clark, then turned to Lois and replied, “His allergies kick up sometimes this time of year. I guess Metropolis doesn’t have the same kinds of pollen floating around.”

Clark took his mother’s hand in his and quietly said, “She knows, Mom.”

Lois made her way to the end of the couch. Martha exchanged a “look” with Jonathan, then whispered, “Cat?”

“She’s in the bathroom and I haven’t told her,” Lois whispered back. “I came down because I heard thumping noises. And please don’t whisper at me unless you know I’m looking at you. I lost some upper-end hearing in the service from being around machine guns and artillery and other explosions, and I have to read lips a lot.” She knelt beside Clark and put her hand on his wrist. “I’m guessing this is the first time you’ve felt like this in many years, if you’ve ever felt this weak.”

“Not that I can remember.” Clark closed his eyes and leaned his head back. “That’s some baggage the airline lost.”

Clark’s parents both looked puzzled. Lois caught Martha’s expression and smiled. “When Clark told me his secret a few weeks ago, we talked about my PTSD being baggage, just like being—” she glanced at the stairway and whispered “—Superman’s wife would be.” Her volume rose slightly. “He hasn’t officially asked me to marry him, but he did ask me to think about it. And I have been.” She caught Clark’s eyes with hers. “I hope I haven’t just let too many cats out of the hat.”

“Bag.”

Her expression cleared. “Don’t be absurd, honey. Nobody puts bags in their hats.”

“No, the phrase is—”

Martha chuckled. “Clark, she’s trying to lighten the mood. She knows ‘The Cat in the Hat’ and all about cats and hats and bags.” She patted Lois’ arm. “You’ve found a good woman, sweetie. I just hope she’s willing to make an honest man of you soon.”

“I just hope he’s smart enough to give up,” added Jonathan.

All four of them laughed quietly.

At the top of the stairs, just past the last light before the left turn to the bedrooms, Cat knelt on the carpet, leaned against the wall, and wept silently. The easy camaraderie she witnessed

among the four people on the couch put the last nail in the coffin for her hopes for a love with Clark Kent. Clark would never be hers, would never love her, would never embrace her or kiss her with passion or commitment, would never again wake up next to her in the same bed. He’d told Lois about his being Superman but hadn’t told her. He wanted to spend his life with Lois, not with her. Even if Lois ultimately chose not to marry him, he’d never accept Cat as a substitute.

Being right twice, that Clark was also Superman and that he’d never love her like she loved him, gave her no solace.

A friend was all she could ever be to him. Lois held his heart in her hands and he held hers. They might as well call the Smallville pastor in the morning and schedule the ceremony. Cat would stand up for her, hold Lois’ bouquet while the bride passionately kissed the groom, hug the stuffing out of the bride, chastely kiss the groom’s cheek, and support them together any way she could.

She’d have to bind up her own heart with duct tape and fishing line to get through the ceremony, but she’d do it.

The other thing she would have to figure out was how to tell Clark and Lois that she’d deduced Superman’s secret identity. Tonight’s overheard conversation had eliminated the last vestiges of doubt from her mind. Clark was Superman, irrespective of his temporary lack of powers. The hero would return, she was certain. Just from the few moments she’d eavesdropped on them, she could tell that Clark’s voice was already stronger and steadier and his mind was working more clearly. It was just a matter of time before he was all the way back.

Cat silently slipped to Clark’s old bedroom and slid beneath the covers. She’d feel marginally better after a good night’s sleep, even though she’d miss the soothing sounds of the city.

Getting past knowing that Clark would never be hers might be more than she could bear.

Clark awoke to the smell of frying bacon and ham and pancakes. He sat up slowly and listened. Then he heard his mother and Lois laughing softly in the kitchen, something he wasn’t sure would happen until that moment. He’d believed that they’d need more time to adjust to each other and accept one another. But their easy teamwork sounded real and sincere.

He shrugged and guessed he was wrong about that. And it looked like a very good thing.

Just then Lois peeked around the corner and smiled when she saw him. “Hey, sleepyhead, it’s almost a quarter till seven and your father is already at his chores. You’re burning daylight. Come get some breakfast while it’s hot.” She walked to the couch, leaned down, and gave him a light kiss on the lips. “How about I fix you a plate?”

He grinned and stood without a groan or moan. “I can get my own, thank you. Just let me visit the little reporter’s room first.”

She started to turn away, then spun back into his embrace. “I love you, Clark. I hope we have lots of mornings like this.”

Before she could turn yet again, he took her shoulders in his hands. “Wait, please. I’d like to ask you a question.” She paused, then nodded. “Last night,” he said, “you called me ‘honey’ when we were talking about cats and hats and bags. Was that – were you saying that because – well, why did you say that?”

A mysterious smile peeked out from her face. “Let’s take a walk after breakfast and talk about it. Assuming you feel up to it, that is.”

“Sure. I think I need to loosen up my body anyway, and a walk over the property would be a good thing. Besides, there’s something I’d like to show you.” He stepped around her. “After I run my special errand, that is.”

Lois shoveled in her last bite of pancake and made ‘yummy’ noises. “Oh, Martha, that’s so good! Your cooking puts MREs to

shame.”

Martha tilted her head, puzzled. “What’s an MRE?” Clark chuckled and said, “Can I tell her?” Lois nodded to him. “MRE is an acronym for Meals Ready to Eat, but Lois says a lot of the foot soldiers say it stands for Meals Rejected by Ethiopians because they taste so terrible.”

Martha groaned. Lois said, “They got better by the time I was discharged, but they still weren’t anywhere close to what you can do. Probably never will be. The best thing I can say about the earlier meals is that they were better than the C-rations and K-rations the Army passed out in World War 2 and Korea. I bet Jonathan could describe those rations more colorfully than I could.”

Martha laughed. “Not much of a recommendation, is it?”

“No, but it’s accurate.”

“Mom, do you have anything for me to do this morning?”

“Hmm. Other than washing the dishes – you and Lois can both handle that one – there’s nothing else you can do until that ‘powerful’ magic moment.”

Clark’s eyes seemed to lose a bit of their normal sparkle, but Lois’ expression didn’t falter an iota. From the corner of her eye, Lois caught Martha’s tiny grin. It seemed that Clark’s mother was on Lois’ side in this relationship tug-of-love.

Martha reached over and patted his hand. “Don’t worry, honey. Things will happen the way they’re supposed to happen.”

He sighed and nodded. “Okay, Zen Mother. Come on, Lois, those dishes won’t wash themselves.”

Lois nudged him with her elbow. “Now I know where you got that easy acceptance of circumstances.”

Clark chortled, then they stood together as Lois shook her finger at him. “You shouldn’t complain, Clark. I’m not. Sure, I got up earlier than I usually do and now I’m doing the breakfast dishes with you, but I also saw a beautiful sunrise, got to cook with your mother, and I’m going to take a very nice walk with a very special and wonderful man.” She turned to Martha and asked with perfect innocence, “By the way, Martha, when will Jonathan be back so we can begin our walk?”

When Clark blurted out an inarticulate syllable and stopped in place, she turned her big, doe-like, innocent eyes to him. She held his gaze until Martha snorted behind her and the three of them laughed like a sitcom laugh track.

Martha smiled as she watched Clark guide Lois to his Fortress of Solitude. She doubted that he knew how many times she’d watched him as her heart broke for him while he climbed that tree to sit on one of the crates on that platform and brooded over the differences in him that separated him from his friends and classmates. She’d known when he’d climbed the tree to mourn the end of the relationship with Lana Lang. She’d watched him struggle with his new abilities, his impossible strength, his ability to float in mid-air, and she and Jonathan had comforted him and tried to guide him through those difficult times.

But the Fortress was always Clark’s place. She never went there while he was at home, not for any reason. Her young man needed a place of his own to be alone for short periods of time, and she always respected his boundaries.

Now he was bringing a young woman into that part of his life. She hoped Lois would also respect his boundaries. Of course, Lois had boundaries of her own, and as long as they respected each other’s boundaries, they’d be just fine.

Lois looked around at the trees surrounding the creek. “This is nice. And it’s good to know that nobody’s pointing a weapon at us, doping his scope to hit us center mass.”

Clark grinned at her. “Just don’t look like a deer and you should be just fine. Some of the hunters in this part of the state don’t exactly carry licenses.”

“I’ll be careful. I’m not packing my AR-15 this week.”

“Well, we should be fine. My Fortress is about fourteen feet up the tree, and very few deer climb very well. Plus, we’re both bigger than the squirrels around here.”

She stopped at a tall oak with horizontal boards screwed into the trunk. “This looks like the place.”

He nodded. “It is. You want me to make sure the spiders and snakes are gone before you come up?”

“Please do. You know what a delicate flower I am.”

He chuckled and climbed the ladder. Lois noticed that the steps didn’t display much stress, as if he were almost floating up the tree instead of actually climbing. “Showoff,” she muttered.

He stopped and stared down at her. “Did you just call me a showoff?”

“Aren’t you?”

“Afraid not. That’s actually what my mom was talking about – the ‘powerful magic moment’ when my ‘special advantages’ show up again.”

“Ah, right. Sorry, I’d forgotten about that.”

In seconds he poked his head over the side of the platform at the top of the ladder. “All clear. Shall I come down and escort you?”

“Oh, I think I can make it that far without falling.”

Carol Sherman stood behind a tree topping a rise at the edge of town. The band was playing their hearts out, the town was hopping, and the people were having a great time. Carol desperately wished she could experience it with them.

But she couldn’t.

Everyone knew her as the EPA liaison who was tearing up Wayne Irig’s farm for no good reason. They were sure she’d lied to them from the moment she’d walked into the courthouse to display her EPA paperwork.

She had, too. She hadn’t done it deliberately, but she had. She’d sold the county clerk the line that they were checking for pesticide contamination from decades earlier. She’d assured everyone that Wayne Irig was safe and sound, off on a government-paid vacation. She’d promised the reporters, the town council, the mayor, and anyone who’d listen that nothing odd was going on at the Irig farm, that the operation was a standard one and would be complete in a couple of weeks, and that the Irig farm would be restored to its original condition before they left.

It was a complete and utter lie.

She didn’t know exactly what these paramilitary pretenders were up to, but it wasn’t anything good. She’d almost called her boss in Washington to check up on Colonel Trask and his men, but fear grabbed her hand and stilled it, fear that Trask would do something very bad to her – or worse, to her daughter – if he found out that she’d gone behind his back.

Bureau 39 didn’t show up on her list of organizations. Her Internet searches on her laptop gave her only hints of something shady going on. The chemists with Trask’s men checked soil samples, but they were using modified Geiger counters instead of chemical detection equipment.

They were looking for something radioactive.

This was bad. This was very bad. She had to get out, and she had to have proof that this project wasn’t what she’d been told it was. Her word wouldn’t be enough. She had to have written proof. And the only written proof was in Trask’s files.

She had to get it. She had to get it soon.

Just as soon as she found some courage.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Clark’s bedroom brightened until Cat couldn’t sleep any more. It was time for her to get up and face the day. They still had the EPA story to work on, and Cat was looking forward to getting some quality pictures to go with Clark’s and Lois’ text. Maybe she

could contribute a good sidebar on government overkill and money-wasting unnecessary projects, too.

Cat sighed and buttoned her shirt, thinking about the jeans and boots Lois had mentioned the night before. Maybe she should pick up a pair of each for camouflage here in Smallville, and there were enough country dance venues in Metropolis to make the purchases worth her while. Maybe she could attract someone who could masquerade as Clark's slightly older brother.

Maybe her heart would heal someday, too.

Martha caught her eye as she hit the bottom step. "Good morning, sleepyhead. Glad you could join me. Get caught up on your sleep?"

Cat glanced at her watch. It was almost eight o'clock. She grinned at Martha and shook her head. "I guess Clark's description of farm life was accurate. When do chickens get up, anyway?"

"Generally right at daybreak, unless it's raining hard. Then they usually wait until they're very hungry." Martha gestured at the dining room table. "Speaking of being hungry, what can I whip up for you?"

"Just coffee and toast, please. I know I'm late, and I'm not a big breakfast eater anyway."

"You're sure? It's no trouble, honest."

"Thanks, but no. I feel like you're spoiling us as it is." She slid onto one of the chairs. "Speaking of our two wayward chicken-scratchers, I don't see them around."

Martha placed Cat's coffee on the table, along with cream and several kinds of sweetener. "Clark took Lois to his Fortress of Solitude. I suppose they needed some alone time."

"Fortress of Solitude? That says a lot, both about Clark and about how he feels about Lois."

Martha faked a sniff. "I know. He's never invited his mother to the Fortress, and I must say that I'm deeply traumatized by that exclusion."

Cat grinned and prepped her coffee. "I kind of hope Lois has good news for him. They both deserve some." She sipped her drink and smiled. "That's excellent, Martha. You'll have to come back to the Daily Planet with us and make sure we all get our caffeine fixes from your carafe."

"You're saying that Clark didn't exaggerate about the terrible coffee in the newsroom?"

"I don't know how he could have. We use the coffee left at the end of the shift to threaten reluctant sources. Always works, too."

They shared a chuckle, and toast chose that moment to pop up. Martha stood and moved to the cabinet. "What flavor of preserves do you prefer?"

Cat looked over her choices and said, "Well, since you don't appear to have any cream cheese, I'll accept a thin spread of blueberry or raspberry."

"I have both."

"In that case, please astonish me."

"Blueberry it is. Here you go. Are you sure I can't tempt you with some eggs or ham or pancakes?"

"As the playwright Oscar Wilde allegedly once said, I can resist anything but temptation. Most days you'd have to push me away from the table this well-provisioned, but—" she played with her cup for a moment, then said, "I'm afraid I'm already having a downer of a day. I'm sorry."

Martha nodded. "Does your mood have anything to do with Clark or Lois?"

"Well – yes, actually, it does." She took a nibble from her toast. "When Lois got to the room last night, she was uptight about something she wouldn't tell me about. Because she's my best friend in the entire world, I need to ask you if there's anything you know about that."

"I see. I think you should ask her about that, Cat. It's not my business."

Cat lifted her gaze and smiled. "I was kind of hoping you'd

say that. There's something else weighing on me, something I need to share with another person, and that other person can never reveal it. I think you're that person."

Martha regarded the younger woman carefully for a moment, then put her hand on Cat's. "Is this about your feelings for Clark and your history with him?"

Cat's mouth fell open and she sat back. "Make that two things," she grunted after a long moment.

"You did ask me to astonish you."

Cat looked at Martha's twinkling eyes and sighed. "Is it that obvious?"

"Not unless you know what to look for. I wasn't really sure how you felt until just now. And I wouldn't have brought it up unless I was also certain that you don't have any evil designs on my son." She squeezed Cat's hand gently. "You have to know how he feels about Lois."

Cat nodded. "I do. I also know how Lois feels about him, too, even though she's still not sure she's the right woman for him. She's had a few guys chase her, but despite being chased hard a couple of times, she hasn't dated anyone seriously other than Clark since I've known her, and she vacillates between handing him her heart on a silver platter and trying to run so far away from him that even he couldn't find her. She's a better person than she thinks she is, but Clark is the first man who's ever come close to convincing her of it."

Cat sighed again and looked down at the table. "The Army damaged Lois, I damaged Clark, but together they complete each other. I guess – no, I'm sure that they can help each other heal the right way. And he wouldn't force himself on her in any way, shape, form, or fashion. He's just not that kind of man. Lois' fears about being unfixable diminish more every time she's around Clark, and she allows him to open up and safely be himself around her. She wouldn't hurt him for all the tea in China. He wouldn't hurt her for all the gold in Fort Knox."

She sat back and crossed her arms to hold her hurt in place. "Doesn't leave any room for me. When I'm around those two, I'm about as useful as a fish's bicycle."

"I'm sorry, Catharine. You're a fine young woman. You're right, Lois has Clark's heart, but that doesn't mean you can't find love, or that it can't find you. Who knows, you might meet someone this month who'll want to be the Adam to your Eve."

Cat coughed out a wet laugh. "Never heard it put that way, Martha, but thank you."

"You're welcome." She hesitated, then carefully asked, "Do you want to tell me about the other thing that's weighing you down?"

"Oh. Right. You don't miss a trick, do you?"

Martha put her elbow on the table and propped her chin on her palm. "If there's a chatterbox in this family, it's me. Clark talks a lot, but mostly to gather information rather than reveal it. Jonathan is very economical with his speech – he doesn't chatter or babble or fill up the air with meaningless words. And neither do you."

Cat waited for Martha to continue, but she didn't. With a sigh, she looked away and said, "I – learned a secret a while back. A big secret, one that I'm certain you'd prefer I didn't know." She waited a few seconds longer, then looked directly at Martha. "I learned what a certain someone does when he's not comforting Lois or writing quality news stories."

Martha's forehead furrowed, then her eyes opened wide. Her pupils shrank to pinpricks. "Uh – how – exactly what is it that you think you've learned?"

Cat tipped her head back, listening, and when she heard nothing unusual, she turned toward her hostess and drew an "S" on Martha's chest.

Martha nodded and sighed. "Did someone tell you or did you figure it out yourself?"

"No one spilled any beans to me. I just gathered information

from personal observation and a little judicious snooping. Clark doesn't know that I know. Neither does Lois. And to forestall the big concern that has to be in your mind right now, no one who doesn't already know will ever hear this from me."

"I see. So how does this affect your relationship with my son?"

"We're friends. That's really all we can ever be. Remember, he told Lois about himself but he didn't tell me. If he ever does, I'll be shocked and stunned and stupefied to learn it." She looked away as she said, "Besides, I'm the untrod path in the yellow wood."

"Robert Frost? Two roads diverged in a yellowed wood?"

Cat looked at Martha again. "Yes. I still don't know how I feel about being – untrod."

Martha sighed. "Please don't be bitter. I know it's hard to lose someone, then later on when you think you might have another chance it isn't really there."

Cat shook her head. "I think I've accepted it. I just hope I can sweep all those old leaves out the door."

Martha unsuccessfully tried to stifle a smile. "How did you know that he told Lois?"

"I was at the top of the stairs last night, out of sight just around the turn to the hallway. Lois didn't hear me come out of the bathroom. She was more concerned with whatever was going on downstairs with the three of you." Cat turned away again. "Understandable. She loves him with all her heart, Martha. She's just not sure her heart is strong enough or big enough to love him the way she thinks he deserves."

"What do you think?"

Cat paused in thought, then said, "I think Lois has far more love and strength in her than she knows. Being around Clark for all these months has taught her so very much. Two years ago – maybe just a year ago – she needed me desperately, and she might not have stayed at the Planet if I'd left. Now – well, she wants us to remain close friends – and I do too – but as far as relative importance in her life goes, I've been replaced."

She stopped long enough to take a deep breath and let it out. "And I don't mind so much, given Clark's character and obvious love for her. She needs him to be cautious with her, and he is. She needs him to open up to her, and he has. She needs to believe that there's no one else in the world who can love him like she does, and she's almost there."

Cat paused, then turned to face Martha again. "But none of that would be happening if you and Jonathan hadn't been such wonderful, patient, loving people and brought up Clark to be the excellent man that he is. Whatever good comes from this relationship is largely due to the two of you."

"Thank you. You're very kind."

Cat lifted one index finger and wagged it at Martha. "I'm not just being kind here. It's the truth or I wouldn't say it to you."

"I still thank you. That does, however, leave you with a choice – how you're going to deal with their relationship going forward."

Cat leaned back and crossed her arms, her eyes boring into Martha's. "I'm going to do my dead level best to defend both of them against any and all outside threats. If anyone comes after either one of them – or both of them together – that person or group will have to come through me first."

Before Martha had a chance to respond, the phone rang.

Clark enjoyed bringing Lois to his Fortress, smiled to see how she looked in wonder at nature's beauty around her, and drank in her soft laughter when something in the woods around them amused her. He gently grasped her hand and was silently thrilled when she lifted their combined digits to her face and kissed his knuckles. There was so much he wanted to tell her, to ask her, to promise her, but he also didn't want to pressure her into doing or saying something she wasn't ready for or that she'd regret later.

She lifted her shining face to look at her. "This is all so beautiful, Clark. And it's so very you."

"How so?"

She gestured around them with her free hand. "You're up in the air, above so many things. You can see so much farther from here than on the ground." She reached over and ran her fingertips down his cheek. "You're also alone. That's not good, not good at all. But you've shared this with me without any limits or preconditions and brought me into this special place in your life." She pulled him as close to her as she could. "Thank you so very much."

Then she kissed him as if her heart were trying to encircle him.

If she hadn't had a firm hold on his torso he might have floated away. As she slowly pulled back, he chuckled and said, "I think the 'magic moment' has arrived. My powers are all the way back."

She grinned. "I knew they would be."

He kissed her again. "Did you know that you'd be the one to bring them back?"

"Of course not, you goof. But you're not from Earth. The green crystal your dad showed me last night might be dangerous to you, but your powers are as much a part of you as my pancreas is a part of me. They might be suppressed for a while, but I don't think they'll ever leave you permanently."

She dropped her gaze, then looked up again. "But the powers aren't what makes you Superman. He wouldn't be the hero he is if it weren't for Clark Kent standing inside the super-suit. His honesty, his fearlessness, his personality, all come from you. He doesn't make you – you make him."

Clark put his arms around her and gently drew her toward himself. "Thank you. Hearing you say that means so much to me."

"You're more than welcome." She leaned against his shoulder. "And I'm so honored, so blessed that you love me. You wouldn't hurt me if it meant becoming the benevolent ruler of the whole solar system. And I – I want to spend the rest of my life with you, loving you and being loved by you, arguing over stories and spelling and letting me take risks and knowing all the time that you're protecting me the best way you know how."

She pulled back and smiled. "I want to marry you, Clark. Will you be my forever-and-a-day loving husband?"

His jaw opened and he blinked several times before he remembered to breathe. "Ah – yeah, I want all that too. But I thought you were going to give me permission to ask you, not propose to me."

"What, you're complaining now?"

"Oh, no! I'm just – a little surprised. That's all."

"Surprise! Better than pancakes and strawberry syrup, huh?"

He laughed. "Much better." He leaned in to kiss her, but she held him back. "What's wrong?"

Her mouth went straight but her eyes twinkled merrily. "I'm still waiting for an answer, Farm Boy."

"Oh! I thought it was understood."

"Come on, Clark! Make me understand!"

He took in her unbalanced posture, the forward tilt of her head, the tension around her eyes, and he realized that she believed he wanted to marry her but she wasn't totally, utterly, completely convinced. This was not a moment for humor or teasing. She wanted – no, she desperately needed – a straight answer from him.

"Then please understand this, Lois. I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life standing beside you, loving you, treasuring you, protecting you whether you think you need it or not. I will be so happy to be your husband that you may not be able to stand it. So my answer is yes, I'll marry you, tomorrow if that's what you want, or any date in the future."

She crushed her eyes shut and grabbed him around the neck.

She all but molded her body to his, and he wrapped his arms around her and held her close. She sobbed once and he felt her tears dampen his neck. He put his lips beside her ear and softly said, "I love you so very much."

He was glad his powers had come back. She might have accidentally strangled him had they held off returning for another fifteen minutes.

As they walked back to the farmhouse, Lois couldn't have been happier if she'd won every lottery in the country on the same day. The only thing that could have topped this moment would be actually saying "I do" to Clark and hearing it from him. She wished they could get the license today and find either the Kent's pastor or a judge or just fly to Las Vegas.

Now she had one more reason to finish this assignment and request some vacation time. She was sure Perry would allow Clark to take some time off, even if he hadn't been at the Planet for much more than a year. And she'd make time for Cat to throw her a wedding shower or a bachelorette party or even a memorial party mourning her passage from single woman to wife, whatever she wanted to do.

Of course, she'd have to break the news to Cat first.

Clark apparently felt her slight stumble and he stopped. "Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded. "I just realized that now I have to tell my best friend that she can't have you." His mouth moved and she added, "Not even on a temporary duty assignment. Got that, almost-husband?"

He grinned at her. "I don't remember whether or not I told you, but she and I had a conversation about restarting our romantic relationship and I shut her down."

She let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "No, I didn't know about that. When did it happen?"

"During the investigation into the bombing of the Carlin building. That night when she and I came to your apartment, she asked me if she had a chance with me. Remember? You asked me about her suggestion that I compare her couch with yours."

Lois frowned in concentration for a moment. "I think I remember that night. What did you tell her?"

"That if I were going to date any woman working at the Daily Planet, it would be you and no one else. I told her we could be friends, but that was it." He took her arm and gently restarted their walk to the farmhouse. "Of course, I didn't know at the time that you and I were going to fight about going out together."

They stepped across the small drainage ditch less than a football field from the door. "That's because I was afraid you were going to tell me you'd decided you loved her more than you loved me."

"You didn't know how good you had it. Now not only do you have to put up with my mom and dad, I get to charm your parents and make them like me more than they like you."

"Too late, Kansas. They don't know anything substantial about you, just what Lucy and I have told them, and they already like you better than they like me."

"Then my work is done. We can get married right away."

They shared a soft laugh, then Lois said, "File the story first, then we get married."

Clark looked like he had another comeback ready, but Cat threw open the back door and waved for them to hurry. "Come on! Sheriff Harris just called, said that someone saw Wayne Irig in town having breakfast. We need to get going so we can talk to him."

It wasn't Wayne having breakfast, it was Roger Parker, owner of Parker's Hardware and Plumbing Supplies, a man who looked like Wayne from a distance but who didn't know the farmer very well and was surprised to be mistaken for him.

Rachel couldn't stop apologizing. "I'm real sorry, y'all, real sorry. That boy swore up and down it was Mr. Irig. I shouldn't have called you without making sure who it was."

Cat shook her head. "You didn't do it on purpose, Sheriff. We appreciate the effort you put forth."

Clark put his hand on Rachel's shoulder. "She speaks for all three of us. We're not mad, Rachel, just a little disappointed that we haven't caught up to Wayne yet."

"Thanks, Clark. Look, I gotta go. Somebody tipped over Al Schumacher's little yard tractor last night and all the gas leaked out on his clover and killed a big patch of it. He wants me to dust for fingerprints and take shoe impressions and I don't know what all so I can bust the perps. Stupid teenagers. If they're gonna put out that much effort, they should do something constructive."

"I understand, Rachel," he said. "Duty calls all of us eventually."

"Yeah." Rachel took a deep breath and let it out quickly.

"Hope I see all o' y'all tonight at the hoe-down. The band is gonna rehearse live in the gazebo in about an hour, and a lot of the young folk want to loosen up for that dance. Y'all can have a little fun today, can't you, even if I got you here under false pretenses?"

"Stop beating yourself up about this, Rachel," Clark insisted. "It's okay, I promise."

"Well — awright. Hope the next time you see him, it really is him."

Clark watched her slink guiltily to her patrol car and get in, then turned to the other two reporters. "Actually, she's right. We can have some fun and look for any sign of Wayne at the same time. You two want to get something to eat?"

Cat gave him a mysterious half-grin. "In a little while, sure. Right now, though, Lois and I are going shopping."

Lois turned to her and frowned. "Shopping?"

"Sure! We both need to get out of these stylish city threads and into some snappy Smallville clothes." She took Lois' hand in hers and headed off toward the strip of stores in what passed for downtown. "Come on, Louise, let's see if they can outfit the sexiest women in Smallville."

Lois laughed and almost skipped along beside her. "You'll be the death of me yet, Thelma."

Clark watched them and smiled. It was so nice that Cat was Lois' best friend. And it seemed that she'd decided to be Clark's friend as well. He hoped Cat would come to the wedding, whenever it happened and wherever it took place.

Lois sat on the small couch, the brown dress in a bag beside her, and watched her friend try on shirts to see which would go best with the boots and jeans she'd already bought. "I'd stay away from vertical lines if I were as tall as you. The boots already give you almost three more inches in height. You'll look like you're six feet tall."

"I always wished I could play basketball. I'd be a terror on defense at that height."

"Yeah, but can you dribble?"

"If I'm drunk enough, sure."

Lois snorted a laugh. "I think maybe I should put on my new dress and let you compare colors. We probably shouldn't look like sisters."

"Are you ashamed of me, Sis?"

"Of course not. I just don't want to scare the guys away from you."

"Like that'll happen with Clark around. He'll scare off anyone who needs it."

"Come on, Cat, you—"

"Okay, okay! Just keep me away from red T-birds."

"Around here you'd have to choose a pickup truck."

Cat paused and spun on one heel to face Lois, then lifted her hair with both hands and canted her hips. "It doesn't matter what I

drive, girlfriend, I'm going to look absolutely fabulous behind the wheel."

Cat finally picked out a blue shirt with a light-colored broken print. Lois put on her brown polka-dot dress, and together they drifted toward the gazebo where the band was rehearsing. With her new height advantage, Cat spotted Clark before Lois did and pulled the suddenly shy brunette in her wake to a stop behind his broad right shoulder. Then she called his name and waited for him to turn around.

He turned. He saw Lois.

And Cat realized she'd disappeared from his field of vision. She knew that all he could see was the beautiful young woman in the flattering dress before him.

He reached out and took her hand. "Wow," he breathed.

Lois blushed a little. "What do you think?"

He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Lois curtsied – Cat was truly shocked to see that – and tugged his arm close to her side. "Shall we dance, Mr. Kent?"

"You know how to line dance?"

She pulled him into the small group dancing in front of the band. "Cat and I both learned a couple of years ago. We took lessons because the instructor told us it was a good way to meet guys."

"Did it work?"

She chuckled. "Define 'guys.' Cat had to beat bunches of forty-somethings away with a baseball bat."

Cat smiled at the memory. Lois had learned more than either woman had expected, and now she was holding her own among all those country people who'd known how to line dance from kindergarten.

Cat was startled by a tap on her elbow. She turned to see a tall skinny guy who looked like a high school senior nervously trying to get her attention. "Excuse me, ma'am, but I – I was wonderin' if you'd – you'd like to dance."

She considered cutting him down for a moment, but a glance past his shoulder told her that he'd probably been teased into asking her by his companions. They probably expected to see him shot down in flames.

So, being the perverse sprite that she was, she nodded. "Sure. I'm a little out of practice, so you lead, okay?"

It took him a moment for her agreement to register with him, but when it did he nearly burst. "Uh – uh – sure!" The band chose that moment to segue into the old classic "Tennessee Waltz," and Cat allowed him to take her hands and pull her into the dance area.

The startled boy kept swallowing, so Cat took the conversational lead. "What's your name?"

"Name? Oh! I'm sorry. I'm Will. Will Carpenter. What's yours?"

She could never have explained her next statement. "I'm Margaret Mayfield, but my friends call me Maggie."

"I haven't seen you before, Maggie. Are you new in town?"

"Visiting friends, actually, and yes, it's my first trip to Smallville."

"That's great! Who are you here to visit?"

"I'm staying with Jonathan and Martha Kent. You know them?"

"Oh, sure I do. Everybody knows them. They're really nice people."

"They are that. Their son Clark and his girlfriend are here, too."

"Really? That house of theirs must be crowded again."

"Sorry, crowded again?"

"Oh, my big brother was on the baseball team with Clark. I got to go over there with him a couple of times when Mrs. Kent was laying on a spread for us. She cooked the victory dinner when

those guys won the State tournament in their class. Kenny – that's my brother – pitched three games and only gave up four runs. Clark played center field, hit four, maybe five dingers and drove in a bunch of runs. Those guys rocked that year! They won the tournament with a record of six wins and only one loss."

She chuckled. "I'm not much of a baseball fan, Will. What's a dinger?"

"It's a home run. Man, Clark, he hit one so hard, it went over the fence in left center so fast I thought the ball had a jet engine in it."

"Do you play baseball too?"

"Well, yeah, I do, but I'm a second-string first baseman and right fielder. Coach says I do good work with my glove, but I can't hit a curve ball to save my life, although I'm pretty good runnin' the bases if I manage to get on. I'm actually better at basketball."

"Maybe you'll get to play in college."

"That would be cool. How do you like our town so far?"

She smiled softly. "It's pretty good, actually, and getting better every minute."

Lois glanced over at Cat and Will. "I hope she's not planning to chew him up and spit him out."

Clark's eyes had taken on a mildly puzzled cast. "I don't have any idea what she's planning, but she just introduced herself to him as Margaret Mayfield."

She frowned in thought. "I have no idea why she'd do that."

Clark shrugged. "Me neither. But if she introduces us to Will, we'll need to remember to call her Maggie. I don't see any reason to embarrass her here."

"Huh. She looks like she's having the time of her life."

He chuckled. "Will is having a great time. His buddies are just about to fall over with amazement. And there are at least three girls who look like they're radically changing their opinions of him."

"I guess she's performing a public service, then."

"I hope it doesn't go to his head."

Lois snorted. "Or someplace else."

"Why, you naughty girl you! I think you owe someone an apology."

"Hey, it's not every day that a naughty girl gets engaged to a really super guy and makes an honest man out of him."

Clark's foot caught on the dancing surface and he lost the rhythm for a half-second before recovering. "If you don't mind, I'm going to resign from this verbal fencing contest while I'm not too far behind."

Cat made a show of glancing at her watch, then said, "Oh, Will, I'm sorry, but I have an appointment I have to keep. But I have to tell you that this has been a lot of fun. Maybe we'll see each other again before I go back East."

Will's face fell for a moment, then he recovered his silly grin. "That's okay, Miss Mayfield."

"No-no-no! I told you my friends call me Maggie. That includes you."

He gulped and his eyes turned into saucers. "Sure – Maggie. I appreciate you puttin' up with my mediocre dancing."

"You were fine, Will. You didn't step on my feet more than six or seven times." She laughed at his sudden horror. "No, seriously, you didn't step on me at all. The girls here must love to dance with you." He did the fish face of someone who wanted to talk but couldn't find any words. She leaned closer and kissed him on the cheek. "At least, I bet they will now."

She turned and took two steps away, then looked over her shoulder at him, smiled, and gave him a finger wave. Will's color was coming back and his stance slowly relaxed. He returned her wave, then turned and strutted back to his friends like John Travolta doing disco. They were standing in a loose gaggle and

staring at him with their mouths open. Before he reached them, a young blonde intercepted him and pulled his arm against her side.

Cat suppressed a belly laugh. That's my good deed for the day, she thought.

Lois led Clark to meet her at the edge of the dance floor. "Are you through corrupting the morals of the youth of Smallville now, Thelma?"

"Yes, Louise, I'm done. If he can improve his dancing skills just a little bit, he won't lack for dates any time soon."

Clark shook his head. "Some of these Smallville girls have expensive tastes. You might have just bankrupted poor old Will."

Cat grinned again. "That's his lookout. Hey, I need to get my camera from Clark's house and get some shots of the fake EPA site. How about I meet you two there in, say, an hour?"

He looked at Lois, who nodded and said, "Sounds good. Just don't get caught, okay? We don't want to have to bail you out of trouble."

"Right back at you. You two walk around and have fun. It'll establish where we were this morning in case we need an alibi."

Lois couldn't stop smiling. She watched Clark interacting with the people in the town and enjoying himself. She'd never seen him uptight or nervous, but today he was more relaxed and at ease than ever. It was as if Smallville itself was untwisting the knots of stress he'd accumulated over the months he'd spent in Metropolis.

And maybe she was helping. She certainly hoped so.

He finished a quick conversation with a matronly woman and turned to Lois. "How about a quick lunch? It's almost time for us to meet up with Cat, and I'm sure you're hungry. Mrs. Potter has her famous potato salad here, guaranteed to be salmonella-free."

She chuckled. "Has that been a problem in the past?"

"Once or twice. Now the dishes like those are refrigerated until they're served. How about it?"

"Sure. I've always wanted to see you in your natural habitat."

"What natural habitat is that?"

"Having a picnic lunch with little old ladies walking by and pinching your cheeks."

"I don't know about that. I rarely get my cheeks pinched."

She grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the tables in the square, grinning like she'd won a prize at one of the carnies games. "You're with me today, Farm Boy, and they may not let you eat anything. But don't worry. I'll protect you from all the left-handed six-fingered cooks and servers."

Lois was right, Clark mused. The way they were sitting close together, the way they were smiling at each other, the way they teased each other, all combined to attract the little old lady moths to their joyous flame. His cheeks were pinched repeatedly, and Lois was hugged so many times and congratulated for sitting so close to him that she struggled to finish her lunch.

Two of the ladies recognized Lois' name and thanked her for her service, and one older man sat across from them and chatted briefly with her about some of the non-combat aspects of Army life. He had a low opinion of Washington politicians who sent American soldiers into battle and then hamstrung them with absurd rules of engagement. He also didn't care for the inevitable black markets many GIs tapped into to buy things civilians saw as staples, like toothpaste, toothbrushes, foot powder, and soap that wouldn't grind your skin off. But he admitted that they were necessary evils, given the poor state of the Base Exchange inventory at many forward areas.

Then he stood and saluted her. Lois responded by coming to attention and returning the salute, holding it until the other man ended his. Then the man smiled and ambled off toward another part of the carnival.

Lois watched him go, then sat on the bench close to Clark. "I wish I'd thought to ask his name," she said. "He's a vet's vet."

"That's Preston Flynn. He owns an electrician's shop on the south side of town."

"Do you know what he did in the service?"

Clark nodded. "He's a Vietnam vet and a Medal of Honor recipient." Lois dropped her fork and her eyes grew wide. "I've seen the citation," Clark continued. "He was a field medic at Khe Sahn during the worst of the siege. Saved a lot of lives with his heroism."

"And he saluted me?" squeaked Lois. "I should have saluted him first! Medal of Honor recipients receive the first salute from every uniformed rank, generals included!"

"He doesn't like to talk about it. Kind of like you." He took a drink of iced tea. "I'm sure you noticed that he didn't bring up the combat you'd seen. Besides, neither of you is in uniform any longer."

"I don't care. If I see him again, I'm gonna salute him."

"I'm sure he'd appreciate it as long as you don't make a big scene. Hey, how would you like a bear?"

"A bare what?"

"A stuffed bear."

She frowned at him, obviously not comprehending. "A stuffed bare what?"

He chortled. "No, like a plush doll! A toy, a souvenir of our time together here in Smallville."

"Oh! Silly me, I thought you meant something bare, b-a-r-e, and I couldn't figure out what bare thing you were trying to give me."

Several sexy-time thoughts chased each other through Clark's mind. He smiled but didn't voice them. "Actually, I meant winning you a stuffed bear – b-e-a-r – or some other kind of critter. There's a Superman swing-the-hammer-and-ring-the-bell machine over on the next aisle."

A soft smile suffused her face. "I think that's a wonderful idea." She leaned close and whispered, "Just don't knock the bell off the top of the tower."

Lois hugged the blue and white bear wearing the Superman cape and grinned. "This is my very favorite stuffed animal now. I'm going to name him Clarkie and keep him forever and ever and ever!"

Clark laughed with her. "I was a little concerned that Butch McGowen was going to pick him when he almost broke the mallet. He's still a competitive weightlifter, you know."

"Yeah, I could tell. He kept flexing for that little redheaded girl."

"Only because she kept squealing at him."

"True. Hey, who was that bubble-headed blonde who kept making eyes at you?"

He frowned. "I don't know. I didn't see her."

"Well, she acted like – in fact there she is now."

The blonde bounced at Clark from the side and grabbed his arm as if she owned it. Lois disliked her before she knew the girl's name.

"Clark, honey! Where have you been keeping yourself? I've been waiting for you to call me!"

Clark tried to disengage his arm, but she kept renewing her grip. "Lana, let me introduce you to Lois Lane, my coworker and my fiancée. Lois, this is Lana Lang, a girl I dated in high school." He gave up trying to escape. "Dated for a short time, that is." He turned to the intruder and said, "Lana, didn't you get married a while back? What's your last name now?"

"Oh, pooh," she said, "Brad and I got divorced almost two years ago. Basketball wives get cheated on a lot. I went back to being Lana Lang. I wrote you all about it. Didn't you get my letters?"

"I was overseas a lot and moved fairly often. Did you try to send them directly to me?"

“No, I sent them to your home address in Smallville. Maybe your parents forwarded them?”

“They might have gotten lost overseas. Or they might still be at the house, waiting for me to come back to Smallville.”

“There’s a shoebox with letters and some cards in it,” Lois said. “It’s in the top of your closet. I saw it there when Cat and I were hanging up our clothes.”

“Oh. Well, maybe that’s where they are.” Lana tightened her grip and her voice went up a register. “Clark, you haven’t told me how glad you are to see me!”

His mouth opened slowly, but no words escaped. After a few seconds, Lois stepped closer to both of them and said sweetly, “That’s because Clark is unfailingly polite, Lana, and he won’t tell you he wishes you were somewhere in northern Timbuctoo instead of here with us. I, on the other hand, am often very impolite. Like I’m about to be with you.” She handed the stuffed bear to Clark, stepped into Lana’s personal space, and glared barbed-wire icicles at the blonde bimbo. “Back off and leave my fiancée alone. Or else.”

“What – Clark, are you gonna let this snippy city girl talk to me like that?”

“She was in the Army, Lana. She’s a trained combat soldier. If I were you I’d play nice.”

“I don’t care what she used to be!” Lana dropped Clark’s arm and tried to push Lois away. “Listen, you skinny little—”

Lois grabbed Lana’s wrists, pulled her forward and stuck out her leg, then flipped her onto the grass with a simple hip throw. Lana landed flat on her spine and lost all the air in her chest. Suddenly her lungs didn’t seem to be working well, and she lay on the ground making tiny whining, breathy grunts.

Clark’s eyebrows pinched together. “She’ll be all right, won’t she?”

Lois moved to look into Lana’s eyes. “She’ll either recover or suffocate in a few minutes. Either way, we have someplace to go and something to do when we get there.”

Lana’s eyes widened and she tried to reach up to grab Clark. He leaned back and said, “Lana, she’s kidding. You’ll be fine in a little bit. I’m sorry you didn’t play nice with her.”

“Bye, Lana,” Lois added. “Hands off my man from now on, okay?”

Lana lay limp on the ground, trying to recover the ability to breathe. She whimpered lightly as the other two walked toward their rental car. Lois didn’t bother to glance back at her.

Clark handed the stuffed bear back to Lois, then bent down close to her ear and muttered, “Talk about not playing nice with others.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Carol Sherman sneaked into the pitch-dark, empty tent at four-forty-two a.m. She looked around for a moment, then decided to risk using her penlight. She’d overheard two of the men who carried rifles everywhere say some very disturbing things, some of which referred to people being dead. And she still shuddered when she thought of how Colonel Trask had abused poor Mr. Irig. She wanted no part of this paramilitary operation and she was on her way out the door.

She also needed to show some proof to her boss at the EPA main office that this operation was not what she’d been told it was.

She slid open a file drawer and leafed through the folders. It looked as if Trask’s system was “throw it in the drawer and forget about it.” Nothing was organized by date, by subject, by anything. It made finding the proof she wanted difficult if not impossible.

Of course, she mused, that might have been the reason for the lack of organization.

She heard a snapping noise behind her and she spun around with her light before thinking. The beam flashed past a man standing about ten feet from her.

She’d make a lousy cat burglar.

It was useless to pretend that he hadn’t seen her, so she opened the flashlight’s focus and looked at his face.

It was Colonel Trask.

He tilted his head. “Looking for something, Ms. Sherman?”

She nervously shifted the light to her left hand. “Oh – uh – yes, I was – I was looking for my – my assignment summary. Job description. You know. I – I wanted to make sure I was doing everything I was supposed to do.”

Trask nodded slowly. “I see. Have you found what you were looking for?”

“N-no. No, not yet. But I can come back later if you’re busy.”

His face seemed to harden and his eyes got darker. “I’m afraid you can’t come back later, Ms. Sherman. In fact, I want you to come with me.”

“Oh, but I – I need to call my daughter—”

“Now.”

That single word, delivered with such flat intensity, terrified Carol. She stuttered incoherently for a moment, then nearly fell when Trask stepped toward her and grabbed her right arm with his left hand. “Come with me, Ms. Sherman,” he growled. “We need to discuss – your severance pay. Since you’re leaving us.”

Her fluttery flashlight shifted and illuminated first his almost glowing eyes, then his predatory smile, and finally his right hand.

That hand held a huge knife.

She dropped her flashlight and Trask stomped it flat.

As Trask pulled her out of the tent, she realized that the man was insane. And that she was in real danger. Her panic froze her voice and robbed her of independent movement. She had no choice but to go where Trask guided her. She was sure he would kill her.

A few moments later, in an area of Irig’s field where they’d already completed their digging, he proved to her how right she was.

The morning sun peeked over the treetops as Lois slipped almost noiselessly through the orchard with Clark behind her. “See anything?” she whispered.

He didn’t answer until she turned her head to see his mouth. “Just Cat,” he whispered back. “She’s about sixty meters from our position where she can see the front tent flap and the heavy machinery. Looks like she’s getting some good shots.”

She turned to look at the tent again. “I hope so. I’d hate to think—”

“Freeze, both of you!”

The sudden command from behind them startled Lois. She tensed and turned to attack the man with the rifle, but Clark put one hand on her upper arm and quickly squeezed out “no” in Morse code.

She was surprised to discover that he knew the code, but then she realized that there was no reason for him not to know it. And then four other men popped out of covered holes in the ground around them, all holding AR-15 rifles at the ready.

That’s why Clark hadn’t spotted them – he hadn’t looked underground. Lois had forgotten for a moment she was the only combat vet in their group, so none of them had mentioned the possibility of guards hiding under the sod. It also meant that the people in this operation were highly trained and very dangerous.

Well, so was she. She only hoped she’d get a chance to prove it.

Cat had just replaced the film canister when she saw her friends being force-marched toward the big tent. She quickly got as many shots in as she could, then ducked down as two men walked toward her position with rifles at the ready. She was sure they were about to spot her when one of them suddenly stopped and touched the other’s arm and said, “Hold up a minute.”

The first man put his hand to his ear. “This is Cooper in Rover Two. Go ahead, base.” He stopped to listen. “We haven’t completed our first circuit. You sure we need to report back?” He listened again. “That’s a roger. Rover Two out.” He shouldered his weapon. “Come on, Tony, the brass wants everybody back at the main tent.”

“How come?”

“That information is available on a need-to-know basis, and apparently we don’t need to know. Let’s go before the great and powerful Oz goes nuts again.”

They turned and retraced their steps. “You need to quit saying stuff like that, Bo. Somebody’s gonna hear it and turn you in to the colonel.”

Bo’s reply was too soft for Cat to hear clearly. As soon as their footsteps faded from her hearing, she exhaled with relief and silently counted to ten for a margin of safety. Then she started moving closer to the tent.

The three-inch heels on her new boots gave her enough additional height to let her see her target. She unlimbered her camera and resumed photographing everything, including Lois and Clark being forced inside. Then she pulled out her WayneTech pocket recorder and quietly narrated what she’d seen, including the date and the time. It was a habit from the old days using physical tapes, even though the voice file would have date and time stamps.

Now all she had to do was wait for a chance to get help to Mr. Irig’s farm. There was no cell signal this far from the town, so she hoped they had a regular phone in the tent so one of them could call Sheriff Harris.

One of the soldiers shoved Clark through the tent opening and growled, “Move it, four-eyes! The colonel wants to see you.”

“We want to see him, too,” Lois snarled back. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you guys are in?”

“Not as much as the alien is.”

Clark turned and looked at the speaker, then narrowed his eyes. “Trask. You crazy maniac. I should have known you were behind this.” Clark took a step closer to the man and ground out, “The ‘alien,’ as you call him, is trying to help people. You’re just —”

“Just trying to save the American way of life, Mr. Kent,” Trask replied. “The alien is softening us up for an invasion by his fellow creatures. And I believe it’s just about ready with phase two, the propaganda about him being the best person on the planet to run everything.”

Clark took another step forward. “You really are insane! All Superman wants to do—”

Lois’ touch on his elbow stopped him. “Don’t waste the oxygen, Clark. He’s not worth the effort.” She turned to the fanatic masquerading as a patriot. “But I’m interested to know how you’re going to take him down. Last time, he shrugged off the missile you fired at him.”

“I’ve got something better this time. Take a look.”

Clark could see lead inside the metal box Trask picked up off the floor and banged on the table. It was a scary moment for him, and judging from Lois’ sudden tension, she thought so too. She masked it by snapping out, “What, you’re going to throw your lunch at him?”

“No, Miss Lane.” Trask flipped the latch and opened the lid. “I’ve got this.”

The green crystal’s agonizing glow reached Clark immediately. He tensed and leaned forward, hoping that the soldiers on either side of him would grab him and hold him up. They did. At the same time, Lois lunged toward the table as soon as Trask lifted the top.

Two other guards blocked Lois’ path and kept her from their commander. Trask slammed the lid shut and relocked the box.

“Whoa!” Trask barked. “No assaulting of the boss permitted today! You two behave yourselves.”

“Or what?” Lois snarled.

“Or this.”

Trask jumped past her and slammed a punch into Clark’s solar plexus. It hurt – it really hurt – but it also gave him a legitimate reason to collapse to the ground and fight for breath. “NO!” screamed Lois, just before Trask swung a backfist out and away from him and into the side of her head. Her eyes lost focus and the soldiers holding her let go. She dropped like a pile of wet laundry.

Trask glared at each of them in turn. “You two are real pests, you know that? I think it’s time to bait the hook and draw the alien to me.” He grabbed the box and said, “Corporal Delancey, you keep her here for—” he glanced at his watch “—thirty minutes, then secure the prisoner and rendezvous with us at the extraction point. Time hack – now.” He turned from the corporal and motioned to the other guards. “Sergeant McAllister, put the male prisoner in the back of the van. Corporal Baker, assist the sergeant. The rest of you head toward the extraction point and take cover. The V-22 should arrive in forty-five minutes.”

“Colonel, that doesn’t give me much time to get there,” Delancey complained.

“Then you’d best hustle when you head out, Corporal.” He grabbed the box, then turned and strode to the doorway. He pointed to Clark. “Let’s get moving, gentlemen. And bring this collaborator. Put a pair of cuffs on him. We have an appointment at the Kent farm.”

Cat saw Clark being half-carried and half-dragged to a windowless van. His stumbles looked real to her – Trask must have exposed him to that green crystal again. She narrowed her eyes and looked closer. The crystal had to be in the box Trask was carrying. She replaced her film canister, dialed the lens to its furthest focal distance, and took half a dozen more shots of Clark being tossed into the van and handcuffed to a ceiling beam.

She waited until the van trundled down the dirt road toward the highway. Then she stowed her camera, hung the case over her shoulder, took one more good look around her, and crept to the tent flap.

She peeked in and saw Lois sitting on the ground. She looked dazed, and she touched her face as if someone had clobbered her hard. A single soldier stood guard over her.

The guard kept checking his watch as if he had an urgent appointment. When Lois lifted her head and looked at him, he said, “I’m sorry about that. The Colonel shouldn’t have hit you.”

She shook her head and blinked several times. “Thanks, I agree with you. You want to help me up?”

“No, ma’am, I better not. I’m here to guard you and secure you in—” he glanced at his watch again “—twenty-six minutes. I’m not getting close enough for you to try me. I really don’t want to hurt you.”

“Mmph. As much as I appreciate your consideration, on the whole I’d rather be in Philadelphia right now.”

He chuckled. “Can’t argue with that.”

Cat slipped back outside and put down her camera case, then slowly tugged the narrow cloth belt out of the waistband of her jeans. She listened but heard nothing, so she peeked around the tent flap again.

This time Lois saw her and reached up to tug on her earlobe. “Come on, Corporal, I can’t hurt you right now. I’m still loopy from that punch. Give a girl a hand, will ya?”

He shook his head again. “Sorry, ma’am. I know your record and hugghhh!”

Cat dropped her belt around his neck from behind like a garrote, jammed her knee into his spine, and hauled backward with all her strength and anger. She couldn’t have taken him by herself, but before the corporal could turn and fight her, he caught

Lois' front snap kick solidly in his crotch. He forgot about clearing his airway and headed toward the ground folded forward from the waist. Lois helped him finish his fall with a sharp blow to the side of his neck.

Cat rethreaded her belt through the loops on her jeans. "Jeez, Lois, did you have to use the knife hand on his carotid? At least he's not the one who hit you."

Lois straightened, only a little unsteady. "No, but he didn't object, either. He'll wake up in fifteen minutes or so. He's just lucky I didn't have my K-Bar with me."

Cat refastened her belt and shuddered. "Yikes. As sharp as you keep that thing you could have cut his head off." Lois paled and grabbed the back of the downed soldier's folding chair. Cat rushed to help her. "Hey, hey, none of that! This is a no-fainting zone. Sit down while I call the sheriff."

Lois dropped onto the chair, then waved her hand at a table across the tent. "Phone's over there. Old rotary model. I think it works."

Cat grabbed it and listened, then smiled. "Dial tone." She dialed zero and waited a moment. "Hello, operator? My name is Catharine Grant and I'm with — yes, I'm one of the reporters from Metropolis. I need to talk to someone in the sheriff's office. Yes, my hair is a little redder than Rachel's. No, please, I have to talk to someone. Sheriff Harris, if you can connect me. Yes, I'll hold." She covered the mouthpiece. "Lois, did they say where they were going?"

"No, I didn't hear — wait, yes I did. Where did he say — right, the, um, the Kent farm. Trask said he was going to bait the hook."

"Oh, boy, that doesn't sound at all like a good thing. I hope we — yes, this is Cat Grant. Sheriff? Yeah, sure, Rachel. Lois and I are at — yes, her. Test drive? Not that I know — never mind that! We're at the Irig place in that big tent. The guy in charge of the fake EPA team is taking Clark to his parents' farm and he's got bad things on his mind. Come and get us — why not? It's on the way! Besides, you'll need to arrest one of the guys here. No, I distracted him and Lois put him down. We don't have time! We're on the clock here, so please hurry. Yes, we're both ready. Thanks." She hung up the phone. "Rachel and one of her deputies are on the way. She'll pick us up and take us to Clark's farm."

Lois stood cautiously and tested her balance, then picked up her guard's M-16 and checked it. "He'll keep until they get here. I want to take a quick look around, see what Trask left behind."

"Okay. I'll stand by the front flap so I can hear the phone if it rings. And be sure to listen for me in case your backup boyfriend there on the ground starts to make trouble."

Lois knew her cheek wasn't broken, just badly bruised, but Trask's blow had come close to giving her a concussion. She knew her body might not obey her mind quite as quickly as usual, so she deliberately moved a little slower than she might have.

She peeked into the cab of one of the digging machines and saw the keys dangling from the ignition. It was one more thing the sheriff's department would have to clean up, especially if some teenager stole a backhoe on a dare. The digging arm wasn't even secured properly—

What was that?

She looked beyond the backhoe and saw something that wasn't natural, maybe a pile of discarded clothing. She checked her surroundings and slowly walked toward whatever it was.

Then she realized what it really was.

It wasn't just a pile of clothing. It was a dead body.

It was Carol Sherman's body.

Fury began in Lois' toes and spread upward to her hair. The woman had been defenseless against Trask's insanity. She lay sprawled on her back in the knee-high grass, both arms straight out to her sides and one knee raised, her throat sliced open like a loaf of bread. The bones in her neck were visible and stained dark

red. Her eyes were still open, staring at nothing. Her face showed how terrified she'd been during her last few moments of awareness. A column of ants crawled across her exposed skin and open neck wound, searching for food.

Lois' teeth ground together and her breath came in short, hard bursts. There had been no reason to kill this woman. All she'd done was what she'd perceived was her job and Trask had murdered her without remorse. He didn't deserve to live.

She didn't realize how long she'd stood there, seething, until she heard tires crunch the gravel behind her. She spun, dropped to one knee, and brought the rifle into position to fire — then realized that two county sheriff's cars were parking nearby. A short, stocky man popped out of the first car and ducked behind the engine compartment. Rachel Harris stepped out of the second car and yelled, "Burt! Hold up! She's not a bad guy!"

Lois slowly stood and held the rifle vertically in her left hand by the barrel grip, her right hand up and away from the trigger. "There's a dead woman over here. I just found her."

Something in her voice made Burt take a step back. He looked at Rachel, who nodded to him, and he sprinted to Carol's remains. After a moment, he called out, "Somebody cut her throat, Sheriff. I don't see any bullet wounds. I think she's been dead a while." He turned and took two steps away from the body. "Man! I can see her neck bones! What did the killer use, a sword?"

Rachel looked at Lois. "Your bad guy do that?"

Lois nodded. "Yes. He's headed for the Kent farm and he's insane."

Cat stepped out of the tent with her hands up. "He's got Clark Kent with him."

Rachel nodded. "Then let's go. Burt, you call for an ambulance."

"We got a guy in here, too."

"He dead too?"

Cat almost smiled. "No, just very uncomfortable."

"Anyone else?" asked Rachel.

"Just Lois and me."

"Fine. Burt, take the rifle. Cuff the guy in the tent but be ready to shoot him if you have to. Ladies, we got to go now."

Lois held the weapon in front of her and snapped, "You trained on this rifle, Officer?"

Burt nodded. "I know how to make it go bang."

Lois smirked with one corner of her mouth. "Good enough for me. Here you go. Safety's on, full thirty-round mag, one round chambered, set for single fire."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you. I got it now."

"Good. Don't let him get away."

Burt held the rifle vertical, the butt resting on his hip and his forefinger alongside the trigger guard. "He'll go to jail if he behaves himself, ma'am, don't you worry."

"And if he doesn't behave?"

"No jail."

Lois looked into the young man's eyes and saw cold, unrelenting anger. Burt would not let that guard escape without dying first.

Clark was feeling better, but his powers weren't back yet. He'd have to hope that they returned in time for him to save everybody from the lunatic. Trask's men still obeyed his orders, but some of them were exchanging worried looks, as if they were thinking about the wrongness of what they were doing. The unit's discipline was starting to unravel.

It might not unravel soon enough to help him, though. The van was already on the gravel road that led to his parents' farmhouse. He wondered what Trask had in mind.

He'd find out all too soon.

His hands were cuffed in front of him, which made him wonder if Trask expected him to try to get away. "Shot while

attempting escape” would appear beside his name on the after-action report. Worse, even if he survived his wounds, he’d be unable to help his parents or Lois or Cat.

The van turned around and stopped between the barn and the oval duck pond. Clark heard muffled, inarticulate shouts from inside the barn. The van doors flew open and he was yanked out of the back, then all but dragged to the barn door.

“Take a good look, Kent,” snarled Trask. “You’ll be joining them in a moment.”

His parents were tied with a thin rope to each other and to Wayne Irig. All three of them sat in the middle of the floor with their hands bound, all with bandanas or handkerchiefs stuffed in their mouths. With their ankles wrapped and linked with shorter ropes, there was no way for them to stand or even roll out of the old wooden structure.

The stench of kerosene alarmed Clark. He glanced to one side and saw a bucket full of the flammable liquid. “What are you going to do, you maniac?”

“Simple,” Trask replied. “I’m going to use them – and you – as bait for the alien. When it comes to save all of you, I’ll open this box and kill it.” He turned to his men. “Jefferson, dump the rest of the kerosene on the floor between the hostages and the door. Benson, give me the keys to the car. The rest of you take the van and get to the extraction point. I’ll handle everything here.”

“Yessir!” Benson tossed a key ring to Trask, then herded the rest of the crew into the back of the van and closed the back doors. He opened the van’s side door and called out, “Come on, Jefferson, let’s go! We got a chopper to catch!”

Jefferson poured the kerosene in a half-circle around the bound captives, then sprinted to the van and secured the door from the inside. They sped down the gravel road, trailing a plume of dust. Trask took Clark’s arm and dragged him into the barn, forced Clark to his knees, then looped a rope around and through his handcuffs. “Time to cast the line into the water, Kent. You’d better hope the alien likes you.”

The kerosene stench was almost overpowering. Clark waited until Trask backed out of the barn to test his strength. He put his hands together and pivoted his wrists apart.

A link on the handcuff’s chain slowly pulled open.

Trask stood just outside the barn door and laughed at the bound quartet, then pulled a Zippo cigarette lighter out of a pocket. “There are stories of these things being found in the oddest places, buried in the ground for decades or pulled up from the bottom of a lake, still in working order.” He flipped the top open and thumbed the ignition wheel once. The lighter caught immediately. “I wonder if this one will survive the fire.”

He tossed the lighter onto a trail of fluid, then turned and marched toward the car. The kerosene “whooshed” from the doorway to the circle Trask’s men had poured on the dry wood. Clark felt the heat immediately, and he knew that the three older folks couldn’t take the heat and smoke for long. He kept pressing against the handcuff links.

The chain parted with a snap. He was back – hopefully back enough to save them.

He flexed his arms, and after a moment the ropes around his chest parted. He leaped to his feet and blew icy air at the burning kerosene and wood. It took him two breaths, but he quickly had the fire out.

He snapped the ropes holding his father and said, “I’ll be right back.” He made a super-quick check for more hot spots, then turned to look across the pond at Trask.

Trask stood beside the back of the car, a shocked expression on his face. “You!” he shouted. “You’re the alien! And all that time I had you!”

Clark yelled, “Now I’ve got you!” and sprinted around the corner of the pond, directly at Trask.

He was too late.

Trask unsnapped the top of the box he’d carried and opened it as Clark reached him. Clark stumbled but managed to slam into his enemy and knock him down. But that was all he could do – the crystal’s power sapped his own once again.

Trask snarled, “You just killed them!” and leaped to his feet. He ran around the pond toward the barn and drew his pistol. Clark heard him work the slide and almost panicked.

“Trask! NO!” he yelled. “Your fight’s with me, not them!”

Trask stopped and turned to face him. “You’ve polluted them, taken over their minds! You’re controlling them somehow! They’re no longer human! I’ll take you down as soon as I take care of them!”

He turned toward the barn again, but before he could bring his weapon to bear, Jonathan Kent swung a wooden axe handle over his head and down at the madman. Trask tried to dodge, and he almost did – except Jonathan’s aim was good enough to catch Trask’s pistol and tear it from his hand.

Before he could swing again, Trask hit Jonathan in the stomach with a left, then the side of his head with a right elbow. The axe handle went flying. Trask frantically searched for his pistol but couldn’t get to it before Clark screamed, picked up the Kryptonite, and smashed it against a boulder at the edge of the pond as he fell headlong in the long grass beside the water.

The crystal shattered into dust. The pain left Clark’s body immediately and he took a deep breath.

Before he could stand, Trask ran to him and kicked him in the ribs, then picked him up by his shirt collar and punched him in the jaw. Clark slumped and Trask drove a knee into his chest, then flipped him over his hip and slammed him to the ground.

As Trask stood over him, Clark heard his father grunt. He’d crawled to Trask’s weapon and picked it up. As Clark watched, he tossed into the far end of the pond. Trask heard the splash and turned to look, but by the time he realized what had happened, the ripples on the water had spread far enough to obscure the pistol’s location.

“Huh,” he grunted. “Your human slaves are still fighting for you. But it’s not enough.” He dragged Clark to his feet again and snarled at him face-to-face. “It will never be enough! We free humans will defeat you!”

Clark grabbed the loose cloth on Trask’s uniform jumper and held the man against his chest, too close for Trask to punch him again. “You’re still wrong and still a moron, Trask!” he growled. “I won’t let you hurt my family!”

He pulled Trask sideways with renewed strength and dropped both of them in the pond. Clark knew the water was only about four feet deep, so he slugged Trask in the midsection as hard and as often as he could while the other man scrambled for a foothold on the bottom and tried to block Clark’s blows at the same time. Clark grabbed Trask’s left hand and twisted it backward until the bones in the man’s wrist cracked and snapped. Trask let out a yell mixed with a muffled scream.

Clark knew the fight was as good as won. Even Trask couldn’t fight him with just one hand. A right cross and a left hook knocked Trask almost unconscious and off his feet under the water. Clark lifted him and slammed him against the same boulder where the Kryptonite had shattered. He pinned the crazy man against the rock with his left hand and cocked his right fist, knowing that a full human-strength blow that smashed Trask’s head against the boulder, even without his powers, might easily kill the man.

Kill the man—

Clark could kill Trask. The madman would never bedevil them again.

Clark hesitated. Trask’s eyes cleared a bit and he grunted, “Go ahead! Kill me! It’s what I’d do in your place!”

Clark heard a car speeding down the gravel road to the farmhouse and he slowly relaxed his fist. He glanced up at his dad, who was being attended to by his mom, and their eyes met.

Jonathan smiled through his pain and nodded to his son. Clark's loose fist lowered and he released Trask with his other hand. "I don't work that way, Trask."

Trask snarled, "I'll expose you for the menace you really are!" Clark stepped back. "You'll try. If you get people to believe that Superman and Clark Kent are the same person, that's the price I pay for not taking a life." He turned and started moving through the water to the other side. "I won't kill anyone, Trask. Not even an insane, out-of-touch-with-reality menace like you."

The sheriff's car slid into a partial bootlegger's turn and stopped with the trunk just ten feet from the far end of the pond with the passenger side almost facing Clark. Rachel Harris popped out of the driver's side, quickly moved to stand at the passenger side corner of the trunk and put her hand on her weapon. Lois shoved open the passenger door and jumped out, took two steps, and collapsed with her right leg pulled up against her chest and her hands wrapped around her bad knee.

Oh, no, thought Clark, her leg quit on her again. He started climbing out of the water to go to her, but he slipped in the mud and stumbled to his right, away from Lois' position. He tried to change direction and go to her, but his foot slipped again and he stumbled away from the car, then fell to one knee.

Before he could stand, Cat Grant came out of the back seat right behind Lois and ran toward him. The bright smile on her face suddenly transformed to fear. Clark didn't know why until Rachel yelled, "Drop the gun, mister!" and drew her service weapon.

Before Clark could move, Cat yelled, "Look out!" and hit him like a strong safety tackling an unsuspecting wide receiver. Just as she made contact, he heard Rachel fire her weapon from in front of him followed by what sounded like an almost instantaneous higher-pitched echo from behind. Cat knocked him down and fell across him and drove his breath from his lungs.

Lois raised her head just before she heard the gunfire, just in time to see Cat tackle Clark to the grass beside the pond and fall prostrate across his upper body. She also saw Trask's body jerk with the impact of Rachel's bullet as his shirt puffed out and a bloody red hole appeared just to the left of center on his chest. He dropped the smoking small-caliber pistol from his right hand and his face went slack as he collapsed and slid down into the water. A corner of her mind tagged it as a Saturday Night Special, probably a short-barreled .380 semi-auto hideout pistol, not very powerful and not very accurate beyond twenty feet or so, but still lethal if the bullet hit a vital area.

Lois wondered where that bullet had gone.

She painfully pushed herself to her feet and began limping toward her best friend and the man she loved. Suddenly a look of horror appeared on Clark's face. He stared wide-eyed at his left hand.

It was dripping blood.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Rachel took two steps toward the pond, but Lois' panicked shout brought her up short. "Sheriff!" Lois screeched. "Call for an ambulance now! Gunshot wound!"

She looked toward the pond and saw the redheaded reporter lying face-down across Clark's lap and the blood dripping from Clark's hand.

No! Clark wasn't shot! He couldn't be shot! She could never shoot Clark! She'd aimed at the fake government man! And where was he?

"Rachel!" Lois yelled again. "Ambulance! Now!"

Right. Gunshot wound, ambulance, hospital. She picked up her radio microphone and began calling for help.

Lois half-stumbled, half-collapsed beside Clark and Cat as her medical training kicked in. "Who's hurt?"

Cat coughed and groaned. "I think – it's me."

Lois grabbed Clark's bloody hand and blanched as the excess blood flowed toward his elbow. "Did – did the bullet hit you?"

Clark gently shifted Cat to the grass and rolled her over onto her back. "No. None of this is my blood." He bit his lip, then said, "It's all hers."

Cat gestured weakly to her right side just above the bottom of her rib cage. "Got me – there – I think." She turned her head toward Clark and coughed. "Trask?"

"The sheriff shot him," Lois answered, then glanced at the few remaining bubbles on the water's surface. "Hit him hard enough to – She's calling for an ambulance for you now, Red. You're gonna be fine."

Cat almost smiled. "You – called me Red. Means I'm – bleeding pretty good, huh?" She lifted her left hand and tried to grab Clark's shirt. "I don't think – Lois would mind – hold me just – once more, Clark?"

He slid down beside her and slipped his right arm under her head, careful to move her as little as possible. "I'm right here, Cat. I'm not going anywhere."

Her eyes closed and she smiled. "Just like – when you called me – Mags – in college."

Lois' eyes overflowed. "Why did you do that, Cat? Why did you jump in front of that bullet?"

Cat turned her head to Lois as she tightened her grip on Clark's left arm with her left hand. "Didn't mean to – get shot. But you – you need Clark." She coughed and groaned, then said, "And the – the world – needs Superman." She looked back at him. "I – I should have married you. I'm – I was a fool."

Clark stroked her cheek. "We'll discuss that later, okay? Right now you need to stay with us. Stay with us, Cat."

Cat's breath came deeper, faster, and a little bit ragged. "No. Not Cat. Cat's – she's stupid. Doesn't know a – a good man – when she meets one." She panted a few times and shook her head loosely. "The name is – Mags." She patted Clark's arm with her left hand. "Mags is – is in love with – a good man. A – a very good man."

Rachel ran to them and knelt beside Clark. "Ambulance is on its way. I brought my car's emergency first aid kit. It's all I got. Lois, you were a medic in the Army, right? Your training is better than mine."

Lois wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "Yes. I was. Thanks." She opened the small bag and rummaged around in it for a moment, then pulled out a small syringe and a pressure bandage. "Best I can do right now. Cat, I'm giving you a shot of morphine, then I'm going to put a bandage on your wound."

"Okay," she whispered. "Be – gentle."

"Shh. For once, try not to talk."

Cat didn't speak, but she did smile. Clark said, "How you doing, Mags?"

She relaxed as the morphine hit her. "Better. Doesn't hurt – as much."

Lois gently patted Cat's leg. "Please don't talk, Thelma. You know Brad Pitt doesn't like chatty women."

"Clark – does. He never minded – listening to Mags talk." She turned to him and smiled again. "Tell me about – about the – the forever and a day love – again. I'll – I promise – I'll listen – this time."

Cat's eyes drifted shut as she took a labored breath. Clark gave Lois an almost panicked look. Lois forced back a sob and whispered, "Tell her what she wants – what she needs to hear." She forced back a sob and added, "Please."

He blinked to clear his eyes and nodded. "Hey, Mags? That forever-and-a-day love is what my parents have. From what you've told me, I think yours do too. It's how—" he glanced at Lois again. She nodded through her tears for him to continue. "— how I feel about that redheaded beauty I saw when I was

registering for my classes, the one who makes the best spaghetti on campus, the one who writes so well that she's gonna be a famous and successful reporter by the time she's thirty. I just know she'll win all kinds of awards and be the talk of the town by then."

Cat smiled again. "Flattery will — get you — lots of places — Mr. Kent." She stopped and coughed wetly, then groaned. "How — how about — you and me — we — get married — and move — to the — couple's dorm?"

Clark leaned down and gently kissed the corner of her mouth. "That sounds like a marvelous idea, Miss Mayfield."

"No," she whispered. "Mrs. — Kent. Tradition — you know."

Lois heard the siren howling down the highway. As high-pitched as it was, Clark must have already noted it, she thought, even without his powers. The big white-and-blue truck's tires complained loudly as the driver took the turn to the Kent farm with a definite lean, then it thundered down the gravel road almost to the sheriff's car. The driver expertly executed a Y-turn and stopped with the rear doors less than ten feet from Cat's position.

Two EMTs jumped out of the back and shoved a gurney toward Cat. The redhead's lips were suddenly flecked with pink foam. She rolled her eyes at Lois and whispered through the bubbles on her mouth, "Bye — Louise. We — woulda — had — fun —"

Cat coughed, moaned, and rolled her head to the side. She didn't inhale again.

Lois screamed.

Clark put Cat flat on the ground and started chest compressions. "Lois!" he barked. "Breathe for her!"

Lois wiped her face and leaned over her fallen friend to clear her airway. She counted ten cardiac compressions and blew into Cat's mouth to fill her lungs as Clark paused. One of the medical techs, a young man seemingly just out of high school, ran back to the ambulance and dragged out a portable IV pole, along with a bag of plasma and tubing. The second tech, a black woman in her late thirties, knelt beside Lois, then pulled a stethoscope out of her pocket and signaled for Clark to take a quick break. She listened to Cat's chest for a moment, felt both sides of her neck, then said, "I can't get a heartbeat or a pulse. Keep going."

The second med tech slid to his knees near Cat's lower legs and started to clear her right elbow for the IV needle. Then he froze.

"Jolene."

"What!"

"Look at her right side."

The woman glanced and said, "She was shot, Ken! Of course there's blood there!"

"No," he said quietly. "It's still pulsing out past the pressure bandage, but only when she gets chest compressions. That means that—"

"That her heart has a hole in it and it's leaking into her chest cavity." Jolene sighed. "Seen it before, with dumb hunters shooting each other." She reached up and touched Clark's shoulder. "Mister, stop. It's not helping."

Clark kept going. "What do you mean? She's got to have blood flow to stay alive!" He pumped a few more times and yelled, "Come on, Mags, breathe! Breathe!"

Lois' tears began anew. "She — she's — oh, Clark, she's — she's dead!"

"No! We can save her! We can bring her back! Keep going!" He stared open-mouthed at Jolene. "Come on! Don't let her go now! Help her!"

Jolene slid her hand down his arm and squeezed gently. "Mister, I'm really sorry, but she's gone. All you're doing now is pushing out the blood that's leaked into her chest. Whatever made that wound in her side also tore a hole in her heart." She squeezed a little tighter. "We can't help her now. The only thing we can do is take her to the hospital."

He stared at Jolene for a moment more, then turned to Cat's waxen features. "Oh, Mags, I'm so sorry! Please forgive me! I wish — I should've — I—"

He broke off as Lois wailed again. Clark knee-walked to her and took her in his arms as his tears mixed with hers.

Ken and Jolene gently lifted Cat's body onto the gurney and strapped her in, then raised the gurney and wheeled it to the ambulance. Rachel pushed herself upright and walked stiffly to the open rear door and spoke with the EMTs for a moment.

Lois didn't bother to listen to the conversation. She was trying to comfort Clark while he was trying to comfort her. She didn't move as the ambulance pulled away.

Rachel knelt beside them. Lois heard her say, "I'll see to your folks, Clark. You two — y'all just take your time, okay?"

Lois felt his head move. Might have been a nod, might have been a pained look, might have been a grief reaction. She only knew that she'd fall to the ground like overcooked pasta if he were to let her go.

She barely registered a three-way conversation on the other side of the pond, probably among Rachel, Jonathan, and Martha. Again, she didn't try to listen in.

After a long moment, Rachel knelt beside Clark again. This time she felt him raise his head to listen. "Clark, I talked to Burt on the radio, and he's gonna meet us at the hospital to take our statements. Your folks said that the only person who needs medical care is Wayne, but your mom said he's conscious, just a little disoriented. I think he tried to fight the guy I — the EPA guy — and got whacked pretty hard. I'm gonna call the hospital and find out if I can bring him in if I drive slow. If I can, I'll take all of us as soon as the other bus gets here to pick up the — for the guy in the pond."

Lois tried not to hear any more. A madman had shot and killed her best friend. And she hadn't been able to help her. Despite her training, despite her experience, despite her love for Cat, Lois could do nothing for her.

Except — maybe she could honor Cat's final act of love.

Rachel waited for one of the other two to speak or move, but neither one did so by the time the ambulance's siren faded from her hearing. So she slowly stood and looked around the farm, trying to figure out what to do next.

Clark finally turned and crawled to the edge of the pond where he tried to wash Cat's blood from his hands. Rachel handed him a rough towel from the trunk of the car, one with a few old stains of various hues that would never wash out. As he was drying his hands, Rachel knelt beside Lois. "I got a glimpse at your knee. Looks like it's all swole up. I'm gonna load all of us into my car and drive us to the hospital as soon as the second ambulance crew gets here for the — the EPA guy in the pond." She exhaled roughly. "I'll have Burt meet us there and take our statements."

Lois nodded to her without speaking. Rachel stood and looked across the pond where the Kents were. Jonathan was lying down, propped up on one elbow, talking — or maybe quietly arguing — with Martha. Clark was making his way to them, visibly limping and favoring his left side. Bet that crazy man kicked him there, she mused.

He'd never hurt Clark again.

She forced herself not to look at the pond.

Dave Harris, her father, had been county sheriff for twenty-eight years before he retired. He'd never fired his weapon in anger that whole time. He'd never taken aim and deliberately put a bullet into a living human being.

Rachel had been sheriff for just over two years and she'd killed a man.

She knew what would come next. The state of Kansas would put her on mandatory suspension, then conduct an investigation and decide if she could go on being sheriff. She thought they'd

probably exonerate her, then return her to active duty.

There were a couple of newspapers in neighboring towns who wouldn't want to let it go, though. They'd published editorials opposing her campaign and articles slanted against her before and on the day of the election, hinting – or even saying flat out – that she was too young or too nice or too inexperienced or too girly to do the job right. Her opponents in the next election would say things that would undermine her authority, call her a killer, call her gun-crazy – assuming she wasn't removed from office in a recall election.

Her friends would treat her different now – they might not want to be friends with a killer like her. Even the deputies in her department would treat her different. There would be a barrier between her and them, and good people like Burt would back away from being her friends.

She'd be different, too. She already knew she was changed and there was no going back to the way she used to be. And there was no way to predict what the EPA might decide to do.

Part of the post-incident process would be at least one session with a psychologist. If she decided she could trust him – or her – there'd be a good bit of stuff to work through.

She wiped her eyes. That was for later. This part wasn't done yet.

She walked to the Kents and helped Jonathan to stand. "Thanks, Rachel," he grunted. "I'm not used to this kind of sudden exertion."

She turned eyes she knew were red to him. "I don't think anyone is. You want me to help you to my car?"

Martha touched her on the shoulder. "Please, let me do that. Wayne needs some help too, and you're stronger than I am."

"Sounds good, Mrs. Kent." She looked at the car and heard it ding softly. "Huh. Guess I left the keys in the ignition. Leastwise the doors are all open."

Jonathan shifted his weight to his wife's shoulder. "Martha's got me. You go help Wayne."

She nodded and walked to the older man. "Hey, Mr. Irig, how you doin'?"

He lay on the ground on his side. His eyes rose to hers and he lifted his bound hands to her. "I can honestly say that I've been better."

Rachel almost smiled, then knelt down and examined the rope. "I think it'd be quicker to cut it than to untie it. That okay with you?"

"Fine," he breathed. "Just get me to the hospital, please. I don't feel so good."

She reached into her pocket and slid out a folding Buck camp knife. "That's where we're all headed."

Rachel helped Wayne to stand, then guided him to her cop car. I don't feel so good either, Wayne, she thought.

Rose McKellen, the MD on call for the Smallville General Hospital Emergency Room, nodded at the sheriff when Rachel walked in. "Rose, we need two stretchers for injured adult males. They're both awake and alert but they've both been beaten. Y'all need to check 'em out pretty thoroughly."

Rose turned and lifted two fingers in a 'V' formation, then pointed at two young men standing and waiting for instructions. Each man grabbed a gurney and wheeled it outside to the open police car.

Rose turned back to Rachel and quietly asked, "Is this related to the gunshot victim we got a little while ago? The young woman?"

Rachel nodded. "If it ain't here already, there's another bus bringing in another body. A man. That one was shot with a .38 Special revolver." Her hand touched the butt of her weapon. "This one." She closed her eyes and tightened her face as if grabbing her emotions and wrestling them into submission. After a long pause,

Rachel spoke again. "That's the one I – I shot. The first DOA was killed at the Kent farm, too. The second victim – the one who's coming in shot the first one."

Rose put her hand on Rachel's arm. "Sounds like a justified shooting to me. And it kind of sounds like you saved some lives."

"Yeah. Keep tellin' me that, will ya?" Rachel turned and waved at the ER entrance. "Got three others beside the stretcher cases coming in. Martha Kent, Clark Kent, and Lois Lane. I don't think any of 'em are hurt bad, but if you could check them out I'd appreciate it, 'cept Clark got punched out pretty good and Lois hurt her knee and might need some painkillers, maybe even a x-ray. And I told her we had a orthopedist here who might could help her."

The doctor assayed a small smile. "I thought I was doing triage today."

The sheriff gave her a sad look that said that Rose's comment might be funny on some other day. "Please check on the three older adults ASAP," Rachel said. "Jonathan and Martha Kent, along with Wayne Irig. I'd guess you'll want to keep all three of them overnight if not longer, but you gotta make that call."

"Got it," said Rose. "What about you? You need some medical attention?"

Rachel smiled mirthlessly. "Thanks, Rose, but you don't do the kind of doctorin' I'm gonna need."

The orthopedist was a short, fat-fingered older man with a gossamer touch. Dr. James examined Lois' knee with a minimum of pain, then nodded. "I usually don't concur with my patients' self-diagnosis, Ms. Lane, but you've got this one right. Ice, elevation, and rest is my recommendation, something you no doubt already knew. Unless you want some fairly extensive joint replacement surgery, there's not much more I can do for you."

Lois nodded. "Thank you, Doctor. I assume I can leave now." "As long as Dr. McKellen clears you, yes."

Rose did clear Lois and signed the necessary release forms. After Officer Burt took their statements, Clark, who had already been released, drove Lois back to his parents' house and put her to bed in his old room. She turned her dry, weary eyes to him and said, "Thank you for taking care of me."

He stroked her hair. "It's my pleasure. And my privilege."

She reached up and pulled his hand to her mouth and gently kissed it. There was something in his touch and in his face, something familiar, something that Lois thought she recognized. After a long moment, it came to her.

She looked into his eyes and saw her long-time companion, her always-near nemesis, looking back at her.

Guilt.

He blamed himself for Cat's death. Probably for her unrequited love for him, too.

Clark stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. As if he'd read her thoughts, he quietly said, "She loved both of us, Lois. And she showed us how much she loved us." His eyes closed and he shuddered.

She reached up and cupped his cheek. "Clark. I love you. Don't forget that, okay?"

Before she could say anything else, he leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Try to get some sleep. You've had a really tough couple of days." Then he gently closed the door behind him and ghosted down the stairs.

Lois wept again, more quietly this time. Less than twenty-four hours ago, she and Cat had gone shopping for new clothes, Lois to impress Clark and Cat to look spectacular in Smallville. That blue shirt that Cat had bought was now a blood-soaked wreck. And Lois' dress was smeared with Cat's blood.

Lois would never wear the dress again. Even if it were cleaned and restored to pristine condition, she could never bear to look at it, much less put it on.

And Clark would never see her in it again.

Not that he could see much of anything at the moment. Cat's body, lifeless in his arms, was surely all his eyes would register, all his mind would conjure up. He probably saw it even with his eyes closed.

Lois cried because she'd never talk to Cat again, never cry or laugh with her, never confess to her how much she loved Clark but was scared of that very love, never see the pain in Cat's eyes again when she thought about Clark and what might have been.

She wondered if Clark had cried – no, he'd cried for Cat. Lois wondered how much he'd already cried and how much he'd cry for her in the future. And how many times he would wake up screaming from dreams of Cat dying in his embrace.

It was the perfect recipe for a classic case of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. And Lois knew exactly how he must feel.

Cat's death wasn't his fault. He wasn't responsible. Trask was responsible for her death. Not Clark. Not ever Clark. But even Superman was vulnerable to something like this.

Dana Friskin's voice sounded in her head, telling her that while her feelings about the combat she'd seen, the guilt she carried for shooting people who were trying to kill her were natural and human, the pain and loss she'd suffered when the wounded she treated on the battlefield hadn't survived, they weren't justified. She'd followed orders, followed procedure, acted heroically, and saved a number of lives. But seeing Clark going through the same kind of pain that she'd experienced made the doctor's reasoning crystal clear in her mind and heart.

She finally understood what she had to do.

She'd have to forgive herself, just as Clark would have to forgive himself. Different circumstances, different acts, different reasons, of course, but the same inescapable pain. Forgiveness was the only way back to real life for Clark.

For her, too. And it was hard to accept how much she'd have to let go.

That forgiveness meant that she'd have to release herself from the responsibility of making everything right that she'd put wrong. She'd have to release the self-blame and self-recrimination from her evening ritual. She'd have to put it all behind her, to the extent that it would not guide her every thought, decision, and action in the present. It might even put a stop to her frequent nightmares. At least, it should slow them down.

And it would remove that comfortable pain in which she'd nestled herself for so long. The pain didn't bring comfort, of course – it was just that resting in the pain was easier than all that effort to work on her healing. It was a hard road, but one she had to travel to recover who she really was.

Clark would have to do the same thing. And she could help him take the first steps to that self-forgiveness.

She owed him that much. And she loved him enough to give him so much more.

She sat up and pushed the covers back. The sooner the better, she told herself. There was no time like the present.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Clark sat down to assemble the article on his laptop and include Cat's pictures from her camera. His eidetic memory meant that he didn't need a recorder for his contribution, but he'd taken Lois' WayneTech device with him, along with Cat's, to get all the information they'd collected.

Anything to keep from thinking about holding Cat's body as the life leached out of her.

Anything to keep from remembering doing CPR on a dead woman.

Anything to hide from the pain of losing a close friend to mindless violence he could have prevented with one punch.

He kept his eyes clear as he described how an armed Apache helicopter from Fort Riley, the nearby Army base, had been sent to

intercept and force the V-22 to land, where the remaining members of the Bureau 39 team had been arrested by Rachel Harris' deputies, assisted by a second chopper carrying two squads of Army infantry. The men in the Osprey had seen the force arrayed against them and had surrendered without a single shot fired.

The lieutenant commanding the Army force had surrendered both credit for their capture and the disposition of those arrested to the Smallville Sheriff's Department. Because the prisoners weren't actually military personnel, just paid mercenaries, there was no argument over who actually took them into custody. The Army, though, had assumed responsibility for the Osprey, something to which the sheriff's department gladly agreed. The Army had pilots trained to fly the plane, and the sheriff's department did not.

Clark chose his words carefully and edited them without mercy. His laser focus on the screen kept his mind from wandering.

Anything to keep from seeing her waxen face in the emergency room when he and Lois had been asked to officially identify her.

Anything to push away the vision of him smashing Trask's head against that rock until his brains sank to the bottom of the pond.

Anything to banish the sight of her blood dripping from his hand.

It was hard. He kept thinking about what else he might have done to save Cat, what he hadn't done that would have kept her from being shot in the first place. Her face – that beautiful, lifeless face – would surely haunt him for a long time.

But he still had a job to do. He sent the finished product to Perry's inbox, along with a note saying that Cat's photos would follow, then called the editor with the bad news.

Perry was stunned into silence for a long moment when Clark finished speaking. "You – Son – you can't mean it." Clark didn't answer. "You're tellin' me that – that Cat Grant is dead?" Clark sighed but didn't speak. "Y'all ain't playin' some kind of really lousy joke on your old boss, are you, son?"

"I wish my judgement were that stupid, Chief. I'm sure you know that Lois is just shattered by this."

He sighed. "I do. I'd guess you aren't doin' too good neither."

Clark closed his eyes and waited until his voice was back under his control. "No. I'm not." Abruptly, he had to stand up. His voice rose in intensity until he was almost shouting into the phone. "She saved my life, Perry! She pushed me off to one side and Trask's bullet – he was aiming at me and she – she took it for me! I could have stopped him if I'd just—" He stopped to regain control of his volume. "I – I'm not sure how to deal with that."

Perry took a breath, then said, "I think you're tellin' me you could've stopped Cat from bein' shot if you'd stopped Trask. Permanently, I mean."

He forced back the tears and took control of his voice. "Yes. I could have but I didn't." He waited for his boss to speak, but the older man kept silent. "Perry, how – I don't know how to live with that knowledge."

"You didn't kill a man, Clark. You stuck to your principles and refused to take a life when very few people, if any, would have blamed you for finishing him off. You did good."

Clark closed his eyes and took a deep breath before responding. "I don't know if – I don't see a way forward for me. Someone close to me died because I held to my beliefs. How can I live with that?"

"It's the simplest thing you'll ever do in your life, son. And the hardest. You put one foot in front of the other and keep walking, even when you don't know where you're goin' and you ain't sure where you've come from. I been there, Clark – in fact I think I'm back there again – and it's a bad place to be. Just know that you won't be there forever."

Clark sat down again but didn't say anything for a long

moment, so Perry finally spoke again. “You two take whatever time you need, y’hear? I’ll let Cat’s family know what happened. Then I’ll tell the folks in the newsroom.”

“Thanks. I was not looking forward to either of those conversations.”

“You stay with Lois, son. You’re both gonna need a friend.”

“Thanks again, Perry. We’ll talk later.”

He hung up the phone and dropped his face into his hands. Lois’ touch on his shoulder made him jump. “Huh? Oh, Lois, it’s you. How are you doing, or is that a stupid question?”

She shook her head. “It’s not stupid. And I’m doing as well as can be expected.” She gently embraced him from behind the couch. “How’s your side, the one where Trask kicked you?”

“Still pretty tender. I guess that green crystal does lots of bad things to me.”

“The crystal isn’t what’s hurt you the most today.” She walked around the couch, then sat down next to him on his unhurt side and gently put her arms around his neck. “You haven’t dealt with death like this before, have you? Up close and personal, I mean.”

He stared straight ahead and clenched his fists. “As Superman, I’ve seen accident victims die, seen people beaten or shot or stabbed and not survive, but a friend – no. I’ve never held a – a close friend in my arms as she died.”

Lois took in and released a deep breath. “I have. In the Middle East while I was in the Army. I lost so many – soldiers and civilians both – I started to think I was some kind of jinx. It’s not something that ever goes away on its own. You’ll have to learn to deal with it. To do that, you’re going to need some professional counseling. And not as Superman – as Clark Kent.”

“You know I could have stopped him. He was right there – all I had to do was smash his head—” He broke off and clenched his teeth. “I kept to my principles and Cat paid the penalty. I put my beliefs above her life and it killed her. I was supposed to save her and I failed.” He groaned and crossed his arms. “Superman failed her.”

She touched his chin and rotated his head to face her, then looked at him with what he interpreted as confidence mixed with sympathy and shook her head. “Sorry, but no. Superman is the one who wears the garish outfit – a very sexy outfit, too – but your mind is the one who makes his decisions and your heart is the one that gives of itself and privately weeps for the ones the superhero couldn’t save. You made the hard choice, Clark, the choice to preserve life and not end it. If you weren’t the man inside the Suit, I wouldn’t respect Superman like I do.” Her voice softened and she stroked his cheek once. “Superman didn’t fail her. Most importantly, you didn’t fail her either.”

His eyes narrowed again and he felt his throat tighten. “What good is Superman if he can’t save everyone?”

Instead of answering, she took his face in her hands and kissed him, a soft kiss gentle as a mother’s with a newborn. “You would have saved her if you possibly could have. Her death isn’t your fault. If you had flown her directly to the hospital, she still would – would have died.” She touched her forehead to his for a moment, then slowly pulled back a few inches and wiped her damp eyes with her fingers. “You can never save everyone, Clark. All you can do is the best you can do and be satisfied with it.”

He took her hand in his and looked away. “I’ll never be satisfied with it, Lois. I can’t be satisfied to save some and forget about the rest. I’ll never let go of it.”

She turned her head and kissed his hand. “I’m sorry. That was a poor choice of words. I should have said that you need to do the best you can and accept that it’s not perfect and never will be perfect. That’s why you need to talk to a professional. I think it would be good for you to work with Dr. Friskin, but you need someone you feel comfortable talking with. She’s helped me a lot.”

He looked at her again. “You don’t sound like a victim now.

Or a jinx.”

“I know, and I appreciate the irony. It’s – when I saw how you were hurting and heard the pain in your voice, I saw myself in Dana’s office, hearing all of her reasons why I still have worth, that I’m not a crazy killer. I’m responsible only for my own actions, not anyone else’s. And I’m not the one who shot Cat. Trask did that, not me, not you. And I remember what you told me a little while ago – that she showed her love for the two of us by placing her own life in jeopardy to save you.” She brushed tears from her cheeks with one hand. “It took this tragedy for me to see all that clearly.”

“So you’re okay with your part in all this?”

She stroked his hand. “No, I’m not okay. Not yet. I will always miss her, and I’ll probably need you to help me through some bad times and serious crying jags in the near future. But eventually I will be okay. Because I’m finally learning to do my best and accept that it’s not perfect and never will be.” She kissed him softly once again. “Will you at least start with Dana? Please? And if you’re not comfortable talking with her, will you listen to her recommendation?”

She’d asked him to wait for her and he had. Now she was asking something from him that was much more difficult – to share his burden and his guilt with someone. For the first time, he comprehended why she so often described herself as broken or damaged. He felt her pain and grasped why she felt like there was a hole in her soul. And for the first time, he felt that hole within himself.

He couldn’t be effective as Superman with a wound like that. He probably wouldn’t be a good Clark Kent, either. And he couldn’t lose her.

There really was no other possible decision. “Yes. I’ll do as you ask. If you want me to see Dana Friskin, I’ll work with her until she fixes me.”

She smiled and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “You have a head start on me. You’ve already been to some of the group sessions.” She kissed him again, this time with a bit more passion. “Bet you never thought you’d attend them as a patient, especially this soon.”

“Well, I kind of have to.” She frowned for a moment until he added, “You’re above me in the chain of command.”

After a moment, he smiled. Just a little bit. Then they shared a quiet laugh.

With this woman beside me, he thought, I can overcome anything.

Because they flew back to Metropolis on the plane carrying Cat’s body, Lois had to steel herself for the trip home. She’d been embalmed by Elijah Morris, Smallville’s lone undertaker, and he hadn’t charged a nickel. He insisted that he did it as much for the Kents and Lois as anything else. He said he’d been touched by their love for Cat and for Cat’s dedication to finding and publishing the truth about Bureau 39’s invasion of his home town, and he was grimly satisfied that Bureau 39 had been exposed as the menace they were.

He billed the Air Force for embalming Trask. They paid the outrageous fee without a whimper.

Cat’s funeral, held in Metropolis on the following Tuesday instead of in Cat’s home town in Idaho, wasn’t a cakewalk for anyone, but it was especially hard for Lois. She’d helped prep and load bodies for removal from the combat zone in the Middle East. When she was able, she’d served with the honor guard that received casualties while going through rehab for her knee. She’d even volunteered for light nursing duty when she was ambulatory again. The sight of those badly wounded boys – and a few girls – had put her emotions through the wringer. But until the day Cat died, she’d never had her heart shredded that badly.

Until the day of Cat’s funeral.

Cat had often described her parents to Lois in glowing terms, and she saw their love that Tuesday afternoon in every move, every touch, every look that passed between them. They were in agony, of course, but they weren't angry, nor did they blame anyone for their loss. It was almost as if Clark's parents had been cloned and given a daughter to raise instead of a son. She contrasted their example to that of her own parents and realized that her model for marriage and family left quite a bit to be desired. She wasn't sure she could get past that. Nor was she sure that Clark – or any man, frankly – would be willing to get past it, either.

She desperately hoped he was still willing to try. She'd do almost anything to keep him with her. Their shared love for each other was one of the very few things that kept her from completely breaking down at the funeral.

Then it was time for her and Clark to personally offer their condolences to Bud and Nora Grant.

Lois's tears locked her lips shut for a moment, so she was grateful when Clark took the lead. "Mr. Grant, Mrs. Grant, we're so sorry for your loss. I assure you, Catharine will be missed for a long time."

Mrs. Grant took Lois' hands in one of hers. "Thank you. Thank you both." She blinked and looked at Clark. "It's Clark, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Catharine knew you years ago, didn't she? When she went undercover at that college?"

"Yes, ma'am, we met there."

"But you lost touch when her assignment ended." Nora Grant sighed. "That's too bad. The few times she mentioned you, she always described you in such glowing terms. And I'm sure you know how she felt about you."

For Clark's sake, Lois needed to get off that conversational path. "I know I'll miss her for the rest of my life," Lois said. "We were partners and best friends. We even called each other Thelma and Louise sometimes and promised each other to take off together one day, buy or steal a red two-door Ford T-bird, and drive to the Grand Canyon."

Bud Grant almost smiled at her. "I'd imagine that Catharine came up with the idea. It does sound like her."

Lois ducked her head for a moment, then lifted it and said, "She insisted on a fire-engine red T-bird instead of a green one like in the movie, and we weren't going to drive off any Arizona cliffs. Just up to the edges."

The four of them shared a damp smile, then Nora said, "Thank you both so much for being friends with her. It helps to know that she was important in your lives."

Clark took Nora's hands in his. "I don't think either of us will ever forget her."

Lois and Bud joined hands with the other two, and they held each other's pain back just a little for a few moments before Clark and Lois slipped away.

Lois drove Clark back to her apartment instead of his because, she told him, she wasn't quite ready to be alone with him at his place. True to his nature, he escorted her to her front door. He held her hands for a long moment, then softly released them and said, "I guess I'll see you tomorrow at work. Wait, I forgot, we're still on bereavement leave for three more work days." He hesitated, then said, "I'll call you around ten if that's okay."

She reached out and took his sleeve. "Please come in for a few minutes. I'll make coffee, and you can whip up a couple of deli-style sandwiches. Assuming you're hungry, of course."

His eyes smiled. "I assume you have fresh bread?"

"From the bakery this morning, assuming Lucy went shopping like I asked her to." She drew a deep breath and opened her door. "Shall we go in and test all those assumptions?"

The rest of his face agreed with the smile already in his eyes and he gestured for her to precede him. Lois stepped into the apartment and turned on the light, then closed and latched the door behind him. When he looked at her quizzically, she smiled and said, "No quick escapes for you, Farm Boy."

He smiled back and said, "As you wish," then turned to the small kitchen and began building their sandwiches. Lois marveled at how domestic he looked. It gave her the courage to bring up the subject she'd wanted to discuss.

Her coffee maker burbled and burped its way to four cups of coffee as she set the table for them. She was pouring the second cup when he placed a small open-faced turkey and Swiss sandwich before her chair. They grinned at each other shyly and sat down across the small table from each other, then dug in.

Neither one spoke until the meal was almost over. Clark sipped his coffee and asked, "Is Lucy coming back tonight any time soon?"

Lois shook her head. "I asked her to give me the apartment until midnight. She agreed without questioning me."

"Ah. So you have an ulterior motive for inviting me in?"

She shrugged slightly. "I was hungry. And you make great sandwiches."

"And?"

"Well – I thought we could talk about some things."

"Well, we have almost four of hours private time. What do you want to talk about?"

She wiped her lips with her napkin. "Yeah. A couple of things, actually. Um – both Cat's parents and Perry asked me if I'd take charge of closing out Cat's apartment. Her folks asked me to send them a few specific things, but according to her will, most of her clothes and furniture and other stuff is going to a shelter for battered women over on upper Ninth and Bolton. I was hoping you'd come with me and give me a hand sorting through all of it."

He nodded and took her hand. "Of course I'll help. You don't even have to ask."

"Some of the folks from the Planet wanted to stop by and help, too. I'll take as much assistance as I can get." She squeezed his hand and closed her eyes. "You might have to – to comfort me once or twice. It's gonna be a tough day."

His other hand found her cheek and cupped it. "Nobody's going to enjoy that chore. You know I'll be there for you."

She took in a shuddering breath and opened her eyes. "I think if – I think it would make it easier for me if we could be there as a newly engaged couple." She paused long enough to smile at his startled expression, then said, "I love you, Clark. I want to marry you and live with you and intertwine my life so tightly with yours that we'll be inseparable for as long as we both live. If – if you're willing to go public with our engagement, I'll pay for the announcement in the Planet's Living section."

He stood and drew her to himself, embracing her in his velvet-covered all-powerful strength. "I'll follow your lead on when we tell everyone. I'll even ask Superman to sky-write it for us if you want me to. And I love you more than I love anyone else I've ever known in my entire life."

She buried her face in his chest and sobbed once, then nodded. "Any thoughts on when we could tie that forever-and-a-day knot?"

He chuckled. "I'm still wrapping my mind around us confirming our engagement. I don't think I want to wait years, but maybe next weekend is a little quick. You have any thoughts?"

"Hmm. I think an early spring wedding would be far enough in the future. That's only about seven months from now. It would give everyone a chance to get us some cool wedding gifts, so we'll have to register somewhere. And it gives me enough time to get used to the new knee Daddy wants to give me."

"New knee, huh?"

"Yep."

"How long have you known about this?"

"I talked to him just before we left for Smallville. He said he'd clear his schedule for the initial consultation as soon as I wanted, and if we decided on the surgery he'd get it set up right away. Next day, if I wanted."

Clark nodded. "You've been thinking about this for a while, then?"

"Yes. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before, but I wasn't sure I wanted to." Her voice hardened. "Now I am."

As if he didn't want her thinking about Cat's last moments if she didn't have to, he grumbled, "I guess that means your dad will want to give you away, too."

Her voice softened. "That, or auction me off to the highest bidder."

Clark pulled back and mock-glared at her. "He tries a stunt like that and he'll face the wrath of Clark Kent."

She chortled. "I think he's smarter than that. Anyway, would you like to go ring shopping on Monday morning?"

"To find your wedding band, the One Ring to rule them all?" He bent and kissed her. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

She returned the kiss with enthusiasm, almost losing herself in it before she released it and pulled back a few inches. "Wow. That's — you're a really good kisser."

"Thank you. Would you like to try it again or just stare lovingly into my eyes?"

She smiled softly. "Both, actually. But first—" she felt her smile harden and her eyes narrow "—I want to get something straight with you."

He paused, seemingly uncertain about what she wanted to get straight, then ventured, "Sure. What might that something be?"

"We don't drop the Bureau 39 investigation. Trask didn't dig up that green rock and analyze it all by himself. Someone was behind him, bankrolling him, giving him logistical support, and if we believe General Newcombe, it wasn't government money. Whoever that is, Clark, I want him taken down hard. And permanently."

He stared at her for a long moment, then said, "I see that marriage isn't going to gentle you all that much. And before you start yelling at me, I agree completely with everything you just said. I also believe that this investigation is going to need some super-help."

She nodded slowly. "You don't think it would be an ethical violation to use your powers on this story?"

His face hardened. "Given how much destruction and pain he's caused, no, I don't. I'll do anything legal to get this guy. Maybe even some things that cross the line a little."

Her head tilted to one side. "It sounds like you already have an idea or two on who that guy might be."

"I do." She watched his smile turn a bit feral. "And if I'm right, it'll be a pure pleasure to put him in prison for the rest of his natural life."

Lois beamed at him. "That's my super-Clark." She kissed him again, briefly, then said, "We'll make Cat proud of us, wherever she is."

Epilogue

"Stop crowding me, Mom!"

"I'm not crowd—"

"I'm going flying whether you like it or not!"

"Sweetie, skipping school isn't the way to get permission to —"

"Screw school! None of those people understand what I'm going through!"

Lois sighed. "I do, Catharine."

"Oh, sure! You got your super-powers at fourteen and you've just been hiding them from the world like Dad hid them from his kids! And just because I'm the youngest I found out last! It's not fair!"

"We weren't sure you were ready to handle that information."

"So you let me walk in on you while you were dancing in mid-air? Is that how you told my siblings about him? And all those veiled hints and wink-wink nudge-nudge conversations at dinner make sense now! I'm furious with both of you, but at least now I know you didn't cheat on Dad with Superman!"

Lois almost snapped back at her daughter. But she paused to think of what to say and realized that she had to change her approach. This one clearly wasn't working.

She turned and sat down on the couch, then patted the cushion beside her. "Sit with me, Little Kitten. I need to tell you a story."

"Right." Catharine put her hands on her hips and all but snarled at her mother. "Is this the one about the first Intergang story you and Dad wrote? Or about the two of you bringing down Lex Luthor and how he never saw it coming? Or the time Dad saved you from some wanna-be druid? Or maybe how he busted you out of jail when you were going to be executed for a murder you didn't do?"

Lois shook her head sadly. "No," she replied softly. "It's about how you got your name."

The girl stopped ranting and stared at her mother. "How I got my name?" Lois nodded. "You've never told me any stories about that. I just assumed — I always thought you two just picked it out of the air. Or got it from a baby name book."

"No. You're named after a very special person in our lives, someone who died before you were born. You were named Catharine Margaret to honor her."

Catharine was intrigued and she perched herself on the chair opposite her mother. "Is this why you sometimes call me Little Cat? Or Kitten? Or even Mags?"

Lois smiled. "Yes. You were named after one of the bravest people I've ever known. Her name was Catharine Grant, and she gave her life to give you yours."

Little Cat's eyes bugged out. "You mean — she donated an organ or something?"

"Something like that. It's kind of a long story, though. Are you sure you want to hear it now?"

"Yes! You can't lead with something like that and then not follow through! I want to know what happened!"

Lois smiled. Like mother, like daughter.

"Okay. To start with, you remember that I told you I was in the Army?"

"Yes. You had to leave the service because you were wounded, right?"

"That's right. But I've never told you how that figured into Cat Grant being my best friend, or how it affected the way I met your father."

"Then start talking! I'll try not to butt in with dumb questions."

Almost an hour later, at the end of the long tale, Catharine had moved to the couch beside her mother and was nestled in Mom's embrace, weeping openly, her tears mixing with her mother's as Lois stroked her daughter's hair. "It's not fair," sobbed Catharine. "What happened to her wasn't fair."

"No," Lois sniffed. "It wasn't. But Cat Grant sacrificed her life so that I could live and have you and your brother and sister. She knew she was putting herself in danger, she knew she wasn't bulletproof like your dad, she knew she didn't have my training or skills, but she still did her best to save someone else's life." Lois paused to wipe her eyes. "I still love her more than anyone except your father and all our children." She sniffed and tightened her hug. "And I will always miss her."

Little Cat returned Lois' embrace for a long moment, then lifted her face to her mother. "It's funny. I never met her, never had the chance, never heard of her until today, but somehow I miss her too." The girl buried her face in her mother's shoulder. "I

really wish I'd known her."

Lois stroked Catharine's hair. "You would have liked her. And she would have adored you."

"Even more than Aunt Lucy does?"

Lois laughed. "As much as your Aunt Lucy loves all of you kids, I think you and Cat would have been best buddies. In fact," she said as she leaned back, "I probably would have had to limit your time with her. She might have been a corrupting influence on you. In a good way, of course."

"Oh, of course."

They shared a teary laugh, then Catharine asked, "Mom – would it be okay if I visited her grave with you the next time you go?"

"Of course, sweetheart. How about this Saturday afternoon?"

"I'll be there. Uh – will my sibs come too?"

"I don't know why they would. Neither Larry nor Rhonda has any direct link to Cat Grant. If they want to come, we'll take them next time, okay?" She smiled and gently tweaked her daughter's nose. "This Saturday will be our private time together."

"What about Dad?"

"Well, you can ask him if you want to. I think he hasn't gone there with me very often because he doesn't want me to get the wrong idea about his relationship with her."

"Oh." Catharine turned her head and spoke too casually. "If Big Cat had lived, do you maybe think – is it possible that – that Dad might have married her?"

Lois paused, then said, "That's an interesting question. Anything's possible, Kitten, but remember that your dad asked me to marry him, and I accepted his proposal, before Big Cat died. So, yes, it's possible, but the probability is extremely, extremely low. Besides, she was pretty determined not to be a mother by then. She was afraid she wouldn't be able to be who her kids would've needed her to be. She probably would have gotten married eventually, but kids? No, unless the guy she married already had some of his own."

Lois felt Catharine relax a bit. "Okay. Hey, do you think she would have minded being called Big Cat?"

Lois laughed again. "I think she would have preferred Auntie Cat instead, but if you had insisted, she would have let you call her anything that was affectionate."

"That's a good thought. Hey, do you think she and Aunt Selina Cat would have gotten along? Or if you just yelled out, 'Hey, Cat,' would they both answer?"

They shared a quiet chuckle before a soft knock from the living room doorway drew their attention. "Hey, you two. How's it going?"

Catharine Margaret Kent jumped up from the couch and ran to her father. Despite her youth and her above-average height, which had exceeded her mother's almost two years earlier, her steps were graceful and smooth. Her arms wrapped him up and she snuffled, "Oh, Daddy, I love you so much! Thank you for being my dad!"

He returned her embrace. "I love you too, Kitten." Above the girl's head, he lifted a questioning eyebrow at his wife, who smiled back and nodded. After a long hug, he pulled back and looked down at his youngest child. "Hey, Mags, how about you and me waiting until your siblings are in for the night and then taking a little trip with me?"

The girl chuckled and gave him a happy frown. "I'm a little old for ice cream treats, Dad."

He shook his index finger at her playfully. "You are never too old for ice cream. But that's not what I meant."

"Oh? What did you mean?"

He picked her up in his arms, levitated a couple of feet in the air, and spun her around several times. "I meant that we could go to Florida or Georgia or wherever you wanted to go to get some ice cream."

"What? But Dad, that's too far to drive in one – wait a minute!

You don't mean – are you talking about—"

He put his mouth beside her ear and whispered loudly enough for Lois to hear, "Let's you and me go flying together. What do you say?"

Lois watched her daughter jump to the floor, then bounce in place as if she had steel springs in her shoes. "Mom! Dad said – he said – we're going flying!"

"I heard." She smiled at the girl – no, the young woman acting like a girl – and said, "Be sure to dress in dark clothing. And do exactly what your father tells you. Deal?"

Catharine all but tackled her mother and squealed, "Deal!" Then she spun on one foot and bounced some more. "Come on, Dad! We have a cloud to catch!"

Clark threw a helpless look at his wife. "I guess we're going now. Will you be okay with dinner for the other two great beasties?"

She nodded at him. "Assuming their social calendars are open, veggie pizza, here we come. I think we'll go there instead of having it delivered. In fact, I think I'll go even if I go alone."

"Without the kids?"

"You know what social butterflies Rhonda and Larry are."

His mouth opened, but before he could say anything more, Catharine all but pulled him off his feet. "Come on, Dad! I want to see the sunset from over the Atlantic!"

He managed a finger-wave to his wife as his daughter tugged him up the stairs to the roof. "Later!" he called out.

Lois laughed, pleased that the encounter with her Kitten had ended so well. As she half-listened to their conversation upstairs, she picked up her phone and dialed a number in Gotham.

"Hello, Lois. Hang on a second – okay, the line is secured."

"Hi, Selina. How's life treating you?"

The woman on the other end of the conversation groaned. "Like an interloper. I can't seem to get rid of those last fifteen pounds I put on with our second kid. And it's been almost two years already!"

"Really? I feel your pain, girlfriend."

The voice turned bone-dry. "I'm sure you do, Ms. Fit-Through-A-Keyhole-Like-I-Used-To Lane. I assume you're calling to invite us to a cookout in your back yard next Saturday so you can show off your slender figure to all your women friends and make their husbands or boyfriends jealous of Clark."

Lois laughed as the upstairs window slapped shut. "Oh, if I only had a recording of Catwoman talking about babies, weight gain, and weekend backyard cookouts, I could sell it to the tabloids and retire."

"You'd make a lot more selling it back to Bruce. He still thinks he's in his mid-thirties. Keeps telling me he never thought he'd be married to someone as old as I am. Last week he gave me a T-shirt that says 'I Thought Growing Old Would Take Longer' on the front."

Lois laughed again. "I don't know whether to tease you or commiserate with you."

"I'll take either one. Oh, Bruce will want to know this, so I have to ask you how the new implanted digital hearing aids are working."

"Surprisingly well. Although I'd forgotten how high-pitched teenagers' voices can be. Maggie had a slumber party last week, and when the girls all started laughing and squealing at once it sounded like fifty baby chainsaws on meth doing the Hamster Dance."

Selina laughed freely. "Just wait until she gets older and starts dating. Then you'll know you're almost ready to retire."

"You'd know more about getting older than I would. And I'll have you know that Rhonda has a steady boyfriend and Larry is quite popular with the young ladies at parties. Speaking of time going by, our little Kitten knows The Secret now."

"You told her? Or did she invoke those latent Lane genes and

discover it herself?"

"Herself, with a little bit of luck tossed into the blender. She's sharp as a lightsaber, won't let anything get past her."

"Can't argue with that. Did you call to commiserate or complain? Or maybe to brag about how smart she is?"

"None of the above. Clark's taking her flying tonight, so I'm driving the other two to the Pizza Palace, assuming they're free. But I wanted to do something special with Catharine, so I called to ask you when you were next headed to Milan for a wardrobe upgrade."

"Ha-ha-ha! I should have known you had an ulterior motive. Hmm, how about two weeks from Friday? That'll give us two days, or three if we don't come back until Tuesday morning. Or is that too soon?"

"Should be fine. I'll have Clark warn the credit card companies. But I also wanted this to be a threesome instead of just the two of us."

"You refer to my namesake, I assume?"

"Yes. Presuming, of course, that you can keep your paws off the sparkly stuff."

"Don't worry, Lois, I always pay for my swag now. In fact, Eddie and Harvey are the only ones from the old days who still call me regularly about non-criminal activities. And I also assume that this trip means that I'm reserving the new Learjet and crew?"

"I hope so. I can't swim that far. I want my little girl to have the best weekend I can give her. And we need to watch our conversational content, too. We'll have impressionable young ears super-listening to everything we say."

"Sounds like a fairly restrictive form of fun, but I'll take it. I'll firm up the details on my end and call you back to confirm in a couple of days. This may take a little wheedling."

"If anyone can wheedle Batman, I'm sure you can. Just tell him that this is for Clark and he'll agree to just about anything. Besides, it's time Superman and Batman did some kid-sitting for their wonderful wives."

"You're absolutely right about that. Whoops, here comes Bernard with milady's afternoon grapefruit."

"Who's Bernard again?"

"Alfred's hand-picked successor. Alfred had to retire last year after that second heart attack that scared us so badly, although he still insists he's just fine. Despite his age and condition and station in life, I still think he could take Bernard in a fight without breaking much of a sweat. They're starting to work much better together – what is it, Bernard?"

Lois heard the sound of the man's cultured tenor voice without grasping the words, then Selina came back on the line. "Sorry to cut this short, but I have a guest waiting for me downstairs and I don't want her in the mansion any longer than she has to be."

She almost asked who the guest was, but decided she didn't need to know which crazy Rogue was trying to break through the walls Bruce and Selina had raised to protect themselves and their own children. Instead she said, "Go take care of your guest, then give Bruce a kiss on the cheek for me and a big sloppy one on the mouth from yourself."

Selina chuckled. "Will do. Have fun with the replacement units tonight. We'll chat again in a couple of days and firm up our plans. Toodles!"

Lois hung up the phone, sat back, and smiled at her life. She and Clark would celebrate their twenty-fifth anniversary next year. They had three beautiful children, the youngest of which would be introduced to the world of high fashion with her mother in just a few days. Best of all, by sharing the story of the origin of her name, she'd managed to build a strong bridge to the girl, one that if reinforced regularly would be a lifelong link between them. The other two kids were in advanced classes in their college-prep private school and were close enough in age to defend each other if the need arose. Of course, it rarely did nowadays.

Her children were all geniuses, no false bravado or bragging involved, and nowadays they taught her as much as she taught them. If she ever admitted feeling a little dumb around any of them, Clark would kiss her and remind her that they'd inherited her mental faculties. It always made her feel better.

Her best friend these days was a reformed world-class thief who had carved out an honest career designing and implementing new security systems, and who sometimes even condescended to fix the holes in existing systems, assuming she was motivated and was approached in the proper deferential manner – meaning if she were offered enough money or asked in the proper way. And it worked out well that Selina's husband – who was still haunting the night as Batman, albeit less frequently – was Lois' husband's best friend. Bruce's billionaire status had come in handy with the Kent household's various remodeling projects, too.

Lois had followed Perry White into the general editor's chair at the Daily Planet and was teaching the young reporters that story content and presentation was everything and the flash and sparkle of their competitors drew the reader's eyes but not their loyalty or the advertisers' dollars. The photo of Perry and Elvis shaking hands mounted on the wall opposite her desk let her draw on the deep well of Elvis trivia which Perry had bequeathed to her. She still missed the old curmudgeon and his Tennessee drawl.

It was a great life.

But she knew she had that great life because of Cat Grant's sacrifice. Lois never forgot that. She couldn't forget it – Cat's death had marked a turning point in Lois' life that dwarfed all that had come before it. Cat's willingness to die for Clark had shown her what love really was. Remembering Cat had helped her through the births of three children, not to mention the greater pain and joy of raising them to near-adulthood.

And now that her youngest child knew that her father was also Superman, it marked a turning point in their relationship.

A good turning point. Her little girl was becoming a woman in mind and heart as well as in body.

And Lois couldn't imagine anything better than that.

THE END

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