

Going Home

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Rating: PG (for extreme emotional stress)

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Summary: Clark decides to reveal his secret identity to Lois before he proposes, but Lois feels betrayed and forces him out of Metropolis by threatening to reveal the secret to the world. Clark returns to Smallville to live and work, where he finds Rachel Harris waiting for him with an open heart. Now he must choose between the rural-hearted sheriff who loves him openly and the highly volatile city-bound reporter who may hate his very existence.

Story Size: 119,412 words (675Kb as text)

The familiar characters of this story are not my own but are the property of corporate entities (DC Comics, December 3rd Productions, ABC, etc.) other than myself. This work is a labor of love and is presented with no expectation of remuneration.

Author's Notes

This tale begins just before “Whine, Whine, Whine” would have taken place late in season 2 and completely blows that episode out of the water. It wouldn't be inappropriate to consider this a follow-up to my “Green, Green Haunting of Home,” but the linkage is pretty loose and this story doesn't build on the previous one in any definite way.

Rachel Harris was, to my mind, seriously underused on *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*. She obviously felt strongly about Clark, was jealous of Lois, and one may speculate about whether or not she would have shot Jason Trask before he fired his hideout weapon at Clark had Trask threatened to kill anyone else. For her part, Lois was intense, opinionated, often difficult to deal with, and given to extreme reactions. And I also think Rachel would have made a better rival for Clark's affections than Mayson Drake did – and I write that while remembering actress Farrah Foke, the actress who played Mayson, quite fondly. So I think this alt-world scenario is both reasonable and logical – if you tilt your head to one side and squint a little.

Have written all that, I understand why Rachel didn't reappear on the show. There simply wasn't room for an out-of-state sheriff to drop into the lives of our favorite couple on a regular basis. Nor was it reasonable or believable (within the superhero context of the show) to move Rachel to Metropolis (to join the police department or the DA's office as an investigator, for example). And they couldn't take L&C west to Kansas every couple of weeks, at least not for an extended visit. So Jolene Lutz (the actress who played Rachel) joined the ranks of one-shot guest stars on this romantic drama. It's actually a pretty impressive list, so she's in good company.

Quick note of possible interest: Jolene Lutz appeared on *Desperate Housewives* in episode 19 of season 3 (2007), and is credited as Yuppie Woman. I wonder if Jolene and Teri compared notes of any kind off-camera? No?

Quick note of *definite* interest: No one dies in this tale. But that's the only promise I will make. If you want to know if the toys go back in the toybox all polished up shiny and new – or if they get there at all – you'll have to read and find out. True love will win out in the end, but we won't know who is on true love's side until

we arrive at that end.

I want to explore a what-if scenario in this tale: What if Lois and Clark broke off their relationship quite abruptly and unexpectedly? What if Rachel and Clark had the opportunity to reconnect? What if she realized that her affection for him had not waned over the years but instead had grown? What if Clark, partly because of the way things ended with Lois and partly because of Rachel's innate goodness, were receptive to her offer of affection and companionship?

What if Rachel already knew about his powers and appreciated them for the boon they are, both to Clark and to the rest of the world?

Let's find out together, shall we? Without spoilers.

Prologue

Clark had thought about it all week. He and Lois were between disasters, between huge time-consuming and energy-stealing stories, between threats from any one of numerous bad guys toward either of them for the past two weeks, between we-need-it-now assignments from Perry, and he decided it was time.

It was time for him to tell Lois that he was Superman, that the two men who had alternately wooed her and vied for her affection were actually one and the same. And the first Friday in May, a day when both were scheduled to be out of the office on Saturday, was the perfect evening for it.

He wasn't a hundred percent sure, not quite, but if he were to ask Lois to marry him tonight, he believed – no, he was almost totally sure – that she'd accept. He wanted to marry her, wanted to watch her walk down to aisle toward him, wanted to hold her hands as whoever was officiating pronounced them husband and wife. And he was almost completely sure that Lois wanted the same thing.

So it was settled. They'd have a nice date, no pressure, no talk about work, just soft conversation and time alone together. He'd let her tell him the latest on Lucy and her progress toward becoming a paralegal. Lois' younger sister had really turned herself around ever since the Metallo incident with her criminal boyfriend Johnny Corbin. And she didn't seem to hold Superman responsible for his death.

Clark dismissed his residual guilt over Johnny and pointed his mind back to his upcoming date with Lois.

They were due for some quiet time, and it would be a good opportunity for him to clear the air between them. He knew that she'd been frustrated about his repeated vanishing acts, and he was tired of the hard looks and sharp comments she would aim his direction when he returned to her. She had to think he had a fear of commitment or a long-term antibiotic-resistant urinary tract infection or some other serious problem, and he didn't want her to be afraid being involved with him.

He also didn't want her to figure out his secret on her own and get justifiably angry at him. Nor was he willing to risk proposing before she knew. That would be a recipe for an unmitigated disaster that might damage their relationship beyond healing.

So yes, it would be tonight. Dinner, a romantic walk in a warm spring evening, an intimate conversation, a declaration of love, a reveal of his immense secret, and when she recovered from the shock she'd kiss him and tell him she loved him too and wanted to marry him.

Easy as pie. Fresh, hot, homemade peach pie. With strawberries and ice cream on top.

Friday night, after a very pleasant dinner, Lois and Clark

walked aimlessly along Baker Street, listening to the soft jazz and blues from the clubs they passed. Lois loved the feel of her hand nestled in Clark's larger one. He was both the strongest and gentlest man she'd ever known. Her heart leaned toward him whenever they were together and yearned for his presence when they were apart. He made her smile, made her laugh, made her feel warm and safe and secure.

At times he also made her coldly furious.

Clark Kent would sometimes vanish mysteriously into thin air, often when they were having a deep and important personal conversation. Or if they were on an assignment, he'd disappear like Batman was supposed to be able to and reappear out of the woodwork like a termite. It was almost as if he were afraid to fully commit to the relationship.

Or to her.

That had to stop. Now.

She looked around and saw that they'd wandered into Centennial Park. This time of night, after most people had eaten dinner or gone to the theater but before the graveyard shift started work, they pretty much had this part of the park to themselves. Homeless people tended to stay out of the park until after midnight, and the visible police presence kept all but the stupidest drug dealers away. So, on impulse, she nudged him toward a bench not far from the Superman statue just inside the park entrance.

He looked at her and smiled. "Tired of walking with me?"

She smiled back. "No. I just wanted to sit with you for a while."

They sat side by side and she leaned her head on his left shoulder. "This is nice," she sighed.

He wrapped one of those marvelous hands around her shoulders and pulled her closer without squeezing her. "Yes, it is. I could sit like this for hours."

"What, looking at a giant-sized Superman?"

He chuckled. "No. Sitting beside you." He kissed the top of her head. "I can't think of much I'd rather do right now."

She put her hand on his chest and felt the power there. His heart beat with strength and vitality that could not, would not, be denied. It was fanciful, and she knew it, but she could almost feel his love for her crashing through his ribs to envelope her.

It was so real it almost scared her – scared that his love for her overshadowed her love for him. But she wanted him to commit to her as much as she wanted to commit to him. And it was time to find out where the course of her life would lead her.

For several minutes, neither of them spoke. The pressure built up inside Lois until she had to say something. She couldn't allow their relationship to go on with the commitment phobia roller-coaster still set on full throttle.

She lifted her face toward his. "Clark?"

That megawatt smile lit up his face. "Yes, Lois?"

"Um – I need to ask you something." He nodded but didn't speak. "Something really important," she added.

He shifted position and assumed a more serious mien without removing his arm from her shoulders. "You can ask me anything. Anything at all."

She licked her lips and glanced around, then gritted her teeth and turned to face him again. "I need to know – why do you sometimes vanish for no reason? Why do you – are you running away from me? Are you having – second thoughts about – about us? As a couple, I mean, not as a team at work, but personally, like – like man and woman and maybe more than friends – lots more than friends."

Lois all but clapped her teeth together and set her lips in a firm line. She hoped she hadn't said too much too soon. She'd wait for his answer, whatever it was.

And if he suddenly ran off again, she'd have her answer. Not the one she wanted, of course, but it would be an answer.

He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. He nodded once and said, "It's time for me to come clean about all that. I planned to do it tonight anyway. And this is actually a good spot for this conversation."

Okay, she thought, he's going to be honest with me, but why is this a good spot?

He sat up straight and took both of her hands in his. "Lois, I have to tell you that I love you and—"

"And I love you too, Clark! Surely you know that!"

"Please. I want to tell you this – I've wanted to tell you for a long time. So please, please let me say all this without interruption." He sighed and continued without waiting for her response. "I have a secret. I think you know that, even if you don't know what the secret is. And it's time for me to come clean on this."

"You already said that."

He tilted his head, lifted his eyebrows, and gave her a gentle "don't talk" look. She pressed her lips together and zipped them shut with her fingers, then mimed turning a key and pressing it into his palm.

She felt his grip on her hands as it tightened. His face paled slightly, and he appeared to stop breathing. Whatever this was, it was big.

She tried an encouraging smile. It seemed to help, because he inhaled and continued.

"I have never – and I mean never, *ever* – told anyone what I'm about to say. As far as I know, the only people who know this about me are my parents. I've discussed telling you this secret with them, and they both thought I probably should tell you now and not wait too long."

This did not sound good. She tugged one hand loose and touched his cheek, then broke the seal on her lips. "Clark, are – are you sick? Is this some kind of long-term illness?"

He grinned. The big lugnut actually grinned! How was a serious illness in any way funny?

"No, I'm not sick. I used to wonder what was going on with me back when I was a kid, though. But I'm not sick. I'm actually ridiculously healthy."

"Then what is it?" She pulled her free hand back to slap him if he didn't hurry up and tell her already! The waiting was—

He slid his glasses from his face. "I'm Superman."

Blank.

Just – blank.

Nothing. The Void. Total absence of everything.

Her mind was worse than blank. It was – suddenly nonexistent.

Breathe, Lois. Breathe.

"Lois?"

He sounded concerned.

He put his hands on her upper arms. "Lois? Are you okay?"

Her head turned away as if of its own volition and the statue caught her eye. It towered over her, bigger than life, carved with huge, bulging muscles and crossed arms as if it were guarding the park. Her body suddenly demanded air and she sucked in a lungful and leaped to her feet and took three shaky steps toward the immense marble image and she came up short at the rail around the pedestal and she almost fell over it into the base of the statue but Clark caught her and held her.

She turned. The statue's eyes were full of concern – no, those were Clark's eyes – no, they were Superman's eyes – but glued onto Clark's face. How could he—

Clark was Superman.

Superman was Clark.

It was impossible.

It made perfect sense.

He'd lied to her the whole time he'd known her.

He didn't dare tell anyone his secret.

think it's three days more now. By mid-day Tuesday, anyway. They're both still at the hospital with him. Martha's going to relieve Janey in the morning so she can get some real sleep."

"Good. Not about the wreck, of course, but that he's probably going to recover." He huffed through his nose. "Kinda puts the reason for my call in perspective, though."

"Perspective is a good thing to have. So why did you call?"

Clark hesitated, then said, "Maybe I should call back tomorrow. I don't know how urgent this is, what with you guys busy at home and with Mark and Janey."

Clark heard his father try to stifle a yawn and almost succeed. "No, I'm up now, and if you don't tell me I'm going to wonder why you called and have to wake up your mother so she can rock me back to sleep."

"Yech. Dad, please don't say stuff like that to me. I mean, I think it's great that you and Mom still – still love each other and all, but I really don't need that kind of detail."

Jonathan chuckled. "Okay, I'll keep it clean. Now tell me why you called."

"Well – remember the advice you two gave me last week? About Lois? About telling her about – you know?"

"I assume you mean the advice about telling her about your part-time job."

"Yes. Exactly. Well – I told her tonight."

His father waited for more, but when Clark didn't continue, he said, "I'm assuming from the time of this call and your general demeanor that the conversation didn't go very well."

"Ah – no. It didn't go well at all. She called me all kinds of nasty names and told me she never wanted to see me again."

"I see." Jonathan hesitated again, then added, "When are you going to go and talk this out with her?"

Clark sighed and ran his free hand through his hair. "I won't ask you how you knew my plans."

"I know my son. You wouldn't want this situation to go on unresolved, but you wouldn't put any pressure on her, either. And my question stands."

"I – I really don't know. She was madder than I've ever seen her."

"She'll get over it, I reckon."

"She slapped me."

His father stopped breathing for a moment. "Slapped you? In the face?"

"Yes. I'm pretty sure she bruised her hand, too."

"After you told her?"

"After I told her the secret and after she fainted and I caught her."

"Fainted? Oh, my, that is bad."

"She tried to punch me in the nose, too, but I dodged that one."

"Wow. That really would've hurt her. Made her even madder, too."

"Yes. I know Lois better than any other woman in my circle of friends, but I don't know women in general well at all. How long do you think I should wait?"

"Wow. That's a tough one. I don't – hang on, I think your mother's awake."

The other phone clicked. "Clark? I think I understood what I heard your father say. You told Lois about – your other job and she reacted worse than you'd anticipated?"

"Far worse. She said she doesn't want to see me again. Ever."

"Oh. Your father was right, that is bad."

"I got that, Mom. The question now is, how long do I let her cool off before I see her again?"

"Hmm. I assume you're both off work tomorrow?"

"Yes. That's one of the reasons I picked this Friday for the big reveal."

"Well, I think you should let her sleep in tomorrow, assuming

she does, but I don't think you should wait too long. What about tomorrow, mid-afternoon? If she's not home when you show up, just slip a note under the door."

Clark thought for a moment, then said, "Thanks, Mom. That sounds like good plan to me. Dad, do you agree?"

"Son, I never disagree with your mother regarding other people's relationships. I'd go with her advice."

Clark almost smiled. "Thanks, both of you. Now go back to sleep and wake up refreshed. I may need to cry on both your shoulders tomorrow night."

"Okay, Clark. Good night. Martha, I'll be back in the bedroom in a minute. And I'm sorry I was so loud that I woke you."

"Oh, Jonathan, you know I'd be bothered if I'd missed this chance to talk to our son, especially since this was so important to him. Now come on back to bed and I'll make sure you sleep like a baby."

Clark did smile this time. "Okay, you two, take your married PG-13 conversations private. I'm hanging up now."

"Good night, Son."

"Good night, sweetie. And good luck with Lois tomorrow."

"Thanks, both of you. Now go to sleep!"

Lois stomped along the street with an intensity that begged for an attempted mugging so she could hit someone who'd feel it. She even took one shortcut through a dark alley she never took at night, hoping for a really stupid perp to accost her.

No one was foolhardy enough to try his luck against her.

She slammed through the door of her apartment building and ran up the stairs, trying to burn off some of the energy from her fury. Her keyring jingled in her shaky hand and she couldn't insert the proper key in the locks, so she gave up and kicked the door twice. "Lucy!" she yelled. "Lemme in! Now!" She shoved the keyring back into her purse, then punched the door with the same hand with which she'd slapped Clark.

Her hand screamed at her as if it were broken.

As she pulled back and gasped in pain, the door flew open and Lucy grinned at her. "Run out of punching bags, Sis?"

Lois blew past her and stalked to the kitchen, where she turned on the faucet and put her left hand under the cold water. Lucy followed her and stopped at the kitchen doorway. "Hey, Lois, what happened? Are you okay?"

The tears had held off, waiting for the anger to lose energy and stop blocking them, but the pain in her hand combined with the pain in her heart to overcome the last barrier to release and she burst out blubbing. The tears were as much from anger as they were from physical pain, but the overriding emotion was a feeling of betrayal.

Clark had betrayed Lois.

A part of her mind tried to tell her she shouldn't be surprised, that men had betrayed her over and over again ever since childhood. Her father had betrayed the family and left. Danny Williams had betrayed her as a junior in high school, spreading the rumor that she was frigid and scared of boys after she'd fought off his forceful offer of sex in the back seat of his car. Paul Murphy had betrayed her in college, allowing Linda King to seduce him away from her. Patrick Sullivan had betrayed her in Ireland, making promises he'd had no intention of keeping. Claude Bouchard had betrayed her when he'd convinced her he loved her, slept with her, stolen her first big story and told everyone at work how unresponsive she was in bed.

Now Clark had betrayed her. He'd kept the biggest secret of all time from her for almost two years. He'd let her think he was dead, shot to death in Georgie Hairdo's club, for almost three days. He'd told her he loved her, gotten her to tell him she loved him, then clubbed her with the confession that he—

She couldn't even think it.

And not only had Clark betrayed her, Superman had betrayed her too. The superhero wasn't nearly as heroic as he claimed to be. He was fully capable of deceit, of playing the trickster, of deliberately misleading her to believe one man was actually two different men.

And she'd never even suspected. Not really. Oh, Clark had mysteries and puzzles and curiosities surrounding him, just as any person did, but this was not something trivial or cute or minor. This was huge, immense, mammoth, colossal, gigantic, titanic, and it overshadowed everything else that had passed between them.

He'd said he loved her and she'd believed him.

Then he'd told her he'd been lying to her since they'd met.

If he'd lie to her about Superman so easily, he couldn't possibly love her as much as he claimed he did. It had to be a lie.

It was unforgivable. This was not something she could overcome, nor would she let him convince her he'd been justified. He had to go, get out of her life, let her heal as much as she could, move on with her future.

And she'd never trust another man enough to love her as long as she lived.

Lucy's embrace suddenly penetrated her mind, and Lois realized that her hand felt frozen and her nose was running and her face was wet with tears and her sister was holding a hand towel against her shoulder.

Lucy turned off the water and wiped Lois' cheeks, then dabbed her hands dry. She offered the towel to her sister. "You need this, Sis. Come on, sit down and tell me all about it."

Lois took the towel, dried her hands, blew her nose, then allowed Lucy to guide her to the couch. They sat down side by side near the middle. Lois bent forward and shed more tears as her sister stroked her hair and made soft, sympathetic noises.

As Lois wound down, Lucy shifted around to embrace her older sister. "Lois, you were with Clark tonight, weren't you? On a date, I mean?"

Lois nodded.

"Um – was it a bad date?"

Lois shook her head.

Lucy frowned. "A good date, then?"

Lois nodded again.

Lucy touched her sister's chin and guided Lois' face into view. "If it was a good date, why are you melting down? What happened?"

Lois sniffed and blew her nose again, then leaned her forehead against Lucy's shoulder. "I – I learned something – I found out tonight – Clark has a secret. A really big one. One he'd – he'd been hiding ever since I met him."

Lucy kissed the top of Lois' head, then asked, "Was it a bad thing, this secret? Is it something illegal?"

"No. Nothing like that." Lois sat up and grabbed her sister's hands. "But it's big. Really, really big. I never would have guessed it, not ever." Her voice hardened. "And the lousy scumbag didn't trust me enough to share it with me."

Lucy frowned at Lois. "I don't understand. You said you never would have guessed this secret, so how did you find out what it was? Did someone else tell you?"

"No," growled Lois. "He said I was the first person he'd ever told. His parents are the only other people who know." She opened her mouth to add something, then shut it. It didn't matter how mad she was or how betrayed she felt. She wasn't going to reveal the Secret.

Not yet, anyway.

Reveal the Secret. What a tantalizing concept.

What a delicious revenge.

Lucy leaned back a little. "I don't like that tiny evil glint in your eye. If you're the first person Clark's told about this secret, you can't tell anyone else. Not even me, okay? If Clark wants me

to know, he'll tell me himself. Otherwise I'll be happy just to wonder."

"No, I'm not going to tell you. Not yet, anyway. But I want that lying son of a sea slug to leave, and I'm going to use the secret to make him go."

Lucy recoiled in apparent shock. "What? Why? How can calm, cool, collected Clark Kent have a secret that bad? And why do you want him gone, whatever that means, that badly?"

Lois turned narrowed eyes to her sister. "He betrayed me! Clark Kent betrayed me just like every other man I've ever trusted! I've never retaliated against any of those men but I'm going after Kent hard! He's leaving the Planet and Metropolis and I can't wait to see him gone!"

Lucy slowly stood. "Lois, please, don't be that way. Clark really cares about you, and he—"

Lois jumped up. "Then why did he lie to me? Huh? Tell me that!"

Lucy took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I can't possibly tell you that if I don't know what this big secret is. You said he told you, not that you found out and confronted him with it. If that's what happened, I can see you being upset, but I don't see any reason for you to be this – this vengeful, this full of hatred. If you'd learned it independently, would it make a difference in how you feel right now?"

"No! It would be worse because he'd still be lying!"

"But he—"

"That's enough!" Lois roughly pushed her sister away. "Stop defending him! He doesn't deserve your loyalty!"

Lucy's face hardened and she leaned toward her sister. "Apparently he doesn't deserve yours either."

That shocked Lois. Before she could answer, Lucy had grabbed a windbreaker and her purse and unlocked the front door. The slam as she left shook the door frame.

Lois stood still for a long moment, still holding the towel. Then she folded it and found a dry corner, wiped her eyes, and marched to the laundry basket. She'd wash out the towel and rid herself of the memory of her breakdown.

Just as she would rid herself of Clark Kent.

Clark spent a total of about forty minutes in bed that night, all of them awake and staring at the ceiling. Despite his unreasoning anger and resentment against Superman, he jerked out of bed before one o'clock and spun into the hero. Maybe he could find a mugger to discourage or a hurricane bearing down on a tropical paradise he could deflect. At this point, he mused, either one would do.

He soared over the city for hours without finding any crime taking place or accidents to clean up or kittens to rescue or storms to tame. It was as if all the bad stuff Superman normally dealt with had giggled maniacally and hidden away from him for the night, refusing to allow him any shred of stress relief.

By six a.m. he was really tired.

He landed behind his apartment and spun into his civvies, thought about going to see Lois in The Suit, then thought better of it, then reconsidered again, then told himself he needed a shower. After running out of hot water, he dried himself, got dressed, and left to walk to the Daily Planet.

He tottered onto the news floor at seven thirty-three, not surprised to see Perry in his office with papers in front of him. He knocked on the doorframe and said, "Morning, Chief."

"Huh? Oh, hey, Clark. What're you doing here? I thought you'd be sleeping in after your date with Lois last night."

The slightly risqué joke fell flat. "It was not a good date."

"Ah." Perry nodded twice, then said, "Anything I can help with?"

"No, sorry, we have to work this out ourselves."

"I see. So why are you here and not talking to Lois?"

Clark pursed his lips, then said, “I don’t think waking her up this early would help the situation. You know she’s not a morning person.”

A grin tapped Perry’s lips for a moment, then he said, “You’re probably right. So you’re just passing time right now?”

Clark shrugged. “I guess so. You have anything I can do?”

Perry frowned slightly, then brightened. “Yes, actually.” He picked up two sheets of paper and held them out. “You can go through these stories and give me a quick edit on each one. Shouldn’t take you all that long.”

Clark took them and glanced at the byline on the top sheet. “Eduardo Friaz? I’m editing his copy? How long has he been working here, anyway?”

“Twelve years, and he still drops the occasional pronoun or definite article or comma or uses a gerund incorrectly. The story itself is solid, so I just want you to make sure the grammar is right. I’ll keep on with this other stuff while you check those.”

“Right.” He looked at the other sheet and frowned. “Do I know Alicia Porter?”

“I don’t think so. She’s a stringer who sends in occasional things on college-age fashion and music trends. This is a part-time gig for her, and I always need to massage her sentence content and structure. I’ve coached her on the proper news story structure, and she’s getting better, but every once in a while she’ll still bury the lead in the fifth paragraph.”

Clark nodded. “Thanks, Perry. I’ll get right on them.”

The editor smiled softly. “Thank you, Clark. You’ll save me some time, and I want to get home by noon. Alice is baking me a cake for no reason at all today.”

Clark turned toward his desk, almost chuckling. Nice to be reminded that true love did triumph.

Sometimes.

Lois turned her head and looked at the clock. Eight-nineteen. Bleah. Morning already.

She threw the covers back and sat up, wishing she were still asleep. She tasted her mouth and frowned. Hadn’t she brushed her teeth last night? Wait, was the date with Clark—

She jumped up and spun around to look at the far side of the bed – empty – then grabbed her head and groaned. Why did she have a headache that felt like a hangover?

At least Clark wasn’t there to—

Clark.

The louse.

The unmitigated liar.

The cruel heartbreaker.

The betrayer of all that was good and true.

She remembered *It*. All of *It*. Every nerve-jangling, soul-crushing moment of *It*.

She wanted to scream but knew it would only hurt her throat. Clark had told her he – that evil, wicked man had lied to her for almost two years! And she hated him!

Why did her head hurt so much?

She stumbled into the living room and saw her purse on the dining table beside an empty wine bottle. Yeah, she thought, that’s right, I finished off that half-bottle last night. On top of the single glass she’d had with dinner and her current emotional state, it had hit her pretty hard. She was lucky she wasn’t barfing up her guts.

Good thing Lucy had snuck a few sips over the last couple of weeks. Her hangover would’ve been worse with more alcohol.

And where was Lucy, anyway? The girl had slammed out of the apartment last night and apparently hadn’t returned. Lois knew she should be worried, but at the moment it required too much effort. Her mental systems were overwhelmed with her unsteady physical condition and her white-hot fury at Clark.

She mentally dared him to come see her today. There were things she hadn’t said the night before and she desperately wanted

to say them to his face before the anger faded.

Because it always had before. She’d never been able to sustain a good mad at Clark, not really. This time, though, she thought she could do it and do it well. His was the ultimate betrayal. Not only had he lied to her, presenting himself to her as two different men repeatedly and convincingly, he’d persuaded her to open her heart to him, to feel not only affection and friendship and trust, but love.

Yes. She had loved him before last night. Not now. Not ever again. She’d burn him out of her soul if she had to. She’d immolate her feelings for him and pour the hot ashes over his head. The sooner the better.

She stalked into the bathroom, ignoring the throbbing in her cranium, and yanked off her clothes. The shower was too hot for her head, but she forced herself to stand under it and let the pain rinse away with her shampoo.

A stupid joke Clark had told her earlier that week crossed her mind.

“When you wash your hair, Lois, always use shampoo. Never use real poo.”

She’d groaned and laughed and pulled him close and *NO MORE!*

No more tender thoughts about the great betrayer! None! Not ever! Like Romeo from Verona, Clark was ever banished from her mind and her heart!

And if he ever reappeared, the penalty would be death.

The shower wasn’t helping much, so she shut off the water and angrily dried herself. After she yanked the brush through her hair, she pulled on a robe and marched to the kitchen, the aspirin bottle in her hand. One glass of water and four tablets later, she marched back to the bedroom to dress.

Then she caught sight of the picture.

It was a shot of Lois on Clark’s arm the night he’d received his Kerth. Her face was turned up toward him and it shone like the sun. She looked like there was nowhere else on earth she’d rather be.

She’d display that abomination in her home no longer.

Lois marched to the frame, opened the back, removed the photo, and slowly tore it into small shreds and dropped each fragment into the trash can.

Now she could get dressed.

After the aspirin kicked in, she’d look for a note from Lucy – unlikely, given Lois’ late night – and check the answering machine. She didn’t remember the phone ringing, but it might have rung without her hearing it, given her state of intoxication and her righteous fury. And if Clark the Ratfink had left a message she might destroy the machine.

For good or ill, there were no messages.

Lois put on jeans, polo shirt, and sneakers, and started to clean up the apartment. It wasn’t a wreck by any means, but it could stand a good cleaning and she had the nervous energy to get it done today. Just for reference, she glanced at the kitchen clock. Nine-twelve.

Her head felt a little better, so she refilled her water glass and drank it down. That’s what Clark had told her to do if she was hung—

NO!

Thoughts of the betrayer were not allowed!

The plastic glass didn’t fracture when she slammed it down on the cabinet, but not for lack of effort on her part. Without another thought for the traitor, she ran to the closet and hauled out the vacuum cleaner and pushed it to the wall to plug it in.

Then she realized that any cleaning of surfaces above the floor would knock little bits of stuff on the floor. So she turned and snatched disposable cleaning cloths and spray cleaner off the closet shelf and attacked the dining table.

She dispatched the evidence of last night’s drinking spree,

then wiped down the table hard enough to take off a layer of finish. Next, she put the few dishes on the kitchen cabinet in the sink and scrubbed the countertops. The dishwashing was next, and that wouldn't take—

The doorbell rang.

With the dish towel clutched in one hand, she stalked to the door and yanked it open, expecting Lucy to say that she'd forgotten her key and it was twenty till ten and where had she been all—

Clark stood in the hallway.

His appearance at her door shocked her. She specifically remembered telling him she never wanted to see him again. Part of her mind told her to slam the door in his face. Another part insisted that she pull him in and rip him a new one.

A very, very tiny, miniscule, insignificant part cried out to put her arms around him and tell him she loved him.

In the quarter-second it took to beat that last part of her mind into a coma, Clark spoke.

"Lois, please let's talk. Let me explain myself."

"No."

She wondered for a second who'd said that, then she replayed it in her mind and realized that she'd said it.

He looked as if he'd drop to his knees at any moment.

"Please, Lois, talk to me. I don't want our relationship to end like this."

"Then you shouldn't have lied to me."

That wasn't right. The flat tone of that statement wasn't the way she wanted to say that to him. It should have come out at an impossibly high volume, at a frequency that would penetrate his super-ears and stick a knife into his skull. It should have been written in flame in front of his eyes and hot enough to melt his glasses. It should have knocked him to the floor writhing in pain, broken his ribs, torn the breath from his lungs, deafened him. It wasn't enough for Lois.

But apparently he thought it was. His entire body deflated. His face all but fell to the floor. His mouth hung open and his hands lifted to either side in apparent supplication. He looked desperate, defeated, beaten and whipped.

Good.

She tightened her grip on the inside doorknob and spoke in that same flat tone. "I told you last night I never wanted to see you again. I told you to go away. I meant it. Go away and stay away."

She tried to shut the door but his hand rose and held it open even though he didn't step over the threshold. "Please! Please let me talk to you, let me explain why I did what I did. I think you'll see things my way if you do." He tried the puppy-dog eyes on her. "Please? I'm literally begging you."

She cut her eyes to his hand on the door, then turned her head sharply. "Move your hand or I will call the police."

He hesitated, then moved his hand. "Lois, please, let's talk this over. I love you and—"

"NO!" she bellowed. "You do NOT get to tell me how much you love me! People who love other people don't lie those other people for months at a time! They don't betray the trust those other people put in them! You did both! I hate you and I don't ever want to see you again!" She tried to slam the door, only to hit his shoe. "Move it or lose it, Kent!"

He huffed as if he were losing patience. "Look, your conditions aren't workable. We both have jobs on the same floor of the same building and for the same newspaper! I can't just stay out of your way on a daily basis. That's not feasible."

She leaned her face into the opening. Her eyes narrowed and her voice dropped in timbre and pitch. "No, you're right this time, it isn't. You and I can't work in the same newsroom. You have to leave the city."

"What?!" His eyes flew open and his mouth worked soundlessly for a moment, then he said, "You've got to be

kidding! I'm not leaving the paper! I've got too much time and effort and good will invested in it!"

"Then I'll tell everyone."

Clark's own eyes narrowed and his voice lowered. "Now wait just a minute here! That's not only not at all funny, that's mean and cruel. And I don't think you mean it."

"Oh no? Why don't we drive over to Perry's house and get his input?"

"He's at the paper until noon today."

"Then let's go see him."

She abruptly thrust her arm out and pushed him back a half-step, just enough to close the door. Caught him off-balance, she thought, and when we get to the Planet I'm gonna do it again.

As she gathered her purse and windbreaker, she silently swore, I will never let Clark Kent hurt me again.

But I will hurt him. How I will hurt him.

And, she suddenly decided, he's walking to the office. Or running. Or flying. She absolutely did not care which.

Chapter Two

Perry made one more mark on the Sunday front page mockup on his desk, then sighed and put his blue pencil away. He knew there were ways to do this on the computer on the hutch behind him – Olsen had told him so at least a dozen times a week for the last five months – but he still felt more comfortable doing it "old school" – that phrase was Olsen's too – than with that little clicky thing beside the keyboard. And he could never remember how to change colors or how to insert text without deleting an entire paragraph. It was too new a trick for the old dog to learn.

He folded the paper and picked up the phone to call for a runner to take the updated page to the print supervisor when the elevator bell dinged. Perry smiled, thinking that Sean Calhoun had anticipated him once more and sent one of his assistants, probably Christine Porter, for the latest changes. Sometimes Perry was sure that Calhoun had a touch of what his Irish ancestors had called "second sight." At other times, he thought Sean was just a born newsman.

He put the handset back in its cradle when stomping footsteps alerted him that neither Lamont Hammonds nor Christine Porter was coming to his office. He barely had time to lift his head when Hurricane Lois slammed through the door and nearly broke the glass.

"Perry! Got something to tell you!"

He nodded once. "Good morning, Lois. A little unusual to see you in here on your Saturday off, but it's not—"

"Never mind! Are you gonna fire Clark or am I gonna print it?"

Fire Clark? What had *happened* between the two of them?

Clark crept in and gently closed the door. "Sorry, Perry, I couldn't stop her without tackling her."

"Wouldn't want you to do that, son. Be a bad idea, I think. And you don't look so good. You okay?"

"Yes, except I'm more than a little frustrated at Lois right now. She won't listen to a word I try to say."

"Have you tried to discuss whatever this—"

"Never mind that!" Lois barked. "Perry, I asked you a question!"

Perry sat back in his chair and laced his fingers together over his belly. "Well, let me see. You want me to fire Clark, or you'll print something. Mind telling me what that something is? It has to be pretty spectacular if it's blackmail-worthy."

"Oh, it is!"

Perry nodded. "Okay, it's good. Fabulous, maybe even magnificent, but I still don't know if it's worth losing one of the best reporters I've ever worked with."

Lois gritted her teeth at her boss, then spun on her heel and faced Clark. "Well?" she demanded. "Are you leaving or do I tell

him?”

Clark crossed his arms and frowned harder at Lois than Perry had ever seen. He must really be upset with her.

“Neither.”

Lois leaned forward. “What does that mean?” she growled.

Clark leaned even closer to her. “It means I don’t believe you. I think you’re bluffing and you think I care too much about – about what you know. Or what you think you know.”

Lois took a step so that they were almost in each other’s faces. “What, now you’re telling me it’s not true?”

Clark shook his head. “I didn’t say that. But I still think you’re bluffing.”

“I’m not! You better get out of Dodge while you can!”

He gave her an evil smile. “This town’s plenty big enough for both of us, pilgrim. I’ll still be here after dark. And I think you’d rather keep it secret to give you some leverage against me.”

“You – you big – I’ll show you! Last chance, jackass!”

“You’re wasting your breath, Lois. I’m calling your bluff.”

She clenched her fists and tensed as if to throw a punch. Clark just narrowed his eyes as if to say she’d never land it and she knew it.

Perry had never seen any woman that angry, that close to violence, toward a man she loved. Whatever this thing was, it was huge in Lois’ mind.

After a long moment of impasse, Lois straightened and snapped, “Fine!” She turned to Perry and said, “You know how we’ve speculated about Superman having a secret identity, that he masquerades as a civilian? Well, Clark Kent is Superman’s secret identity. He told me so himself.” She crossed her arms in apparent victory and glared. “Now is that blackmail-worthy or not?”

Perry sat rock-still for almost ten seconds. Then his eyes flicked to Clark, who had dropped his hands and shoulders in obvious shock. Then Perry slowly said, “Clark, is that true?”

The younger man looked stunned for another long moment. Then bowed his head and sighed deeply. “Yes. I did tell her that I’m Superman.”

Lois growled low in her throat. “Tell him the rest!”

Clark shook his head. “And it’s true. I am Superman.”

“I see.” He turned his head back to Lois. “I assume that’s what you threatened to print?”

She threw her arms wide and almost backhanded Clark in the face. “Yes!” she snarled. “He’s been lying to me for months! For more than a whole year! Ever since we met! He told me he loved me! He betrayed me! I want him out of my life, my job, my city, my everything! I want him gone forever!”

Perry let his surprise show. It wasn’t so much that Clark flew around in revealing blue tights helping people. Nor was it that he’d finally told Lois the truth. What stunned him was her reaction. Of all the possible outcomes of their deepening relationship he’d considered, Lois being almost insanely furious wasn’t even on his list.

“I see.” He stood slowly and ambled toward his memory wall, the one with the Elvis memorabilia interspersed with the photos of people from his life and career. “You say you want him gone.”

“Yes! Gone! G-O-N-E! Forever!”

He turned to face her, trying to calm her by behaving casually. “Okay. Can you define ‘gone’ for me, just so I’ll know exactly what you mean?”

She took two rapid steps to stand inside Perry’s personal space and glared up at him. “I want him gone from the Daily Planet. I want him gone from Metropolis. I want him gone from my life. I don’t ever want to see him again or hear from him or think about him ever again!” Her index finger poked Perry in the chest twice. “That’s what I mean by gone!”

“Or what, Lois?”

Both Perry and Lois snapped their attention to Clark, who

stood in front of Perry’s desk with his hands on his hips and anger on his own face. Lois took a sharp breath and snapped, “Or I’ll print it.”

Clark staggered to one side and grunted, then waved his hands as if he were trying to say something to her.

Lois gave him no time to recover. “You’ve got four days, Kent, including today! If you’re still here on Wednesday morning you won’t have a secret by lunchtime! And it’ll be above the fold in fifty-four-point type in the Planet’s extra edition!”

She stomped by him and banged her hard shoulder into his chest as she passed. The door once again barely survived her passage. The slam she gave it as she exited shook the frame.

Perry watched her march to the stairs and yank that door open as well. The solid steel fared better than Perry’s wood and glass office door, and Lois disappeared into the stairwell. Perry heard her shoes slapping the steel tread on her way down the concrete steps until the door drifted shut on its hydraulic closer.

Clark eventually turned to Perry. The young man started to say something, but instead just exhaled and collapsed in on himself. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

Perry wished he had something to say to fix this. He’d never seen Lois that implacably angry. It made him very nervous.

This just might be the incident that destroyed his newsroom. It would be worse than the Norcross and Judd romantic disaster a dozen or so years earlier. This had the potential to wreck every relationship in the building, from management to printing and shipping. Lois was highly respected for her skill, her longer tenure, and her accomplishments, but Clark was just as talented and far more personable. Much like the divorce of a favorite married couple, people would choose sides. Some would be strong for Lois, some for Clark, and most of the rest angry about the team’s breakup. And it would all fall on Perry, from both above and below.

It might even signal the end of the Daily Planet as he had known her and loved her for decades.

Lois punched the inside of the elevator with her unbruised hand, still fuming. How dare Kent say she was bluffing! How dare he challenge her like that, right in front of Perry! The Daily Planet was her domain, not his! She had prior claim on everything there and she’d fight him before she’d give up one eraser!

She sat in her Jeep and forced herself to calm down. Driving angry in Metropolis was a sure-fire recipe for a high-dollar insurance claim at best, and a jaunt in an ambulance at worst. She couldn’t enforce her edict against Kent from the hospital, nor did she want Superman to rescue her, so she took several deep breaths, closed her eyes, and envisioned a newsroom where her desk was not flanked by one occupied by Clark Kent.

The exercise calmed her but didn’t defuse her anger. It would take a long time, she told herself, before she could think of that traitor without risking an ulcer, assuming she would ever be able to do so. As long as she drove like a little old lady, she could get home and work on releasing some of that energy in a constructive fashion.

Maybe she should rent a rustic cabin where she had to chop her own firewood. That would burn off a lot of anger energy, and the next few renters would surely be grateful for the fuel she’d cut but not use.

As she pulled out of the parking structure and onto the street, she reminded herself that her mortal enemy would be gone by Wednesday, whether he actually quit or was fired. There was no way Superman could function as a reporter, especially not as an investigator, not after she outed him. He’d never get an interview again with anyone, and any information he gathered on criminals from sources other than his gathering it during the crime would be thrown out by any responsible judge. He’d have no choice but to leave.

The possibility that she might hamstring Superman's rescue efforts and possibly cost people their lives did not occur to her.

She parked in her building's lot, locked up and turned to enter the building and nearly ran over Lucy.

The sisters grabbed each other for balance. Lucy staggered back a little and said, "Hey, watch it! We're not competing for dates now."

Lois gave her a small smile. "You always came out on the short end of that stick, Punky."

"Only because you could buy beer with your fake ID."

Lois chuckled. "Yeah, those were the days. Hey, what are you doing here? I thought you had a study session today."

"It was this morning and I'm done. If I'm not ready for mid-terms now, I'll never be ready. And where were you off to this fine morning?" She glanced at her watch. "Oh, hey, wait, it's almost eleven-thirty already. Have you had lunch yet?"

"Not yet."

"Then come on, Big Sis, my treat! How about Uncle Mike's? I haven't been there for a while and it's past time for me to harass him. Besides, he has a turkey club sandwich with my name on it."

Lucy kept the conversation light as Lois drove to Mike's Café. She wanted to dig into the real reason for Lois' anger and sudden hatred for Clark. She thought it was hypocritical for Lois to blame Clark for not being completely honest with her if she hadn't told him every shameful and degrading secret of her own. Lucy already knew most of them, and she doubted Lois could run Clark off with a revelation of her past miscues. Whatever Clark had kept from her, it had to be huge. At least, it was huge in Lois' mind.

Lucy considered and discarded several possibilities as she rode in the Jeep. Was Clark gay? No. No way. The looks he gave Lois and the attenuated embraces they'd shared in Lucy's presence made that one a no-brainer.

Was he seriously ill? Too healthy. And while that might be a reason for Clark to withdraw from Lois, confessing to a fatal illness wouldn't be any kind of betrayal. Nor was Lois the kind of person who'd reject him for something he couldn't control. Another "no."

Was he seeing another woman? Lucy couldn't imagine that was the reason. Clark wasn't that kind of guy. Besides, if there were another woman, *she'd* know he was seeing her, and Lois had said that no one besides his parents knew.

Maybe he had a secret life, like he was an undercover CIA agent, or maybe FBI. Maybe he spent his spare time tracking down bad guys and arresting them.

No, that couldn't be it. He and Lois already did plenty of that kind of thing at the Daily Planet. Nobody would have time for two full-time careers that both required lots of unscheduled overtime. His supervisors would know, of course, but his parents probably might not. Scratch that one off the list too.

She shook her head. This was getting her nowhere. If Lois wouldn't tell her, she'd go to the source. Surely Clark would willingly enlist her help in turning Lois around.

Hadn't that Elvis guy sung a song years ago about a hard-hearted woman and a soft-headed man? It could have been about Lois and Clark.

Lucy barely registered the moment the Jeep lurched to a stop and Lois turned off the engine. "We're here. Lucy. Hey! Calling Lucy Lane, lunch is coming. Be prepared to be charming and intelligent."

She snapped out of her reverie and snarked back, "Ha! Shows how much you know about me! I'm always charming and intelligent."

Lois released her seat belt and frowned. "Sure you are. Just remember that when Uncle Mike comes out to fuss at both of us for staying away so long."

"You just remember that he's an equal opportunity fusser."

Both women opened their doors and stepped out. "Ha back at you!" Lois said. "I've been here several times in the last couple of years."

"With Clark?"

Lois stopped next to the Jeep's front fender and leaned on it. "Look, Punky, I know you're dying of curiosity, but I really, really don't want to talk about Clark— about him. Right now that's the last thing I want on my mind."

They resumed walking from the parking lot to the restaurant. "It's not going away, Lois. It's going to eat at you, give you ulcers, ruin your sleep, mess up your job, poison your relationships with others if you don't get some resolution. You think I'm telling you what to do, I know, but I'm not. I'm just warning you about some of the costs of hanging on to your anger at Clark."

They entered the small plaza outside the eatery and picked a table near the entrance. "And where are you getting all these words of wisdom, anyway?" Lois demanded. "Who gave you a counselor's license?"

They sat as Lucy waved at one of the waiters in the doorway. "I don't have a license and this is free. As to where I got all this so-called wisdom, remember I grew up in the same household you did. Everything I know about doing the wrong thing in a relationship I learned from our parents."

Lois' eyes narrowed at Lucy, but she didn't speak. A waiter who introduced himself as Darren smiled as he took their orders and promised to bring bread and drinks right away. Lucy thought about following up on her last statement, but she decided to wait. Trying to push Lois to do anything, even the right thing, was often a losing proposition.

And this was too important a proposition to lose. She really wanted Clark as a brother-in-law, no matter what this mysterious secret was.

Lois ordered soup and salad with ranch dressing on the side. Lucy asked for the Mike turkey club special with low-salt chips and a large ginger ale, knowing that Mike would recognize the order and come out to see them if he had the time. He might come out even if he didn't. He was that nice a guy.

Just like Clark.

"Look, Punky," Lois began, "this isn't the usual lover's spat over something that really doesn't make much difference in the long run. This — this thing makes all the difference, forever and always. And I can't tell you what it is, not yet. Maybe soon, maybe not. We'll have to see."

"What about—"

"No! I can't! Please don't ask me again!"

That little catch in Lois' voice, that tiny burr that she got when she was trying to hold it together on the very precipice of breaking down, convinced Lucy that it wasn't the time or the place to push Lois on this. She was still too caught up in the emotions of whatever revelation Clark had laid on her to think and act rationally.

Besides, Uncle Mike was coming with their food on a large tray. Darren followed with a folding stand, which he set up beside their table. Then he smiled at the sisters and walked away.

Mike beamed at each one in turn as he placed their drinks and lunches before them. "I'm glad to see both of you girls here. Been a while for at least one of you."

Lucy chuckled at the glare he gave her. "Oh, Mike, you are a rascal! But why did you run Darren off? He's cute."

Mike feigned offence. "And I suppose I'm not?"

"Not at all what she meant," Lois put in. "I've always enjoyed your rugged manliness, your outdoor appeal. Makes a girl feel special."

He nodded as if placated. "Well, then, that's different. You two kids know you're both special to me."

Lucy lifted both hands and wiggled her index and middle fingers downward. "That's us, Lois, we're Uncle Mike's 'special'

kids.”

A chuckle sneaked out of Lois’ throat as Mike’s mouth fell open. “Hey!” he cried. “I’m deeply wounded! You two are my favorite adopted nieces of all time and you know it!”

Lucy laughed easily. “Of course we do, Mike. That’s why we pick on you. We love you too.”

“Uh-huh. Those air quotes you used around ‘special’—” he repeated her gesture “—really make me feel that love. Now come on, you two. Chow down and tell me what’s going on in your lives.” He turned one of the chairs around and sat straddling the back. “We need to catch up with each other.”

Lucy glanced at Lois and read the don’t-go-there glare in her eyes as if it were a tiny neon sign. Didn’t matter. Mike didn’t need to know about Lois’ latest relationship disaster, especially since it was one of her own making and still developing. There was plenty of other gossip to feed him. And it wasn’t a hardship, because Mike truly cared for the two Lane sisters.

Lucy hoped she could straighten Lois out before too long. She certainly planned to try – after they’d both digested their food. Priorities, naturally.

Rachel Harris looked down at her dress. It should have been long-sleeved, down to just below her knees, and solid black. Instead it was floor-length khaki with gold stripes down the side and around the shoulders with a wide pistol belt around the waist. Her shoes, which should have been black heels, were light brown cowboy boots. Her Smokey Bear trooper’s hat fell down over her eyes and she couldn’t see the pastor.

Wait, there he was at the front of the chapel. He was leaning on the casket and making low remarks that Rachel couldn’t quite hear or understand.

Where was Mom? Why wasn’t she here beside Rachel? This was Janey’s husband’s funeral! Rachel’s father’s funeral! The woman should be here beside Rachel! They should be supporting each other! Why couldn’t she turn her head?

Someone grabbed her shoulder and she lurched backward. It took a few seconds before she realized where she was and what she was doing.

She’d been asleep at work with her head on her desk, on Saturday just after noon. She could feel the hair that had worked out of her ponytail sticking to the side of her face. This wasn’t just a nap, it was a full-on deep sleep.

No wonder she’d had such a crazy dream.

“Hey, easy, Sheriff,” the man said quietly. “It’s okay. You’re at the office.”

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, then silently counted to ten. “I’m okay. I’m all right now.”

The deputy’s brows drew down. “Maybe you should go home and rest. Billy and I can cover for you this afternoon.”

She ran her hands over her face, then shook her head.

“Thanks, Tommy, but no. It’s my job to be here whether I like it or not.”

Tommy bent down and all but whispered, “Your dad’s hurt and in the hospital. You’ve spent nearly every day here at the office since you were elected and you’re entitled to some personal time. You don’t live here, or at least you shouldn’t, and nobody’s gonna complain about you getting the rest you need.” He stood and moved away a couple of feet. “And if anyone does complain, me and Billy’ll convince ‘em how wrong they are.”

She almost smiled. “Thanks, but I’m better now. I need to catch up on some paperwork.” She stood and stretched. “I will go see if we have any coffee, though.”

“We do,” Tommy said, “but I’m not sure how drinkable it is. You might do better with a soda from the vending machine.” At her raised eyebrow, he said, “It’s working now. Vernon came out yesterday and refilled it, collected about eighty dollars in quarters, and smiled when he left. Said we’re keeping his retirement

profitable.”

Rachel smiled. “Yeah, he’s rolling in dough. Look, if my mom calls or comes by, you make sure and tell me. I might have to leave kinda sudden-like.”

Tommy nodded. “We know. Next time you see your dad, tell Sheriff Mark we’re all pulling for him.”

“He knows already, but I’ll tell him. Now let me at that soda machine.” She dug in her pocket, pulled out a handful of loose change, and started sorting through it. “Please tell me he put in some Jolt cola.”

Tommy lifted his hand. “Allow me, Sheriff. My treat.”

She raised her eyebrows again. “I won’t know how to act if you guys are gonna be nice to me.”

“Don’t get used to it. Besides, neither of us wants that overdue paperwork on our desks.” He dropped in some coins and selected the Jolt. “Here you go. Guaranteed to overdose you with both caffeine and sugar and keep you awake for an extended period of time.”

“Thanks. Hope I don’t get so jolted that I write too sloppy and have to make you redo them.”

He looked like he was about to be serious, then changed his mind. “In that case, I’d better go check with Denise and see if anybody’s committed any heinous felonies in the last ten minutes.”

Denise Howard, the dispatcher, chose that moment to stick her head around the corner of her office. “Rachel, Walt Ling just called. He says there’s a mountain lion snooping around his sheep pen and he doesn’t want to lose a single lamb. He also said somebody better come now or he’ll unlimber his old Henry and get a lion pelt rug for his living room. I told him he’d better wait for one of us.”

Tommy rolled his eyes. “It’s the Barker’s barn cat. That thing is huge, must weigh twenty-five pounds, acts like it’s part lynx. I saw it run down a hare a few weeks ago. Moved like a cheetah after an antelope.”

Rachel nodded. “It’s not a lynx, it’s a Maine Coon. Them critters can weigh upwards of forty pounds. You better go shoo it off again, Tommy. We don’t want the Barkers and the Lings to start shooting at each other’s livestock.” She sighed and shook her head. “That’s all we need now, our own Hatfield and McCoy feud. And don’t let that critter scratch you. You’ll get infected.”

Tommy reached down with his left hand and patted a hard pouch on his belt. “Got my pepper spray ready. Fastest thumb in the West.”

He walked quickly out the front door. Rachel listened as he started the patrol car and crunched away on the gravel lot. Then she sighed and went back in her office, holding the cold can in both hands.

She opened a file and picked up her pen. Then she put it down, picked up the desk phone, and dialed her home number.

A slightly frantic voice answered, “Hello!”

“Mom, it’s okay, it’s just me checking in. Have you heard anything new from the hospital?”

Her mother sighed into the handset at her end. “No, I haven’t. And I don’t dare leave! They told me to go home and rest but I can’t! Honey, I’ve got to go back! I can’t be away from your father! I – I can’t lose him!” Her voice dissolved into sobs.

Great. Her mother was disintegrating and Rachel felt like she was barely hanging on. It was time to take Tommy’s advice. “Mom! Mom, listen to me! I’ll come home now. I’ll be there in a little bit, okay? You just wait for me. We’ll go to the hospital together.”

“O-okay. Thank you, sweetie. Oh, can you pick up a few things on the way? We’re almost out of bread and milk and peanut butter, and can you pick up some soup? You know how your dad loves his creamy peanut butter. I meant to get him some the other day, but he – they called me and—”

“It’s okay, Mom, I’ll get two big jars of peanut butter, one creamy and one crunchy. That way Dad can have whatever he wants as often as he wants when he gets home. I’ll leave as soon as I change into civvies, okay?”

Her mother’s forced smile came through the phone line. “Of course, sweetheart. Don’t rush on my account, I’m fine now. I – I guess I just needed to hear your voice and know you’re there for me. I’m so glad we have each other to lean on.”

“Me too, Mom. Bye for now.”

Each other to lean on. Huh. Maybe her mom was having weird dreams too.

Chapter Three

Perry waited for Clark to say something – anything – after Lois stormed out of the office, but the younger man seemed too shocked to speak. So Perry busied himself by straightening his desk and stacking the loose folders in a neat pile to one side.

Clark finally moved. He turned to his boss and said, “Holy cow.”

Perry couldn’t help the chuckle that sneaked out. “Sorry, son,” he said, “but that was not at all what I expected to hear just then.”

The ghost of a smile played at the corners of Clark’s mouth for a moment, then vanished like dew in the desert. “I knew she was mad at me, Chief, but I didn’t think she was this mad at me.” He did his country-boy-foot-scrape like he’d been caught watching his neighbor’s teenaged daughter bathe in the creek, then said, “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before now.”

Perry understood what he meant. “I can’t say I didn’t suspect it, although I never thought I’d get a confirmation this way. And I don’t mind that you kept it secret. Seems to me that you did the smart thing. And the right thing.” He exhaled through his nose. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her that angry.”

“Me neither.” Clark paused, then asked, “You think she was serious?”

“I know she was serious when she said it and when she marched out like Napoleon heading into Russia. I don’t know if she’ll be that serious on Wednesday.”

Clark shook his head. “I don’t think I can risk it. I may have to leave town.”

Perry sat down in his office chair and waved Clark to the sofa opposite his desk. “I get it, Clark, you can’t put the people you know and love in danger. If Luthor were alive and he found out, no telling what he’d do. He’d look at good people and think, ‘Now there’s a convenient lever to control Superman. Let’s see, what’s the most efficient way to kidnap them? How much torture can they take?’ Other bad guys would probably think that way, too, much as I hate to admit it. You have to protect your folks.”

Clark looked down and sighed. “Thank you. But what do I do now?”

Perry rocked for a few moments. “I think you should stay away from Lois. You get around her right now and you’ll only reinforce her anger. Leave her alone and see if it passes, or at least if it eases up a little. I’ll talk to her come Monday morning. Don’t come in before nine-thirty or she might start yelling out something embarrassing in front of the whole staff.” He pushed himself upright and held out his hand. “You’re a valuable asset to the Daily Planet and to me personally, Clark. I really hope you don’t leave town. We’ll do our best to get her settled.”

Clark shook hands with him. “Thanks, Perry. I think I’d better get home. And I appreciate your advice.”

Their hands parted. “You gonna take it?”

That ghostly smile threatened a comeback. “Doing things my way seems to have made things worse, so yeah, I’m taking your advice. My folks told me the same thing, to wait, and I didn’t listen.” The proto-smile vanished again. “Guess being super-smart is a power I don’t have.”

Perry smiled wider than he felt. “You’re a typical man in one very important way, Clark. You don’t understand women.” He waited until Clark’s despair relaxed slightly, then said, “Don’t worry about it right now, son. Things will get better. Like a kidney stone, this too shall pass.”

Clark’s eyebrows lifted. “Yeah, I’ve heard about those. People say they hurt.”

Perry nodded and guided Clark out of the office with one hand on the younger man’s shoulder. “They do, son, they really do. And the worst pain comes just before the end.”

Clark slouched back to his apartment on foot, not trusting Superman to stay away from Lois’ place. He tossed his windbreaker on the couch and left it there. A Mountain Dew from his refrigerator accompanied him back to the couch, where Clark joined the windbreaker.

He sipped at his drink without tasting it, turned on the TV and surfed for a few minutes without seeing or hearing it, then decided to call home again. He didn’t know how he could wait until nine-thirty Monday morning to see Lois again.

The phone rang twice before a vaguely familiar female voice answered. “This is the Kent residence.”

“Uh – hi, this is Clark Kent. I’m calling from Metropolis.” He frowned at the background noise. “Who is this, please?”

The woman’s voice answered, “Oh, Clark, I’m glad you called. This is Lana. A bunch of us are making dinner and dessert for Janey Harris and your mom’s wrangling the herd. She and I are about to take it over to them. Lemme go get her.”

Lana dropped the phone on the counter before Clark could take a breath. He waited a few seconds as he thought about just hanging up, then his mother blurted out, “Clark! I’m glad you called, honey. Sorry we’re so busy.”

“That’s okay, Mom. I’m sorry I interrupted. Should I call back later?”

A burst of laughter erupted in the background. “Later? Well, maybe about three o’clock would be good. I’m about to go to the Harris place with Lana and the food we’re fixing. And we haven’t heard anything more about Mark Harris yet.”

“I was about to ask, so thanks for the update.”

She chuckled. “I’ll tell you everything I know when you call back. A couple of the ladies are going to hang around and clean up after I leave.”

“Okay. Tell them not to waylay Dad while you’re gone.”

“Hah! And you object to your father and me having sexy phone talk!”

The background noise disappeared as if switched off. Clark hesitated, then said, “Maybe you were talking a little loud there, Mom.”

Martha seemed to move the phone away from her mouth, then called out, “Lana, who is on the phone?”

Someone snorted, then Clark heard Lana say, “He said he’s your son.”

Another woman chimed in with, “I always said the Kent family was close.”

Laughter erupted in the background again. “Sweetie,” she said sweetly and loudly, “I’m going to have to severely injure someone now. We’ll talk later, okay?”

Clark smiled a little. “Okay, Mom. Just don’t take off any hide where the sheriff can see it. You could get arrested.”

Wryly, Martha replied, “Funny man. Got to go cause pain now, bye!”

Clark hung up and shook his head. There were a few areas in Metropolis where the phenomenon of neighbors coming together to help in times of crisis might still occur, but it was just about guaranteed to happen in Smallville and other similar hamlets and villages and small towns across the world. In Kansas, bad times for anyone produced free food, all fresh-cooked or baked and

ready to eat. It was comforting to him that such things still happened.

He could use some comfort right about now.

Rachel pushed her grocery cart down the aisle looking for her father's favorite brand of peanut butter. It was a local one, made by an older couple coasting on their retirement income and making specialty peanut butter for the surrounding counties just to have something to do together. Her dad always advised her to support local businesses if they provided good service or better products, even if doing so cost a little more money. It built good will and support among the people of the county. And they made some wonderful friends in the doing of it.

She was tired and distracted and staring at her list when she bumped into another cart.

Oh, good, she thought, now I have to apologize and be diplomatic.

As she opened her mouth, someone said, "Rachel? Rachel Suzanne Harris, what are you doing here?"

The slightly scolding tone barely piqued her interest. She lifted her gaze to see Martha Kent staring at her in surprise that bordered on astonishment. "Oh. Howdy, Miz Kent. I'm just pickin' up some stuff for my mom."

Martha frowned slightly and shook one index finger at Rachel. "Young lady, you should be at home with your mother or at the hospital with both your parents! I'm surprised at you. I know Mark and Janey raised you better."

Rachel sighed and leaned against her cart. "That's where we're goin' soon's I get done here. Mom's plumb tuckered but she wants to see Daddy."

"Well, you're not driving anywhere in the state you're in! You look and sound worse off than your mother surely is."

"I know, but I gotta get home. I'll be fine – just slammed a whole Jolt cola." She tried to maneuver the cart around Martha. "Just a couple o' things before—"

"I won't hear of it! You just give me what's already in the cart and then your list and I'll finish for you. I'll have Lana drive my truck to your house and I'll take you in your car."

"Now – now hang on a second—"

"I will not hear of you driving. Give me your keys."

"Miz Kent, you can't—"

"Keys," Martha said imperiously, then held out her hand. "Now."

Rachel opened her mouth to protest again but Martha cut her off. "I will not say this a third time, young lady. But I will give you a ticket for driving under the influence."

"Influence of what? I ain't been drinkin'."

"Narcolepsy. You're nearly out on your feet, you young dummy."

"Hey, you ain't s'posed to talk to the sheriff that way."

Martha pulled her cart back and moved to Rachel's side. "Honey, you're not just the sheriff right now, you're a young woman who's scared for her father and trying to support her frightened mother, and you're doing such a good job of taking care of everyone else that you've almost exhausted yourself. We all love you and want your dad to get better, but he can't do that if he's worried about his little girl, and especially not if she gets hurt driving when she shouldn't. Give me your keys and I'll take you home."

Martha's paired logic and compassion came through. Rachel fished her keys out of her purse and handed her grocery list to the kindly older woman, then picked up the three items in her cart to transfer them to Martha's.

"You keep track o' them parcels and I'll pay you back next payday."

Martha looked almost horrified. "You'll do no such thing. I'll take care of all of it. You just go tell Lana what's going on."

Rachel sighed. Lana. It had to be Lana Lang. They'd never really been friends, especially since Rachel had gone to Clark's senior prom instead of Lana. Even though Lana had abruptly broken up with Clark three weeks earlier, she'd fumed at Rachel for being what Lana had called Clark's "pity date." Clark had never indicated a strong romantic preference for either of them, but in Lana's mind Rachel had stolen Clark away from her. The two of them going to separate colleges had dulled their rivalry, but it had never gone away. Since Lana had come back to Smallville, they'd been polite but a little cool toward each other, and Rachel had avoided Lana if at all possible. And now they were joining in a mercy mission for Rachel's mother.

Sometimes life threw more than one pitch at a time, and they were all screwballs.

Rachel plodded to the passenger window of Martha's truck and tapped on it. Lana, who'd apparently been dozing, jerked upright and gasped. Then she saw Rachel and rolled down the window.

"Hey, Lana, Miz Kent asked me to ask you to take her truck over—"

"Step back, Rachel."

Lana's imperious command startled the sheriff and she obeyed, wondering what was going through that empty blonde skull. Lana opened the door and stepped out, then gently embraced the taller woman and said, "I'm so sorry."

Shocked, Rachel hesitated, then slowly returned the embrace. Lana held it a moment longer than Rachel had thought she should, then she let go and stepped back but held one of Rachel's hands. "I really, really hope your father gets better really fast. And I think you're holding up very well."

"Uh – thank you?"

Lana frowned. It made her tired eyes look baggier. "I'm sorry that I haven't been a good friend to you. I've been pretty mean and I know it. But my childish feelings are way less important than your father's health. I want him to get lots better real fast, and I can't do anything to make that happen but I'm going to help make sure you and your mom have plenty to eat. So what did Martha want you to tell me?"

"Um – she said she was gonna drive me in my car and wanted you to take her truck to my folks' house. Here's the keys."

Lana smiled brightly and, as far as Rachel could tell, sincerely. "No problem. You go have a seat in your car and wait, unless it's locked and you don't have a spare."

"Naw, it's unlocked. Nobody 'round here gonna boost my car, not with them lights and markings on it."

"True. You go sit down and rest before you fall down. We'll make sure both you and the groceries get there safely."

The other girl's solicitude touched Rachel. "Thanks. And I mean it. I'll see you there."

Rachel turned to go as Lana said, "That's fine. And you're not carrying anything inside so don't even think about it!"

Rachel grinned over her shoulder and nodded, then continued her plod to the passenger side of her cruiser. She made sure the rear doors were unlocked, then sat in the passenger seat and put her head back. Sleep quickly wove its web over her mind and she almost forgot to buckle her seat belt.

She barely noticed Martha putting the groceries in the truck. By the time Martha cranked up the cruiser to head for the Harris home, Rachel was out cold.

Martha and Lana carried boxes and bags into the Harris kitchen, then Martha sat Janey down in a chair and let her direct them as they put away the contents. Rachel shook her head and laughed silently. They'd been invaded by a superior force and their defenses had been reduced almost immediately. Now they were held captive in their own home. Good thing their conquerors were mostly benign, Rachel mused.

The short nap in the cruiser had done her some good. She still needed a full night of horizontalness, but at least now she could go until bedtime without the danger of falling asleep on her feet. Lana took a small bag of Double-Stuff Oreos out of the grocery bag she was emptying and put it on the table between Rachel and her mother.

“You two need a sugar rush. Down a couple of those and you’ll feel better.”

Rachel smiled at her mother, who grinned back. “Leave it to Lana Lang to take the wheel and hit the accelerator,” her mom stage-whispered.

Rachel pulled back the tab on the bag. “As long as she signals when she turns, I don’t mind too much.”

“Ha and ha,” snarked Lana. “I’m sorry we can’t stay too long, but I’ll heat up some of that meatloaf from Mrs. Emerson if you want a bite now. Won’t take ten minutes. I haven’t tasted it, but I did take a sniff and it smells terrific.”

“Thank you, Lana,” Janey answered. “Any chance anyone sent some iced tea?”

Lana’s profile all but blurred as she readied the electric oven, put a small portion of the meatloaf in to warm, and snatched open the refrigerator. She pulled out a plastic pitcher and waved her hand in front of it. “Abracadabra! The tea is conjured, madame. Would my lovely assistant Rachel please point to the cabinet where the drinking glasses are stored?”

Rachel returned the smile and indicated the door over the counter behind Lana. In rapid fashion, each of the four women had a medium-sized glass of country-sweet iced tea before her. Lana sipped hers and sighed contentedly. “Ah, that’s really good. Y’all just make yourselves to home, y’hear?”

The other three chuckled. Martha leaned on the table and exhaled. “Wow. I don’t remember working quite that hard loading the truck at the store.”

“Don’t rest too long, Martha. Remember, you have to be back home to get that call from Clark at three.”

“Right, right. We’ve got some time yet.”

“Martha, dear, is Clark’s call something private or can you share it with us?”

“You sure you want in this, too, Janey? I’d think you already have a full plate as things are now.”

Janey sighed. “Maybe I could use a little distraction. As long as you don’t say something Clark wouldn’t want you to let out.”

Martha frowned at the Oreo in her hand, then pulled it apart and ate it like a seven-year-old. First she chewed and swallowed the cookie half without the white stuff, then she scraped the cream filling off with her front teeth, then she ate the other half. She washed it down with her tea, then said, “Maybe I should. Maybe one of you could give me some advice to give to him.”

Martha played with her glass for a long moment, grabbed two more Oreos and put them on her napkin, then sat back and nodded. “Okay, here’s what I know so far. Clark has a lady friend in Metropolis who he says he loves. Jonathan and I have met her and she’s a nice young woman. He thinks she loves him too but she hasn’t actually said it to him, at not least to my knowledge. Last night they went on a date, ate a really nice dinner and took a walk afterward and then Clark told her that – he told her a secret from his past and she got really angry and walked away. He said that now she won’t listen to him, won’t let him explain himself, and he doesn’t know how to handle the situation.”

Lana lifted one eyebrow. “You mean he doesn’t know how to handle *her*, don’t you?”

Martha shrugged. “That might be true. All I know is that she’s really mad.” She looked around. “Any of you have any suggestions?” As Lana leaned forward, Martha lifted her hand and added, “Any *constructive* suggestions for Clark to use in fixing this situation?”

Lana settled back and appeared to chew on whatever she’d

almost said. Janey tilted her head and said, “I’m going to assume that whatever this ‘thing’ is that he told her isn’t illegal or immoral.”

“Or fattening,” Lana snarked.

Rachel snorted lightly. “You know, Lana, that mouth filter in your head don’t work so good when you’re tired.”

Lana shot a sharp look at Rachel, then sighed and sat back. “I’m sorry. Sometimes my mouth runs when my brain’s not engaged. I didn’t mean to make light of Clark or his situation.”

Rachel frowned for a moment. “Did Clark tell you exactly what she did when he told her this mysterious secret?”

“He said she slapped him.”

Lana’s mouth dropped open and she blinked slowly. “Wow. That’s not the Clark I remember. There’s no way he’d do something that would upset his girlfriend that much.”

Janey shrugged. “I don’t have anything right now, Martha, but I’ll let my mind turn it over while we’re doing other things. Maybe I’ll come up with something by tomorrow after I’ve had some sleep.”

Martha patted Janey’s arm. “Thank you. Thank you all. Oh, Rachel, you haven’t said anything yet. Do you have any ideas?”

“Is Lois Lane, this girlfriend of Clark’s, she the one who was here last summer investigatin’ that fake Federal guy?”

“You mean the one you—”

“Lana.” Martha’s abrupt interjection startled Rachel. At least Lana didn’t say it out loud – the one she’d killed. Because of that association, Rachel almost hadn’t mentioned Lois. But she’d had some quality therapy and some really good support from her friends and family and had mostly gotten past the reflexive guilt.

It still stung, though. Probably would for the rest of her life.

Rachel took a breath and said, “I was just gonna mention that she seemed real scared for Clark when that guy tried to shoot him, and not scared like for a friend. She held onto him like she thought he was gonna just melt away. I’d a swore she was real close to bein’ in love with him then. And I’m with Lana, I can’t imagine Clark doing anything so bad that she’d hate him for it. But I really hope they can work this out. I thought they made a nice couple.”

Martha sighed. “Okay, I’ll wait for his call and tell him my friends and his have no idea what to tell him. Maybe Jonathan can think of something.”

This time Janey patted Martha’s arm. “Dear, your husband is a wonderful man and he has all my respect. He’s a terrific farmer, a rock of a friend, and someone to count on in bad times. In fact, he’s coming over later today to work on that stone walkway to the barn Mark started putting in. I think some friends of his are coming, too, and I’d guess they’ll be done before dark. But Jonathan is not an expert on women. He knows you and loves you, of course, but as for understanding women in general?” Janey flipped both hands in the air. “He’s a terrific friend.”

They all laughed. After a moment, Lana gathered the dishes and put them in the sink. A quick question to Rachel revealed the dish soap’s hideaway, and the young blonde whistled as she finished the cleanup. Rachel took one more Oreo and chewed it slowly.

Rachel silently wondered if the secret Clark had shared was that he was Superman. If that was it, and Lois had blown up over it, the problem was Lois’, not Clark’s. Of course, Rachel didn’t know why Lois might have slapped Clark over that secret, so maybe it was something else.

Somehow she didn’t think so. She wondered how he’d deal with the situation.

She hoped it would turn out for the best for him, however it happened.

A moment later, Lana sidled up to Rachel and whispered, “I’m sorry about the – you know. I promise I won’t mention it again.”

Rachel looked up and nodded. “Thanks.”

Lana smiled. “Got to go. They mayor has a bee in his bonnet about some highway repair project and he wants me to go with him to a meeting with the county commission. I’d tell you all about it except nothing’s been decided yet.”

“Thanks for all your help, Lana. Go knock ‘em dead.”

Lana gave Rachel a lifted eyebrow, then reached into the cookie bag and took an Oreo. “One for the road.”

“You mean for the highway, don’t ya?”

“Of course. Which reminds me, I’ll have to brush my teeth before I meet the mayor. He doesn’t need to know that I occasionally indulge in high-calorie snacks.”

“He hitting on you?”

“Nothing like that. He just – we – he’s been very nice since I told him that you and I were friends.” Lana paused, then added, “I hope I wasn’t being presumptuous.”

Rachel smiled wider. “Naw. You been great about my daddy and taking care of me and Momma. I got your back, girl.”

Lana’s smile was somehow more genuine this time. “Thank you. Your dad will be fine, I just know it.” With that little bit of assurance, Lana breezed out the door and drove away.

The old saying that it was an ill wind that blew no good floated into Rachel’s mind. If nothing else, this near-disaster had given her a friend, one she hadn’t expected to make. Rachel decided to make sure this new friendship was a long-term one.

She needed all the friends she could keep.

Chapter Four

Lucy’s turkey sub disappeared in short order, as did Lois’ soup and salad. Darren the handsome waiter dropped the check on the table, smiled, and said, “Your uncle said your money’s no good here today. You ladies have a pleasant afternoon, and come back to see us soon.”

Lucy smiled. “Thanks, Darren. I’m sure we will.”

Darren smiled wider. “He also said that your dessert, should either of you want one, is also on the house. May I recommend a sampler bag of gourmet cookies for each of you? That way you can take dessert home and nibble as the fancy takes you.”

Lucy chuckled as Lois smiled. “Sounds wonderful,” Lucy said. “I know I’d appreciate it. I know how good those cookies are.”

Darren nodded. “I’ll be right back.” He turned to Lois and asked, “A bag for you also, ma’am?”

Lois blinked twice and her brows drew down, so Lucy blurted, “Yes! Yes, she’d love a bag also. Thanks.”

He smiled and left. Lucy watched him go and sighed, hoping it would distract her sister.

It did. “Punky, I don’t think you’re his type. You’re too female.”

Lucy smiled, then gave Lois a mock-angry glare. “You mean I’d be too much woman for him?”

Lois’ smile slowly returned and she chuckled lightly. “Yes. That’s it exactly. Besides, you have classes and studies you can’t interrupt. In fact, shouldn’t you be studying right now? And don’t you have a term paper to write?”

“The first draft is done and I’m halfway through the first critical edit. I want top marks for this and I’m about nine days ahead of schedule now. Don’t worry, Sis, I’ll get it done early. And it’ll be great. I’ll let you read it if you want to.”

“You mean I get to critique your work?”

Lucy crossed her arms and fake-huffed. “Absolutely not. I’ll give you a copy to read after I get the grade I’m going to richly deserve.” She lifted one index finger and shook it at Lois. “And you will not – I repeat, *will not* – give it back to me with blue or red or green or any other color markings to indicate the changes you would have made. This is my paper, not yours, and I’m working on my paralegal certification, not a journalism degree. Besides, I know for a fact that Clark still corrects your spelling.”

As Lucy had known it would, the mention of Clark made Lois turn her head away and end the teasing session. Whatever had happened between them was bad, but there couldn’t be any real reason for Lois to hate Clark the way she claimed to. Lucy had left the subject alone during lunch, but it was time to see if she could pry open the oyster and look at the pearls inside. Lucy firmly believed that Clark Kent was a pearl of great price, and if Lois truly didn’t want him, some other woman would snap him up and be thankful for Lois’ idiocy for the rest of life with him.

Darren chose that moment to lay two fairly large paper bags of cookies on the table. As he put Lois’ bag down, he smiled at her and said, “Here you go, ma’am.”

Lucy’s eyes widened at the size of the bags, then at Darren, then asked, “Didn’t you leave any for the other customers?”

He chuckled politely. “Your uncle wanted you both to enjoy your afternoon. Excuse me, ma’am, but I see two other tables I need to check on. Good day, ladies.”

Lucy watched him glide between the tables to his customers as she slid the cookies inside her purse. “I’m gonna have cookies until the end of the month, I think,” she said. “I can’t come back to Darren looking like the south end of a north-bound cow.”

Lois’ purse was too small to hold her bag, so she slid them into her jacket pocket. “Did you hear that guy? He called me ‘ma’am!’ Twice! I can’t believe it! I hate being called that! I’m not that old!”

“I know, Sis. It’s always so difficult for you to accept the courtesy of others. Come on, let’s go. I really do have some stuff I need to work on today.”

They walked to the car and climbed in. As Lois fastened her seat belt, Lucy said, “You had a good lunch and some relaxing company. Are you ready to tell me the horrible thing Clark did now?”

Lois froze for a second, then jammed her key in the ignition. “I already told you.”

“Yeah, I know, but I didn’t understand what you meant.”

The key almost snapped off from the force Lois applied to the ignition switch. “He betrayed me! He lied to me from the minute we met! He’s like every other man I’ve ever known! I hope he gets permanently constipated!”

Despite herself, Lucy guffawed. “Constipated? Permanently? Oh, what a horrible fate!” She held stomach as she laughed. When she calmed down, she said, “I’m glad I’ve never made you that mad. You probably would have wished for me to be permanently pregnant!”

Lois glared at her little sister for a long moment, then smiled a little. “Yeah, that’s a terrible fate for any woman. Right at early stages, too, when the morning sickness is the worst.”

Lucy laughed aloud again. Lois unbent enough to chuckle, but it didn’t last. “Seriously, Lucy, I really don’t want to talk about – about him. Please respect that.”

Lucy took a couple of deep breaths, then said, “I still don’t get it. A week ago if he’d offered you a diamond engagement ring you were going to say ‘yes’ and dance a fancy jig. Now you’d use it to disembowel him and carve his intestines up for sausage. You really should tell me why the big change.”

Lois sighed. “You’re not going to take ‘no’ for an answer, are you?”

“At the risk of being redundant, no, I’m not. I know Clark, I like him, and I know that he loves you like there’s no tomorrow. I seriously cannot imagine what he told you to make you react like that.”

Lois drove silently for almost a full minute. That’s it, thought Lucy, I’ve capped the well. No information today, if ever.

Suddenly Lois said, “Dad betrayed Mom, me, you, all of us. And he was just the first.”

Lucy tilted her head but didn’t speak, hoping for more. After a long moment, Lois continued. “Paul betrayed me in college. I

thought I loved him, thought he loved me, and then I walked in on him in bed with Linda in the middle of – you know.”

Lucy touched Lois’ near wrist and whispered, “I know. I’m so sorry.”

Lois’ voice was rock-steady and the Jeep was under full control as she continued. “When I went to Ireland two years later, I was convinced that Patrick loved me unreservedly. He didn’t. He tried to get me in bed the week before I left, and when I backed away he accused me of leading him on and lying to him. All he wanted was my body, didn’t give a hoot for my mind or my personality or my writing skills.”

Lucy squeezed Lois’ hand slightly. “I remember you telling me.”

Her voice took on an angry edge. “And Claude! That – that fiddle-headed French moron got me to sleep with him and stole my story! Then he told everyone that I was a horrible lover and a hack writer and probably plagiarized everything I turned in to Perry! And almost no one believed that he’d printed my story under his name! He – he betrayed me and broke my heart and almost drove me away from the Planet!”

Lucy started rubbing Lois’ hand, then almost hit the dashboard face-first as Lois slammed on the brakes at a stoplight. “Now Clark comes along and convinces me he’s not like other men, that he’s honest and trustworthy and brave and transparent and that he’d never lie to me but he did!” The light changed but the Jeep didn’t move. “He – that – that man took my trust and shattered it, destroyed it! There ought to be a special place in hell for all men everywhere! I hate them! I hate them all and I hope they all die slowly and in terrible pain!”

A horn honked behind them. Lucy rubbed her shoulder where the seatbelt had grabbed her, then looked at Lois and saw someone who wasn’t safe behind the wheel anymore. So she put the console shifter in Park and said, “Come on, Sis, Chinese fire drill time. Let’s swap seats and I’ll drive.”

Accompanied by a horn duet from other drivers, each sister moved her seat back, and they each moved over the console to the other side, with Lucy sliding in front of Lois. Lucy quickly adjusted the seat and mirrors, buckled her belt, and shifted into Drive – only to see the light turn red in front of her. Oh, well, she thought, at least Lois isn’t driving. She’d either run the light or not move through the next cycle.

Lucy moved forward as soon as the light turned green and the last of the cross traffic running the red light had passed. As she watched the driver behind her in her mirror, she saw that driver’s frustration mount as the middle lane beside her moved faster than the Jeep but was too dense for the angry driver to change over. Lucy flipped on the turn signal before she turned right at the next intersection and idly wondered why it wasn’t a lot stiffer, considering how seldom Lois used it.

The turn seemed to snap Lois back to the present. She grabbed her own seat belt and fastened it, then sighed deeply. “I never would have thought Clark would lie to me, especially about something that big. I mean, everybody has little secrets, like blowing off a homework assignment in second grade or stealing a piece of candy from a store as a kid or cheating on a sixth-grade test but not—” she stopped talking and turned to face the passenger window.

Lucy’s ears perked up. She’d almost said it. She’d come *that* close to telling Lucy what Clark’s secret was. And Lucy thought Lois needed to say it. She needed to tell someone, to spill the beans to some listening ear.

Besides, Lucy’s curiosity was chewing her up inside. “Lois, will you please tell me what this big secret is? You keep hinting around it and poking at it but you don’t say it. Come on, tell me!”

Lois’ mouth worked several times. Nothing came out. She took a deep breath and said, “I’m sorry, Punky, I really

can’t tell you. I gave my word – sort of.”

“Sort of? What the heck does that mean? How can you ‘sort of’ give your word on something? It’d be like – like being ‘sort of pregnant!’”

“Why do you suddenly have pregnancy on the brain, anyway? You haven’t been – what did that junior high civics teacher say – oh, yeah, ‘out and about with a member of the opposite sex?’ It would explain why references to impending motherhood are popping out of your mouth so often.”

“Trust me, Lois, I wouldn’t settle for any guy less trustworthy than Superman.”

Lois grunted like Batman was rumored to. “Trustworthy – oh, if you only knew.”

“You can trust me and you know it. For example, I have never told anyone about Little Jimmy Burns and his fourth-grade fascination with your underwear.”

Lois huffed as if a laugh had choked to death in her trachea. “Yeah, you’ve kept that one. But I still can’t tell you Kent’s secret. I said I wouldn’t let it out into the wild before Wednesday. If Kent is still in the city on Wednesday morning, I’ll tell everyone.”

Lucy turned into the underground parking below their apartment building. She guided the Jeep into Lois’ reserved parking space and pulled out the key. She released her seat belt and turned to her sister with anger starting to bubble up in her chest. “It almost sounds like you’re blackmailing Clark into leaving.”

“It’s not blackmail, exactly – more like coercion.”

“It quacks like a duck, Lois! You’re extorting an action from someone with a threat to reveal a secret that the someone doesn’t want to be made public! That’s blackmail! You ask any of my law professors and they’ll tell you the same thing!” She shoved the driver’s door open, hard enough for it to tap the car next to it.

“Hey! If old man Nowitzki thinks I’ve scratched his classic Mustang he’ll sue me! You better not have nicked the paint!”

Lucy slammed the door shut and yelled, “Forget the Mustang! We’re talking about a person with a life that you’re trying to wreck! You make him leave forever and you’ll regret it!”

Lois stomped around the back of the car and faced Lucy, then put her fists on her hips and leaned into her sister’s face. “Regret, huh? How about this for regrets? I regret ever meeting him! I regret partnering with him! I regret every moment when I let him lie to me and tell me he cared! I regret not smothering him with a pillow the day he was born! How am I supposed to believe he – he loves me when – when he lies to me?”

Lucy stopped and looked into her sister’s eyes, full almost to overflowing. She forced her volume and intensity down and did her best to relax. Her next point was important.

“Okay. You don’t want to tell me what the ‘big lie’ is. I get that. I don’t understand it, but I don’t have to. But I think you’ve overlooked something, Lois. If Clark’s lie was that horrible, that destructive, that repellent, and you know the truth behind the lie, you’re perpetuating that lie by not revealing it – and you’re just as guilty of lying as he is.”

Lois’ jaw dropped and her eyes grew wide. As if in a trance, she stumbled away from Lucy to the elevator entrance and pushed the call button. Not once did she look over her shoulder at her sister. It was obvious that Lois wasn’t going to talk, not now.

Monday evening, thought Lucy. If Lois hasn’t told me by then, I’ll go ask Clark.

Right now there were assignments to finish up and tests to study for. Her father wouldn’t pay her tuition forever. She was too close to finishing the next step toward paralegal certification to stop now.

Martha sat at the kitchen table and stared at the clock on the wall, trying to will the hands to move. Two fifty-three and Clark hadn’t called yet. She wanted to hear from him, wanted him to tell

her that he and Lois had thrashed things out and were on a path for their future together. That young woman was fire and spit and vinegar and full of drive and she was just the kind of person Clark needed beside him. The fact that he loved her more than his own life didn't hurt, either.

She stood and walked to the refrigerator where she poured a tall glass of iced tea. She sat down again and looked at the clock. Two fifty-five! Maybe if she ate a cookie or two the time would pass faster. No, she needed to watch her weight and set a good example for Jonathan. It wouldn't be right if he walked in and caught her nibbling because she was nervous.

She took a big sip and swallowed. A magazine? No. She'd never be able to concentrate on the words on the page, not even the new Reader's Digest. She had to keep her mind clear for Clark's sake.

Two fifty-eight! Come on, son, be early for once!

As if on command, the phone rang.

Martha leaped to her feet and snatched it off the hook without looking at the caller ID display. "Hello! Clark, is that you?"

"Yes, Mom, it's me."

"Tell me you have good news for us!"

He sighed into the phone. "I wish I could, but I can't."

"Oh, no, honey! What happened?"

"Lois is really mad. I mean, really, *really* mad. I've never seen her like this. She wants me out of Metropolis before Wednesday or she'll print the secret."

What? No! She mustn't do that! She wouldn't! Not sweet young Lois!

"Mom? You still there?"

Martha realized she'd stopped breathing and inhaled. "Yes, I'm still here. Uh – Clark, are you sure that's what she told you?"

"I'm sure. She told Perry the secret at the same time. Sorry, this is out of order. I couldn't sleep so I went to the office early this morning to do some work and found Perry there. About nine forty, I knocked on Lois' door and she was still livid and she dragged me back to the office and told Perry the secret and all but swore she'd tell everyone if I was still in the city on Wednesday morning." He stopped and took his own deep breath. "Sorry about the babbling. Guess I'm still pretty upset."

"That's only natural, sweetie. What are you going to do?"

"Perry said he'd talk to her on Monday and that I was supposed to go to the office at nine-thirty. I'll know more then."

"Oh, Clark, I'm so sorry. Call us when you have something definite, okay? I'll fill your father in on what you told me."

"Thanks, Mom." He sighed again, then said, "I need to go. There's a car wreck a couple of blocks away and I think someone's hurt. I'll just go check to see if Superman's needed."

"Go be helpful. We'll talk again on Monday. Bye for now."

She waited until he disconnected. Poor Clark. He was always so scared to tell anyone about himself, and now when he's finally found a woman he thought he could trust with the secret, it's turned around on him and bitten him. Lois must have some deep pain in her past that Martha hadn't known about.

Too bad, too, because that hurt in Lois' past is killing Clark in the present.

Rachel walked through the grassy field of the hospital, listening to the soft harmony of the machines around the beds as they sang to the patients. A nurse wearing a mask, cap, and leafy mini-bikini danced from bed to bed as she tossed maple leaves on the supine figures. One patient rose from his bed and held hands with the nurse, dancing around the maypole in the middle of the ward. The more they spun the fewer leaves clung to the nurse. And she was far from ugly. In fact her hair was downright beautiful, just like her mother's. The man looked at her with such tenderness that – wait a minute.

It was her father.

Her father was dancing with a nearly naked nurse? The woman was barefoot, too! That just wasn't sanitary!

Rachel tried to step closer so she could separate the couple but suddenly her feet wouldn't move. Someone grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back. She growled and swiped at her attacker but whoever it was held on and shook her. She swung at the place her attacker's head had to be—

—and just missed her mother's jaw.

Her mom lurched back a step and hissed, "Rachel! It's me! It's Mom! Calm down!"

Rachel tried to sit up but rolled off the edge of the couch onto the floor. She caught herself with her hands, then slowly stood. "Mom, I'm sorry, I had this crazy dream where Dad was dancing with a nurse wearing a bikini made of leaves and I wanted to tell him that you were coming and he shouldn't be doing that with her in public – wow."

She climbed back onto the couch and dropped her face to her hands. "That was really weird. Wait – I just realized that her hair looked just like yours does on Sunday morning before church. I think – I think he was dancin' with you in my dream!" She rubbed her cheeks and peeked at her mom. "That's kind of embarrassing, actually. I never thought I'd dream about walkin' in on you and Dad being – married like that." She covered her eyes again. "I'm glad it was you he was dancin' with, though, and not just some random sexy nurse."

Janey gave her a corner-eye look. "I should hope so," she said primly. "Your father doesn't dance with just any leafy bikini babe he meets."

After a moment, Rachel lifted her head and laughed. "Yeah, I guess not. Hey, what time is it?"

"Just after four. You slept for almost five hours."

"Guess I needed it." She stood. "You been to the hospital yet?"

"No. Martha convinced me to lie down for a while. I set my alarm for three-thirty, and I just got out of the shower." Janey leaned in and sniffed, then said, "I think you should take a shower too. Make it cool if not cold. You need to be awake for a while."

"Kay," Rachel yawned. "You want to drive to the hospital?"

"Sure, as long as you can drive back. I may want to stay with your dad."

Rachel nodded. "No problem. You had anything to eat lately?"

"You mean since the meatloaf Martha heated up for us?"

"Yeah. That was good, but I think I'm hungry again."

Janey grinned. "You go jump in the shower and I'll make some sandwiches for us. Don't wash your hair, though, we don't have time to comb it out and dry it."

"I do. I don't wear mine that long anymore, remember? I'll just dry it fast and put it in a little ponytail."

"Fine. But if you take too much time I might go without you. I still have to put that leafy bikini together."

Rachel goggled at her mother, then laughed with her. "I'll hurry, I promise. I want to watch Dad's face when he first sees you in those leaves."

Janey shooed her daughter toward the shower. "No way! I'll tell you part of it when you're older. A small part, anyway. You're still my little girl, remember?"

Early the next morning, Rachel sat beside her father's bed in the ICU and held his hand. Unlike most big city hospitals, their visiting hours for ICU patients weren't limited to five to ten minutes every hour. And they were reluctant to run the county sheriff out of the previous sheriff's cubicle.

A nurse stopped by and felt his forehead, then frowned. Rachel saw it and asked, "Anything wrong?"

The nurse shook her head. "I don't think so. He feels a little warm, but that's not unusual at this stage of recovery. He's still

considered to be post-operative. According to the monitor, his blood pressure, heartbeat, and respiration are all within the norms, so I'm going to take his exact temperature—" she pulled a handheld device out of her pocket and touched it to his forehead "—and we'll monitor it for a few hours to make sure he doesn't develop a fever." The device beeped and she looked at it. "Ninety-nine point two. Like I thought, just a little warm, not too bad, but enough for us to watch him." She faced Rachel and said, "If we have to work on him, you and your mom will have to leave the ICU. Where is she, anyway?"

"She said she's had too much coffee and her kidneys are fussin' at her."

The nurse grinned. "I know what you mean. I have to watch my coffee intake at work or I'll wear a path in the tile to the ladies' room during my shift." She turned to leave. "I promise, Sheriff, we'll take good care of him."

"You better or I might have to introduce you to my jail."

The nurse chuckled. "Too late. Your daddy took care of that when he caught a bunch of us girls joyriding in my friend's parents' car. They didn't know we'd left the slumber party, and when Sheriff Harris took us back and woke them up, boy, were they mad!" They shared a quiet laugh. "Put me on the straight and narrow, though. He told us we were just a few wrong decisions away from being stupid, and just a few stupid away from wrecking our lives. Got through to me real clear."

"Good for you. Hey, I know my dad's not y'all's only patient. Go do a good job with them, too."

"I'll do my best. You need anything, you just call for Evelyn. And if you see something about your dad you think we should know, just push the call button on the bedside panel."

"Will do. And thanks, Evelyn."

"You're welcome. You just take all the time you need."

Evelyn left Rachel alone with her thoughts. Despite her father's condition, her mind kept flitting back to what Martha had told her and her mother about Clark and Lois and how they were fighting over some secret he'd told her. And she still bad that she hadn't had any advice for Martha to pass on to Clark.

Maybe if she could talk it over with her dad it would help. He wouldn't answer, of course, but maybe voicing it would help her think more clearly. And she'd heard that talking to patients, even if they didn't respond, did no harm and often appeared to do some good. Rachel thought it must ground them in this world and encourage them to stay instead of passing on to the next one.

She'd give it a shot. She adjusted her uncomfortable chair as close to her dad's ear as possible, took his hand in hers, then leaned forward and spoke quietly.

"Hey, Dad, this is Rachel again. We're doin' okay without you in the office, but it'd be better when you can drop by unexpectedly and shake hands with the deputies and the staff and just be your big old friendly self again.

"Everybody misses you. Mom's outside waitin' for her turn to sit with you. We're gonna swap out in about ten or fifteen minutes, so I'm gonna be here until then. You just keep on gettin' better, okay?"

She sighed and gathered her thoughts. "I know you remember Clark Kent, the guy who took me to his senior prom when Lana Lang dumped him. He's been working as a reporter back east in Metropolis for about a couple of years now, and he's found a lady he wants to stay with forever. You know, that 'forever and a day' kind of love you and Mom always talk about, the kind you want for me. Clark thought he found that love with her but it seems like things ain't going so good between 'em right now.

"Anyway, he told her some deep hidden secret he's been keeping from her, and she got mad and seems like she don't want him now. I guess he tried to get back with her but that didn't work out. Maybe she don't love him like he thought. She sure acted like it last year when they was here for that EPA investigation, but I

guess she ain't so constant as Clark wishes she was.

"Martha asked me and Mom if we had any advice for him to help him fix things with her and — and we didn't have doodly-squat and now I feel bad about it, like I let Clark down. I'm telling you all this because you know how — you know how I never found a guy I could trust and love, not around here and not in college."

She stopped and took a deep breath. "I think Clark could be that guy for me.

"I know, I'm dreamin', but it's a nice dream and I don't dwell on it. 'Cept now, when you're here like this and Mom don't have nothin' in her head but you and me, makes me sad to think how I don't have a guy I feel like that about. I want that kind o' love in my life, Dad. I really do. I see it with you and Mom and with Martha and Jonathan and with other couples and I want it and I ain't got it.

"And yes, you told me a lot of times to open my heart and look for a guy I won't have to work to keep myself from shooting. Problem is, when I do that I always circle back to Clark. Can't help it. He's just that fine a man. And I know what kept us from goin' anywhere near that when we were in high school was that he wanted to go out in the world and do big things and save the world and then do it again and I all I wanted was to be sheriff right here in Smallville after you retired.

"I did that. And it's great, Dad, don't misunderstand me. I wouldn't change a minute of what I've done since that prom. I got that law enforcement degree, I was your deputy for two years, you helped me get elected, and if I run again in another year I figure I'll get elected again. It's a good life, Dad, and you're helping me to live it, showing me what to do and when to do it.

Smallville's my home and it's a good place for me.

"But if Clark came to my office one day after you get well and asked me to leave with him and travel all over the world with him and be with him and love him like nobody's business I'd do it without lookin' back." She bent her head forward and closed her eyes, trying not to cry over everything in her life and mind and heart. "Don't know if that's wrong or not. I just know I'd go and not look back, even if I ended up an unhappy traveler."

She sighed quietly. "I don't wanna disappoint you, but I don't wanna miss out on something really good in my life, either. And Clark's a really special guy, Dad. I just wish — I wish I knew what to do." Rachel gave her father's hand a soft squeeze, then slowly released it. She sat back in the chair with her head still down, her chin almost resting on her chest.

Her breathing slowed until she was almost asleep again.

A gentle pressure on her shoulder roused her. "Rachel?" her mother whispered. "Honey, it'll be okay. We love you."

She lifted her head without looking. "I guess you heard all that, huh?"

"Most of it. But don't worry, I won't tell a soul. And honestly? None of that was a surprise to me. I already knew how you felt about your father and me, about your job, about your life." Janey paused, then said, "I even knew how you felt about Clark."

Rachel huffed and allowed a tiny smile to show. "I guess I ain't been all that good at keeping that secret after all."

"You have. I know because I'm your mother. I don't think your dad knows how you feel about Clark, but I can't be sure. We've never talked about it." She chuckled. "Maybe we're each trying to prevent the other from interfering in your life. Wouldn't be the first time."

Rachel smiled wearily. "Thanks, Mom. I love you."

"I know, honey. And I love you too. But I think it's time I got to tell your father one of my deepest darkest secrets. Besides, it's after five in the morning and you need to eat. And I think maybe you need to go home and get some real sleep in a real bed that's used to your body."

She yawned and stretched her arms forward. "You talked me into it. I'll come back this afternoon." She stood and held her

mother's hand, then kissed her mom on the cheek. "Dad's a fighter. He won't give up. I know it and you know it. He'll come home."

Janey smiled and nodded. "I'm hanging on to that, honey. I know he'll be okay." She returned her daughter's kiss. "And so will you."

Rachel nodded and left. Sure hope so, she mused.

Chapter Five

Perry entered his office early on Monday morning knowing he had a tough day ahead of him and he wasn't looking forward to it. It would be tough for him, for Clark, for Lois, and for most of the rest of the staff. Maybe Lois would back off and let Clark stay.

It hadn't looked like she would when she'd left on Saturday. And if the worst happened—

He thought Clark would be sensitive to his coworkers' confusion and disappointment. The office pool on when Clark and Lois would announce their engagement – the one Perry wasn't supposed to know about but had quietly put two dollars on a date range anyway – would have to dissolve and someone would have to figure out what to do with the pot.

He hoped that the pool would remain a secret from the couple. If they did find out, Clark would probably apologize for busting up everyone's fun. He'd be totally sincere, too. Might even offer to reimburse everybody who'd picked out a slot and lost money.

Lois would surely snarl at them for gambling on matters pertaining to her personal life and threaten to dismember whoever set the pool up in the first place.

Perry sighed. The upcoming confrontation with Lois would probably be pretty heated. He envisioned three possible outcomes, only one of which might lead to reconciliation.

One – Lois backs away from everything she said and everything she threatened to do. She asks Clark to forgive her and work with her to rebuild the trust between them. That would include not only Clark earning back her trust, but her earning Clark's trust again, because she'd surely realize how badly she'd abused it. It was both the best-case scenario and the least likely one.

Two – Lois reluctantly backs down from her threat to run Clark out of town and admits she overreacted. Even then, she'd probably back away from Clark for a while – maybe a long while – before she started trusting him again on a personal level. This one was acceptable and would result in friction between them, at least for a while, but it would preserve the professional relationship. Perry thought this one would be the most likely outcome.

Three – Lois would be just as mad as she'd been Saturday morning. She'd insist Clark leave town or she'd let the whole city know who else he was. And no amount of reason or pleading or appeals to her already thin compassion would dissuade her. This was the worst-case outcome, the one that would break up the hottest team in town and cost the Planet in both receipts and in reputation.

He fervently hoped for the first outcome, but he wouldn't bet one thin dime on it.

And if the worst-case scenario came to pass, at least he'd be able to use his off-the-cuff-but-otherwise-well-rehearsed speech to Clark.

Lois walked off the elevator and checked Clark's desk. Unoccupied. Good. Maybe he'd snuck out of town over the weekend. If he had, she wouldn't have to defend her position again.

A position she was almost beginning to rethink as long as she kept her mind away from the subject of Superman.

Perry would talk to her about it. He wouldn't want to lose a

productive reporter, especially not one whose presence had slowly become the social glue of the newsroom.

She paused in mid-sit. Clark, the social glue of the newsroom? Where had *that* thought originated?

She finished sitting and flipped on her computer as if by reflex, then sat and pondered that previous thought. It stung to admit the truth, but the newsroom was a happier place for everyone today compared to the days before his arrival. True, Cat Grant was gone and no longer meowing at him and trying to sink her claws into him on a regular basis, but that had become more of a game among Cat and Clark and Lois than a real come-on. It was as if Cat had been trying to get a rise out of Lois instead of actually trying to seduce Clark.

Usually worked, too. Then Clark would separate them and push Cat farther away and it felt good to be the one he stayed closer—

Best not to think about things like that.

It was one more thing she might miss. A little bit. A very, very little bit.

The conversation with Lucy still bothered her, too. Her little sister's assertion that Lois was furthering Clark's deception by not revealing it had knocked her for a loop. She didn't want to admit that Lucy had a point – she hated even thinking it – but the point was real and it was valid. Lois mentally defended her position by remembering that knowing that Kent was also Superman was her leverage to shove him out of her life. It was a very neat little ethical dilemma, the kind Lois usually ignored.

This dilemma kept trying to impale her on its horns.

Yet Clark had betrayed her trust. If he'd cheated on her, she didn't think it would hurt this much. Men were pigs, always had been and always would be, and every one of them was pretty much guaranteed to cheat somewhere along the line. If Clark had cheated on her with another woman, it would have damaged their relationship badly, but it might not have torn them apart like – like learning The Secret had.

She deliberately refocused and slapped the desktop. It didn't matter. Kent was history. By Wednesday he'd be out of the Daily Planet newsroom, out of town, out of her life forever. And a new article was the best way she knew to demonstrate her newfound freedom. An article by Lois Lane. No partner. From now on, she was the hottest solo reporter in town. And she had the hottest headline she'd ever come across sitting in her head just waiting to be put to paper.

Time to get to work.

At nine twenty-five, the timer on Perry's desk started beeping. He'd told Clark not to come in before nine-thirty, and if he held true to form, he'd walk through the stairwell door at nine-twenty-nine and fifty-seven seconds. Not much time to defuse Lois, or maybe it was too much time, given how volatile she could be.

Perry shut off the alarm, then closed the file folder in front of him and walked to his office door. "Lois?" he called. "Need to see you a minute."

He watched her glance at him and nod, then do the finger-magic on the keyboard needed to lock her workstation. She grabbed a pencil and a notepad, then stood and marched to his office.

Perry moved to allow her to enter, then closed the door. "Sit down, please." As she sat, he moved to his desk chair and leaned his elbows on the simulated wood-grain multi-ply surface.

He'd use his desk's construction method against Lois if nothing else worked. He could illustrate the need for people who had different gifts, differing styles, even opposing temperaments. He was determined to keep Clark Kent at the Daily Planet.

He sighed and looked up. "Lois, honey, I know you're upset to learn that Clark is Superman. I know it seems to you like he's

been lying all this time, but you have to look at it from Clark's point of view. You have to admit that you had it bad for Superman for a while after he saved the Messenger shuttle. And it took you months to admit that Clark had some good points in his personality. Not only that, but you almost married Lex Luthor. That crumb would've killed Superman – killed Clark – if he'd tried just a teeny bit harder."

To Perry's mild surprise, Lois' voice remained level and steady, almost calm. "I know all of that, Perry, and I've thought about it a lot. I just keep circling back to one thing and one thing only. Clark betrayed my trust in him. He told me he loved me, then he tossed this thing at me like a grenade with the pin pulled and the fuse burning. It blew up in both of our faces."

Uh-oh. Furious Lois he could handle, could cajole her into calming down and seeing the other side of her anger. Cold, calm, and calculating Lois was an entirely new creature, one with which he'd never dealt. And he had no idea if he could manage her at all, much less easily.

"Uh – okay. I think I can understand that. Can I get you to back off from any of your conditions for Clark?"

"No."

He waited for her to elaborate. She didn't. "I see. Are you willing to talk this over with Clark? We may be able to arrange some kind of compromise."

"No."

Perry pursed his lips and thought. She wasn't yelling and screaming, she wasn't out of control, she wasn't interrupting him or cutting off his sentences. She was just hard and firm and seemed determined to follow through with her plan.

He had to dissuade her, maybe get an extension of the deadline, something to ease the pressure. "Lois, I don't want to lose Clark. He's a valuable asset to the Daily Planet, both professionally and personally. Can we at least move the deadline out a little farther? Maybe the end of the month?"

She didn't break in, but her head was shaking before he finished. "No," she repeated. "If Clark Kent is still in Metropolis on Wednesday morning, I will send you the story I'm working on right now."

Perry leaned back and thought again, then asked, "Is that the story you said you'd submit on Saturday?"

"Yes. And if you won't print it, I'll shop it to every major outlet I can think of. I *will* put it out there, Perry. Don't doubt it for one second."

Perry took in a breath to say something, anything, when a knock on his door drew his attention. "Perry?" Clark said. "Is Lois in there? If she is, may I come in?"

Well. This might be a good thing, Perry thought. But it didn't look like it to him.

Clark heard his boss call out, "Come on in, Clark." He opened the door and stepped in.

As soon as he did, Lois sprang up from the couch and turned her back on him, then crossed her arms and walked to the window. She stared out as if looking for anything interesting because nothing in the office could hold her attention at the moment.

Clark sighed. He noted that Perry hadn't stood, and in fact had leaned back in his chair as if to give Clark room. He had to talk to Lois, had to make her see reason, had to make her understand why he'd kept his dual identity from her.

He eased the office door shut and took two steps toward her. "Lois, please. I want to explain to you why I did what I did." She didn't respond in any way. "Okay, here it is. When I first came up with the idea of Superman – something you inspired, actually – it was because I wanted to use my special gifts to help people. When I was traveling the world, I'd do as much as I could without going public, but someone always saw something, enough to start wondering about me or asking questions about me, and I'd pack

up and move on to minimize the risk of exposure.

"But I didn't want to leave Metropolis. I like it here. I like my job, I like having friends, and I like having a place to call my own where I can go and be at home.

"I tried doing little things here, too, but there are more people around than in a lot of places and I had trouble staying unseen. When I helped that man in the sewer explosion the first week I was here, you told me you kept an extra set of clothes at the Planet in case you needed them."

He risked another step. Maybe she was really listening. "You gave me the idea to put on a costume to use my powers openly. My mother put together a series of outfits for me, and the one I ended up choosing was the best." He assayed a small chuckle. "You should have seen some of the ones I turned down. One of them made me look – never mind. Anyway, my unveiling at the shuttle launch wasn't scheduled. I didn't make my debut like I thought I would. I didn't even have a name for Superman then. You gave it to him."

Her head moved as if she were about to turn and speak, but then she froze in place again, so Clark kept talking. "We were watching the telecast when the announcer mentioned a problem and I thought I could help." She still didn't turn, didn't make a noise. "I'm sure you remember that I was able to save everyone on the shuttle. Including you."

He paused and waited for her to acknowledge him. Her only response was to shift her weight from one foot to the other.

At least she moved, he thought. He risked one more step. "I didn't tell you then because I didn't know you well enough. I wanted to – I really did. But by the time I decided I could trust you, Luthor was chasing you and it looked like he might catch you, and I couldn't risk having him figure it out by putting together little things you might have said or done with things he'd learned by himself. He was smart enough to do detective work like that and I didn't want to give him the chance."

He stopped again and waited for her to do or say something, anything. She took a small step toward the window but didn't speak.

He sighed again. "I'm sorry. I'm deeply sorry. I've wanted to tell you for a long time, but I was scared of your reaction. I finally realized that if I didn't tell you and you figured it out on your own it would probably be worse." He shook his head as he raised his hands to the side, then dropped them. "I never anticipated that you'd react in this way. I never imagined that you'd believe that I'd betrayed your trust. I knew I'd have to give you time to adjust, time to realize and accept that you weren't dealing with two people this whole time, just one man." He sighed. "And I knew it would take time for you to learn to trust me again."

He slipped even closer to her, close enough to touch, close enough to lean down and kiss the top of her shoulder. "I meant it when I said that I'd never shared the secret of what I can do with anyone. I never told any of my teammates in high school or college, never told any of the girls I dated in Smallville, and I certainly never told anyone I met on my travels. And I told you because I wanted you to know everything about me, Lois. I wanted you to love me, but I wanted you to love the whole me, not just Clark me and not just Superman me. I wanted you to love all of me."

He stopped talking. His hands almost lifted to gently grip her shoulders, but her body might as well have been carved from a block of marble. She made no move to turn, said nothing to indicate how she was taking his heartfelt confession, did nothing to hint that she might be softening her attitude. Lois gave no indication that she even knew he was behind her.

He sighed yet again and turned away. "Keep talking," she suddenly said.

Her voice startled him. "What?"

"I said, 'Keep talking.' I can use more material."

“You – material? What are you – material for what?”

She spun in place, her arms still crossed over her chest as if in imitation – or mockery – of the famous Superman pose. “Material for my article. I’d guessed some of that already, but it’s better to have it straight from the horse’s mouth.” She glared at him coldly. “Well? Anything else you’d like me to add to my story?”

Perry’s voice broke in before Clark could rein in his astonishment. “Lois, no! I’m sure Clark assumed all he told you was off the record!”

Still glaring at Clark, Lois said, “There is *no* ‘off the record’ regarding Superman. We get something, we print it. That’s what you told us in the first staff meeting we had after Blue Boy went public. You threw the chum in the water and we went for it – all but this Hack from Nowheresville. He was the only one with the whole story and he sat on it.”

She finally moved toward Clark, fury radiating from her every pore, her eyes flashing into his. “I’ll have it ready this afternoon, Perry. I’ll send it to you first thing Wednesday morning if I even hear that anyone sees or talks to Clark. If he’s not gone by then I will tell every person I see. I will shout it from the rooftops. I will release it to the world. So he’d better make plans to leave now.”

She stomped past Clark without touching him. The office door didn’t slam, but she did shut it hard.

Clark looked at his boss, helpless. “Perry, I – I can’t let her publish it. There’s no knowing how bad the media frenzy would be, no predicting which criminals would take revenge on innocent people just because I’ve been seen talking with them.” He turned his gaze to the door. “And Clark Kent would be effectively dead, for real this time.”

“I understand, son. Why don’t you go home and call your folks, fill them in on what’s happened? See if they have any advice for you.” He stepped around his desk and put one hand on Clark’s shoulder. “But I don’t think you have a real choice here. You’re gonna have to leave Metropolis if you want to keep your secret.” Clark looked up at the man, who continued, “And I think this is a secret you need to keep. I promise you, the Daily Planet will not be the first to publish this information. Not this week, not this month, not ever.”

Clark nodded. “Thank you, Chief. I understand the sacrifice you’re making, and I appreciate it.”

“It’s not a sacrifice. What you do as Superman is important to all of us. If your secret got out, you’d be hamstrung. You’d have no privacy as Clark, you’d have no opportunity to make friends as Clark, you wouldn’t be able to buy groceries as Clark. Very few people would allow you to be Clark Kent. You’d pretty much have to be Superman all the time.” He dropped his hand from Clark’s shoulder and shook his head. “That’d drive you nuts. And I don’t want a super-powered nut flying around here or anywhere.”

Clark grinned a little. “Thanks again. I’d better go call my folks.”

“You do that. But please don’t contact Lois again before you leave. You push her buttons wrong and she might forget her deadline.”

Clark put his hand out. “Thanks, Perry. I’m going to miss working here.”

Perry took his hand and held it firmly. “You don’t have to. I’m sending you out on an assignment to the Midwest to write a series of articles about the flyover states. People in this city don’t understand the folks out there, and I want to remedy that. I want you to start in Kansas and work your way all around the middle of the country. I want stories from Kentucky and Tennessee, from Mississippi and Missouri, from Louisiana and Texas, Alabama and Florida, both Dakotas and Wyoming and Montana and the Southwest states. Show us the wide open spaces, the wildlife, the richness of nature, the beautiful places, the history, and especially the people. I want the residents of Metropolis to feel like they’ve

taken an extended vacation west of the Appalachians and on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.”

Clark reclaimed his hand. “That’s pretty good for an extemporaneous speech.”

Perry grinned and shook his head. “Naw. Been working on it since Saturday. Had to be ready for any outcome.”

Clark felt his face fall. “Yeah. Thank you yet again. Will these be weekly columns?”

“Twice a week, I think, Sunday and Thursday in the travel section. We’ll talk them up on other days, maybe print some reader questions or comments and get your responses. And I want them to start a week from this coming Thursday. Give you some time to get settled wherever you end up.” Perry shook his index finger in Clark’s face and said, “Just don’t pad your travel expenses.”

Clark couldn’t help but laugh. A little, anyway.

Martha hung up the phone and shook her head. Poor Janey Harris. Her husband was still unconscious, condition unchanged, although the doctors had told her that he hadn’t lost any ground. That, at least, was good news. And Rachel was still on the job, putting in full days and long nights at the hospital. If that girl wasn’t careful, she’d run herself to a complete frazzle.

She’d barely lowered the handset on the hook before the phone rang again. Clark was probably calling back. He’d left a message on the answering machine, saying that he’d try again in the early afternoon.

She lifted the handset again. “Kent residence.”

“Mom, it’s me. I need to talk to you.”

“Okay. Do you need to come out here or will the phone do?”

He sighed. “Phone is fine.” She heard him take a breath before beginning. “Lois will not give an inch. I have until Wednesday morning to be out of the city or she’ll reveal my secret through any and every media outlet she can get to.”

Martha gasped. “What – are you sure that’s what she meant? I mean, that’s what you told us Saturday afternoon, but I was certain she’d back away from that by now.”

“I’m sure that’s what she meant. And I’m sure she means it. Perry is, too. I think I need to move back with you guys for a little bit. Do you mind terribly?”

“No – no, of course we don’t mind. When will you arrive?”

“Late Wednesday, I think. I plan to pull out Tuesday evening, drive all night, and get there before dark.”

“Are you bringing your furniture?”

“No. That’s going into storage, along with my appliances and some of my other stuff. All I’m bringing is my clothing and a few trifles I want to keep close.”

“Are you renting a truck?”

“I bought a late-model used Dodge half-ton pickup with a rear seat this morning. I’ll need something to drive when I get there, and the truck will blend in around Smallville. I’ve already packed most of my stuff in boxes, and I’m going to put a lot of that in storage. That’s what I’ll be doing tomorrow. The truck’s in pretty good shape, only has about thirty thousand miles on it, and I have the maintenance log. The previous owner kept the service up to date. He told me he sold it because he no longer needs a truck, that his new wife likes sporty cars.”

Martha laughed. “Good for her. Get him trained from the very start.”

“Yeah. I wish – never mind. Mom, I’m sorry to dump all this on you guys so abruptly. I promise I’ll find a place to move to as soon as I can.”

“Oh, Clark, you’re no burden! Besides, the house will be spic-and-span while you’re here.”

“You’re going to make me do housework for my room and board?”

“In lieu of charging you rent, of course.”

He laughed, which was her goal. She added, “Just give us a call when you’re close so we’ll know whether or not to hold dinner for you.”

“Will do, Mom. Oh, I almost forgot to ask you about Mark Harris. How’s he doing?”

“About as well as can be expected. Janey’s been there almost around the clock. The nurses even set up a cot for her in the room. And Rachel’s been there or at the office almost as often. When you get here, maybe you can talk her into taking a night off. None of us have been able to.”

“You know I’ll do what I can. At least I won’t have to hunt for a job.”

“You won’t?”

“It’s one of the two good things about this situation. The first is that I get to see you and Dad more often. The other one is that Perry gave me an assignment to write about Middle America for the Planet. He said the people in Metropolis don’t know enough about what he called the ‘flyover states,’ and he wants me to correct their shameful lack of knowledge.”

“Ah.” That was news. Good news, apparently, although she’d wait for Clark to arrive before asking about anything else. “So you’ll still have a paycheck coming in, then?”

“Every other week, just like before.”

“In that case, maybe I’ll rethink the no-rent policy.”

They shared this laugh. “Thanks for the encouragement, Mom. I really have to go. I still have some packing to do.”

“I’m really sorry about all this, Clark. Maybe she’ll come around before too much time goes by.”

“We’ll see. I’m not holding my breath, and you know how long I can do that.”

“Well, don’t forget to inhale sometime. Bye, sweetie. We’ll see you when you get here.”

She broke the connection so Clark could continue packing. She’d have plenty of time to offer what comfort she could when he arrived. And Jonathan would be happy to have him home for an extended period of time. But the cost – Clark’s broken heart – was far too high.

The whole thing was a crying shame. She had really liked Lois, too.

Chapter Six

Lucy left her last Monday afternoon class and walked to the student center. She’d missed lunch when the visiting lecturer in her morning civil trial precedent class had run over his allotted time, but it was because so many of her classmates were asking good questions. The man was certainly personable and he knew his stuff, but she wondered how many of those questions were motivated by the desire for a job after getting certified and how many were asked because of sheer interest in the subject. The state of New Troy was one of five in the U.S. in which a professional track for paralegals had been legally established. One wasn’t required to earn the certificate, of course, but the better-paying jobs at the nicer firms with quality reputations had come to demand them or the applicant didn’t get an interview. And the competition for the best jobs was tight, sometimes even fierce.

One vending machine tuna sandwich and a canned soft drink from the student union building later, she was good until dinner.

Which would be late tonight. Yesterday, Lois hadn’t budged an inch from her demand that Clark leave town, despite every argument Lucy could muster. She knew her sister ran on her emotions, but this time she was farther away from reason than Lucy had ever seen her. Lois just wasn’t going to give in this time.

That’s why Lucy was driving Lois’ Jeep to Clark’s apartment instead of going home.

Maybe she could convince him to do or say something to bring Lois around. Maybe he could give her flowers, or bring her one of those mysteriously delicious Chinese dinners, or just use

his puppy-dog eyes to bend her to his will. Anything.

She thought she remembered where he lived – yes, there it was. A surprisingly nice apartment in a fairly dingy part of the city. The first time she’d seen it was two days after Clark had moved in, and she didn’t think anything could fix the rat trap she’d seen. She and Lois had dropped by two weeks later – at Lucy’s insistence – to bring him a surprise dinner, and the transformation had been astounding. That man could build a house for her any time he decided he was willing.

The next time had been after her sojourn in California, right after Johnny Corbin’s death. At the time, she’d accused Superman of killing him, but she soon admitted that while Johnny hadn’t deserved that fate, he had brought it on himself with his criminal life. And while Superman had melted Johnny’s legs to the sidewalk, that Vale guy had stolen Johnny’s green crystal heart from his chest. Vale was the real killer.

Clark and Lois had both comforted her, especially Clark. His compassion had been instrumental in helping her straighten out her life. That’s when she decided that her next boyfriend had better measure up to the standards of Clark Kent, or he’d be called out on strikes before he had an at-bat.

And the only time, several months ago, when she’d mentioned to Lois – almost jokingly – a vague desire to get to know Clark on a more personal level, her sister had all but read her the riot act. Lois had told Lucy that she was not allowed to flirt with Clark for any reason, not to call him unless Lois was on fire, and was not to smile fetchingly at him at any time. Lucy had been surprised but pleased. Lois wouldn’t admit it, but she was sneaking up on love for the big Kansas hayseed.

And now she was running Clark out of her life, supposedly for good.

Lucy turned off the Jeep and sat in the driver’s seat, thinking about what to say to the man she’d hoped would be her brother-in-law. Sorry my sister’s insane? Don’t be a stranger? Be sure and leave me your address so we can write to each other? Was there a Hallmark card for this situation?

My sister’s an idiot@@@

So you’re leaving town@@@

But don’t be a stranger@@@

You’ll—???

She couldn’t imagine what the last line might be. Some greeting card author she was.

Sitting here would accomplish nothing. He was probably home – Lois had threatened to move up her deadline if he tried to get her to relent – so he was probably packing.

The thought depressed her. She didn’t want Clark to leave. Maybe if he told her the secret he’d shared with Lois they would figure out a strategy to get them back together. Yeah. Yeah! That had some small chance of working.

With that little bit of encouragement, she stepped out of the car, locked it and marched up to Clark’s front door with her knuckles raised and ready to rap on it. But there was a distraction.

There was a pickup truck parked around the side of the building, one Lucy hadn’t seen before. Sure, she wasn’t a frequent visitor to this building, but surely Lois would have told her if Clark had bought—

It had to be his truck.

He really was leaving.

She moved closer to the pickup. It was a late-model Dodge extended cab with what looked to her unpracticed eye to be a full-sized bed. The exterior seemed to be nice, not new but well-maintained. She stood on her toes and peered into the cab to see a nice interior and clean dashboard. It looked like it had an automatic transmission, too, and lots of buttons and dials on the dashboard.

She sighed. If Clark really was leaving town, he’d picked a good vehicle to carry his things. Time to find out for sure.

Clark folded the top on the box of books shut and taped it, then wrote “Books – History” on the tape with a permanent marker. He looked up at his shelves and realized that all of his books, videos, CDs, and keepsakes from the living room were packed away, labeled, and ready to go into storage. That would be his task in the morning – he’d already reserved a large space in a climate-controlled building. All that he needed was to put down the deposit, haul his boxed possessions and furniture and appliances to the facility, and unload them into the room.

Just thinking about it hurt.

Packing all of his belongings was something he’d done many times, usually right after someone started asking questions about him or commenting aloud how so many people had been “miraculously” rescued since he’d come to the area. Before Metropolis, he’d always been ready to leave at moment’s notice, had never put down deep roots, had never bought anything he couldn’t carry with him or store until he’d moved. This apartment, these rooms, had been the first place he’d lived since Smallville where he hadn’t known from the start that he’d been staying in temporary quarters, something someone else would call home after he left.

He stopped in the middle of the living room. The refrigerator in the kitchen? First one he’d ever owned. The stove beside it? He’d bought it second-hand and refurbished it and considered it his, even though he’d convinced his landlord to reduce the final month’s rent if he’d leave both it and the fridge in place. The dining area? He’d bought the table and chairs while shopping with Lois.

The memory stung. She’d teased him about his “country chic” preferences and talked him into a more modern design, and he had to admit that she was right about that. The sofa, though, had been purchased with comfort in mind and not fashion. She’d insisted that her couch fit her front room better than his did. He’d replied that it looked good, then had described the feel of her couch as “sitting on a padded brick.” Lois had acted offended for almost five seconds, then had laughed and agreed.

That night, they’d christened his new dining set with pizza and cream sodas. The couch had been christened by a late-night video and lots of smiles. On reflection, he decided that was a memory he’d keep. It was a nice one.

He was savoring that memory when someone knocked on the door and startled him. Too distracted by the bout of sentimentality over his apartment, he hadn’t heard anyone approach. It might even be Lois.

No. Not unless she was making sure he was actually packing. And given her present state of mind, that wasn’t likely.

What the hey. He’d open the door and just find out like a regular, normal person.

Lucy nervously wrung her hands after knocking. She wanted to talk to Clark, yet she didn’t. She wanted to find out what his big secret was, yet she didn’t. She did know, though, that she wanted to get Clark and Lois back together.

So she didn’t turn and run away.

The door swung open and she saw Clark.

As always, he looked delicious. His hair was slightly mussed and there were a couple of smudges of dust on his cheek and chin. His black T-shirt fit like a glove on his solid muscular body. His jeans were loose enough for comfort, yet tight enough to appreciate.

A wild thought appeared in her mind that she might have a shot with him. She bludgeoned it down immediately. That was *not* why she was here.

He looked surprised for a moment, then smiled. “Hi, Lucy. Come in, please. I didn’t expect you, but you’re welcome.”

“Thanks, Clark.” She stepped in and stopped on the top step.

The stacks of boxes startled her – she supposed she hadn’t quite believed he was actually going. That secret must be a real doozie.

She made a show of taking the steps slowly and gazing around the room. “Nice,” she said. “Love what you’ve done with the place. Sort of – I don’t know, a contemporary warehouse feel?”

He frowned ever so slightly. “Oh, that’s funny. You should go to open mic night at the Improv. They’re always looking for new comics.”

His words had a slight edge, but she sensed that his intent was to be light and teasing, so she responded in kind. “I might if I could use you for my main routine. I’d call it ‘Manly Man Jumps to Angry Stupid Woman’s Hissy Fit.’ You think it has potential?”

He sighed and dropped his shoulders. “I assume you’re here to talk me out of leaving town.” She opened her mouth but he brought his hand up. “Don’t. I know you’re trying to help both your sister and me, but you can’t. Unless—” he lowered his hand and his eyes grew wide. “Unless she told you – the thing that made her so mad.”

Lucy shook her head. “No. She won’t even hint at it. All she’ll tell me is that everyone will know whatever that secret is if you’re still here Wednesday morning.”

He looked relieved. “Ah. Well. I see.” He scratched his nose, then said, “And you’re still trying to fix the problem, even when you don’t really know what it is?”

She crossed her arms. “All I know is that Lois has classified you with the men in her past who’ve betrayed her. She mentioned Dad, some guy I don’t remember from high school who lied about her being frigid because she wouldn’t have sex with him, Paul in college, Patrick in Ireland, Claude from the Planet, Lex Luthor – you’re not in very good company in her mind.”

He huffed through his nose. “I guess not.”

“And I don’t understand that! Up until Friday night, you were the white knight, the hunky guy on the cover of every romance novel, the rock she leaned on! You were even above Superman to her! Then you told her some secret and you might as well have confessed to being a serial child molester!” She waved her hands around in the air. “And you’re leaving town so she doesn’t tell everybody your secret. I don’t get it!”

He looked away from her. “It’s probably best that you don’t get it.”

“Oh, no, that makes no sense at all!” She started pacing. “I’ve learned a lot about thinking logically and critically in the last few months, Clark, and I’ve figured out a few things. Whatever this secret is, it’s extremely important to you. And it’s important to Lois. It’s so important that you’d rather leave the city I know you love, the job I know you love, and the woman you wanted to spend your life with than let it out. Lois told me it’s nothing illegal, so you’re not running from the law. You’re not being blackmailed, except that’s what Lois is doing to you, but that’s not the secret. You don’t have another wife and family somewhere.” She stopped and looked into his eyes. “You don’t, do you?”

He looked back. “No. I am not now nor have I ever been married, nor do I have any children stashed in some remote corner of the world. That’s not it at all.”

“I didn’t think so. You’re too honest and transparent for something like that.” She rubbed her chin and turned slowly, thinking aloud. “Yet this is something Lois had no idea about, something that shocked her to her core. It’s something that changed her entire concept of you as Clark Kent, something that made her look at you in a completely different way.”

She heard him step closer. “Lucy, please don’t try to puzzle it out.”

She turned and stepped inside his personal space. “Why? Is this something you’d rather I didn’t know?”

“At this point it’s something I’d rather Lois didn’t know. This isn’t about you, it’s about my life, and I’m asking you to leave it

alone for now.”

“I can’t! I care about you and I care about Lois and I care about the two of you together! I was looking forward to hearing how you proposed to her! I wanted to hear how she cried or jumped and clapped or just threw herself into your arms and kissed you senseless! Instead I hear how you’re the worst example of the male species since Genghis Khan murdered and marauded all over western Asia and had dozens of kids by dozens of women! I have to know!”

“No. You don’t.”

She lunged at him and grabbed his T-shirt near the neck in her hands. “Yes I do! Lois is crazy! She’s totally nuts! You’re a great guy and any woman in her right mind would be thrilled to have you smile at her like you mean it! And I’ve seen you smile at Lois that way! I want you to be my brother-in-law and it won’t happen unless someone fixes this!”

He gently pulled her hands down and softly smiled. “Lucy, you have a good heart. And it this were a relationship problem that didn’t involve what it does, I’m sure you could help both of us see the light. Under the circumstances, though, it’s not going to happen.” He took a half-step back and released her wrists. “Thank you. Thank you for trying to help. Thank you for trying to do the right thing.”

Lucy turned away and flailed her hand in front of her. “I – I just don’t understand! Lois’ attitude just flipped for no reason that I can think of! She’s even mad at Superman! And what does that have to do with—”

She stopped with her mouth open.

She turned and stared at Clark until he looked worried.

She kept staring until he looked scared.

Lois was furious at Clark.

Lois was furious with Superman.

Clark had a secret that wasn’t illegal or immoral.

He wasn’t a secret agent or a contract murderer.

Lois was livid that he’d lied to her since they’d known each other.

Superman had showed up in the city about the same time Clark had.

Lois had said on Friday that she was the only person besides his parents who knew this secret.

She was using the threat of revealing this secret to force him out of her life.

If Superman had another face that he showed the world, he did it to have a personal life.

Logic told her that Clark’s secret was simple.

Clark Kent was Superman. Or Superman was Clark Kent.

Maybe it didn’t matter which way the relationship went.

Maybe her logic was insane.

And maybe – more than maybe, more like extremely probably – it wasn’t true.

But it fit. Lois would hate that Clark had told her before she’d figured it out. And it would explain why she was so angry that he hadn’t told her before. She’d given up Superman for Clark, chosen the man over the superhero, then learned that she hadn’t given up either one of them. It was enough to knock any woman off center.

If that was the right reason. If she was right.

She whispered, “Oh. Crap.”

Clark moved around her with one hand raised. “Now, Lucy, whatever you’re thinking, just – just don’t think it, okay? Please listen to me. This line of reasoning will bring you nothing but trouble, so don’t go there!” He softened his tone and lowered his volume with his last, “Please.”

She nodded. She knew just what to say.

“I understand. Or, rather, I still don’t understand Lois. And I still think she’s about three fries short of a happy meal.”

The tension seemed to leak out of him. “Honestly, I don’t understand her either. I really thought she’d be a bit upset, but

nothing like this.”

“Yeah. Maybe if I knew what it was I could help you.”

He shook his head. “I can’t tell you. And I can’t let Lois tell everyone. I know you’re trying to help, but it’s best to just leave it alone.”

“Nuts!” She turned and kicked the nearest box. “Can’t you do anything to change her mind?”

He sighed. “I’ve tried talking to her. I’ve tried explaining it to her. I’ve tried to be patient, tried to wait her out, but as of ten o’clock this morning she was as adamant about my leaving as I’ve ever seen her about anything.” He shook his head. “Unless you’ve got some kind of brilliant idea beyond denting my cookware with your foot, I have no real options except to leave.”

Lucy crossed her arms and frowned at the wall, hoping Clark would think she was mad at Lois. She was still mad at Lois, but that wasn’t why she was frowning. She was trying to think through the evidence she’d put together in her mind that evening to test her deduction that Clark and Superman were the same person. If it were true, he wouldn’t share it with her unless she used it to put pressure on him – and that would make her Lois-level nasty. That wasn’t an option.

She’d never get verification from Clark. She’d have to use her criminal evidence class learning against Lois, ask her leading questions and get the truth from her. Too bad Lucy couldn’t prosecute Lois for perjury if she lied.

She never considered telling Clark what she suspected. If he was Superman, he had no obligation to reveal it to her. His keeping the secret from everyone in the world, then opening up to Lois, told Lucy how much he loved Lois.

If it was true. But she needed to distract him now.

She turned to Clark and asked, “Have you had dinner yet?”

He reacted as if that was the last thing he’d expected to hear from her just then. “Ah – no, I haven’t, but I’ve still got some sandwich stuff here and I—”

“Then come on, Kent, let’s go get some dinner. I had a very small late lunch and I want you to have at least one pleasant memory of a Lane sister to take with you to the hinterlands.”

A one-sided smile appeared on his face. “Okay, you’ve convinced me. Where do you want to go?”

“Uncle Mike’s Diner is open. How about their early-dinner special? I hear he has fresh sea bass this week.”

Clark’s smile grew. “Come on. I’ll let you be the first to ride in my new pickup truck.”

The ride was nice, with little conversation, though the silence wasn’t a strained one. Lucy mostly thought about the possibility that Clark and Superman were the same person. That would mean that Clark was the one who’d melted Johnny’s legs and immobilized him so Vale could kill him.

How did she feel about it now?

She turned to look out the side window and sighed. It really didn’t matter. The truth was that Johnny had backed himself into that corner all on his own, and when he got his robot body he’d launched a one-cyborg crime wave that brought Superman’s attention. It wasn’t a surprise that the hero had stopped him before he’d killed someone.

She sighed again. She still missed him, but he was never right for her. She’d believed that she could reform him, reshape him, guide him to change his life, and it hadn’t worked. He’d always been, and always would have been, a criminal at heart.

It struck her suddenly that Johnny’s secret about his new body was not unlike Clark’s in that it was something that made him different. Clark – if she was right – used his gifts and skills and powers to help people. Johnny could’ve done that, but he’d been selfish and cruel and kept on stealing. Because he’d believed that no one could hurt him, he’d tried to take what he wanted and ignore others.

It was the complete opposite of Clark. Superman was a hero, Lois' venom against him notwithstanding, and while Lucy wished there had been another way to stop Johnny that would've saved his life, she'd never been able to think of one. She had accepted that their relationship had been doomed from the start. They never could've had the happiness Lois could've had with Clark.

If only Lois weren't such a moron.

Clark sat back and grinned at his dinner companion. Despite his current circumstances, he'd actually had fun with her. "This was a good idea, Lucy. The rainbow trout was perfect, the sweet potato was excellent, the tea is delicious, and I think Darren would like your phone number."

Lucy quirked her lips to one side. "Maybe next time I come here. Hey, you want some dessert? Uncle Mike has some fresh key lime pie."

"Sounds good. If you'll be so good as to attract Darren's attention—"

"On second thought never mind I'm full anyway!"

Clark laughed, and Lucy joined him after a moment. Then she asked, "Clark, was there any particular reason you bought a full-sized pickup?"

He nodded. "Bigger cargo capacity. I'm putting most of my stuff in storage until I light somewhere, but I need some clothes and shoes and a few personal items and I didn't want to bother renting a trailer. And I can use a pickup in Smallville. It sticks out like a zit on a debutante's nose in Metropolis, but in rural areas it'll be almost invisible." He lifted his eyebrows and added, "And I don't want to leave my Kerth here, either."

She nodded back. "Understandable. Where will you go when you drive off into the sunset?"

He sipped his tea. "Smallville. I'm going to stay with my folks for a bit, try to find a place to headquarter out in that general area."

She frowned at him. "Headquarter?"

"Yes. Perry White gave me a long-term assignment to write travel pieces and profiles of the people and places in the middle of the country. Lois may have run me out of Metropolis, but she hasn't run me out of a job."

She didn't smile at his last line like he'd hoped she would. Oh, well, at least he'd gotten a pleasant dinner out of it.

After a moment of looking right at him, she said, "I'll make sure Lois knows."

He shrugged. "I doubt she'll want to spend the weekend visiting me. Probably won't send me a Christmas card, either."

"Maybe not. You never know."

Under normal circumstances, he would have agreed with her. But these weren't normal circumstances. Just as Clark had powers, Lois had powers, and one of her powers was staying mad.

He leaned back as Darren put the check down in front of him, but Lucy snatched it before he could touch it. "No, Mr. Kent, I invited you, remember?"

"I'd hardly call this a date."

"I'm gonna tell Lois it was. My goodbye date with you." She looked at the check, then gave Darren a ten and a five for the eleven-twenty-three bill. "Keep the change, Darren."

He inclined his head. "Thank you, ma'am. You folks come back and see us again real soon now, okay?"

Clark lifted his gaze. "Hey, Darren, where are you from?"

"I'm from Georgia, sir, the one Sherman marched through in 1864."

"Thought I recognized your accent. But I would've guessed Alabama."

"West Georgia, sir, almost to Alabama. You have a good ear for accents. I have to go now, but please do come back. If I'm on duty, I'll see if I can sneak out a couple of slices of fresh peach cobbler."

"Very nice offer, Clark," Lucy said. "Uncle Mike's peach cobbler is definitely something noteworthy."

"I could compare it to my mom's, I suppose. She makes the best in central Kansas."

"I look forward to hearing about it, folks. Bye for now."

Darren strode off to his next table. Lucy said, "When are you leaving?"

Clark stood and helped her to her feet. "If I can get all my stuff into the storage room in time, mid-afternoon tomorrow. I plan to drive most of the night to get to Smallville."

They meandered to the parking lot. "How long is that drive, anyway?"

"My dad says it's a bit over fourteen hundred miles from the farm to Metropolis. They drive in shifts, although they sometimes stop for the night somewhere around central Ohio."

"You're going that far alone? Will you be okay?"

"My dad told me to keep a small cooler in the passenger seat with drinks and ice to cool them. If I get sleepy, I just open the cooler and stick my hand in the ice water until it turns blue. Hard to sleep with frostbite budding in your hand."

She laughed. "Okay, you've eased my mind. I have a morning shift at the diner tomorrow and two ninety-minute classes in the afternoon, so this girl needs her sleep."

"In that case, ma'am, thank you for the dinner and the pleasant company. And keep up the good work in class, okay? You're going to be a terrific paralegal."

"Thanks, Clark." They stood, then she paused and sighed.

"It's not fair, not fair at all. Lois is such an idiot. If I had seen you first, maybe things would be different."

"Maybe they would." He pulled his new truck key out of his pocket. "Then again, if life were fair, horses would ride half the time."

Chapter Seven

Rachel gently shook her mother's shoulder. "Mom? Mom, can you wake up now? I'm sorry, but I gotta get some sleep before I fall over."

Janey opened one eye. "Wha' time izzit?"

"About ten-forty. And it's still Monday night, too."

The other eye almost opened. "Any change?"

"No. Dad's asleep and they say he's still stable. The nurse came in about ten minutes ago to check his vitals and draw some more blood. He didn't react at all."

Janey grunted, then flipped the coverlet back from the cot. "Thanks for waking me. You can have the cot as soon as I go to the bathroom."

"You better hurry. That cot looks really good to me right now."

As soon as her mother sat down beside her father's bed, Rachel took off her shoes and jeans, then lay down, pulled the blanket over herself, and completed her journey to the land of Nod.

Rachel knew she was asleep, knew she was dreaming, and yet her mother's shouts were really loud. Why was her mom yelling at her to get up? Why was she telling her dad he couldn't go? Was he going somewhere he shouldn't go? Did he—

Hospital!

Her eyes snapped open and saw her mother bent over her father in the hospital bed, her hands around his shoulders, shaking them as she all but screamed for him to come back.

Rachel jumped out of bed without stopping to put on her jeans or shoes. She was beside the bed in an instant. "Mom! What's wrong?" Her mother didn't respond except to cry harder.

Rachel looked at the monitor and saw that her dad's heartbeat was rapid and irregular and his blood pressure was one-ninety-two over one-thirty-five. She grabbed the call box and pressed the

button. As soon as a woman answered, she yelled, “Mark Harris in ICU room – I dunno – his heart’s beatin’ funny, real high blood pressure—”

“I’m coming right now.” A page for Doctor Brooks went out over the intercom with a Code Blue suffix.

The cardiac monitor suddenly went flat and emitted a constant tone. Rachel all but leaped on the bed and started chest compressions to keep her father’s blood flowing. The ventilator kept breathing for him, so she didn’t have to do that. All she had to do was keep the blood flowing.

She timed her pumps around the airflow of the ventilator. She glanced at the machine and saw that his blood oxygen level was just under ninety percent. Not too bad, but not good, either. She started pumping again.

The floor nurse jogged into the room and checked his pupils. “Pupils normal and reactive – keep going on the heart massage – temperature ninety-nine point eight – blood-ox eighty-six percent and going down – blood pressure one-ninety over one-forty-five – may have an embolism.” She turned and yelled at the door. “Doctor Brooks! In here!”

A short, slender, older black man in scrubs jetted in and snapped, “Report!”

The nurse repeated what she’d said aloud a moment before. Dr. Brooks pulled a stethoscope from his pocket and snapped, “Stop the compressions!”

Rachel leaned back and wiped sweat from her forehead as the doctor checked her father’s chest. “I think you’re right. I need a crash cart and a syringe of Retavase now!”

The nurse vanished in a splatter of shoe squeaks on the floor. The doctor turned to Rachel and said, “You’re the daughter, right?”

She panted as the vent pushed air in her father’s lungs again. “Yes. Also county sheriff.”

“Takes too much time for us to change places, so keep those compressions going. You’re doing excellent work.”

She leaned in again and pressed, hoping that she didn’t damage his ribs further. Sweat and tears mixed on her face and dripped off her chin, leaving little damp dots on her dad’s hospital gown.

Pump-pump-pump-pump don’t forget to breathe wait for the vent pump-pump-pump-pump-pump—

Her world shrunk to her hands on her father’s torso. Nothing else existed, not her fatigue, not the terror of losing her father, not her mother still crying next to the wall, not the doctor standing beside the bed, not the nurse rushing in with a syringe or the big man pushing the crash cart into the room—

Dr. Brooks grabbed her arm as she paused for the vent. “Climb down now. If we have to, we’ll defibrillate him.”

Exhausted, she hesitated. The second nurse, the big guy with the crash cart, put his hands on her waist and all but picked her up off the bed to set her on her bare feet beside the cot. The man leaned down and whispered, “Sheriff, you’re out of uniform,” then turned away to manipulate the machine on the cart.

Rachel glanced down to check her uniform and suddenly realized she was wearing only her dark blue T-shirt and her underwear. She reached down and grabbed her jeans, then put her hands on her knees and took in several deep breaths before putting on her pants.

Just as she fastened her belt, the doctor said, “Retavase in! Charge to seventy-five!” The box on the cart whined and the doctor shouted “Clear!” and her father’s body leaped up from the bed and everyone in the room stopped moving.

The alarm on her dad’s monitor – which she hadn’t even heard until everyone stopped – went from an irregular tempo to a regular beep then to a lower-pitched warble then a continual beeeeeeeee—

She froze. He couldn’t be dead. No! He’s not dead!

Then the monitor resumed its regular beeping, and the doctor and the two nurses sighed. “There,” said Dr. Brooks. “BP is coming down, we have a regular sinus rhythm, pulse is strong and steady. Watch him closely for the next two hours. Second Retavase injection in the IV line in thirty minutes. As long as the BP stays normal, we shouldn’t have to worry about internal bleeding or a stroke.” He turned to face Rachel. “Excellent work, Sheriff. I think you just saved your father’s life.”

She tried to say something nice to thank him but suddenly they were so far away and everything turned gray and she couldn’t hear them—

Lana sat beside Rachel’s bed and shook her head. If Lana had been in Rachel’s position, her father would probably not have survived. Once again the town’s young sheriff had proven her worth, this time in front of some very influential medical professionals. Mark Harris was such a lucky man to have a wife like Janey and a daughter like Rachel.

She glanced at her watch. She had about fifteen minutes before she needed to relieve Janey in her husband’s room. The women planned to switch bedsides then.

She looked back to Rachel. The girl was asleep with a blood pressure cuff on her upper left arm and a blood oxygen monitor clipped to her right index finger. Lana saw that Rachel’s blood pressure was 116 over 77, her blood oxygen level was 97, and her pulse rate was 64. It all looked good to Lana, who was not a doctor or a nurse, and had apparently looked good to the nurse who was also checking those numbers. The big man, who wore a magnetic name tag that read Barry Simpson, smiled and said that she’d probably be released when she woke up.

“When will that be?” Lana whispered.

“When she’s ready,” he replied quietly. “She was flat tuckered out when she got to her dad’s room yesterday, and they tell me she stayed awake while her mom got some sleep. Then she lay down for less than two hours and had to get up and do CPR on her dad until we got there.”

“Oh? You were in the room last night?”

“Real early this morning, actually, but yeah. I volunteered to stay late to watch over her. You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone that impressive on first sight.”

This was interesting, thought Lana. “How impressive?”

The young man grinned. “I pushed the cart into the room and there was this blonde Valkyrie sitting on the bed doing chest compressions on her dad while Dr. Brooks and Ashley worked on him. Did you know she jumped off that cot to do CPR without putting on her pants? That was impressive.”

Lana squelched a chortle. “Her pants? When did she get dressed?”

“I pushed the cart next to the bed and the doctor yelled at her to get off. I could see she was exhausted, so I picked her up and stood her beside the cot and told her she was out of uniform. By the time we got her dad stabilized she had her jeans on, and then when Dr. Brooks told her she’d saved her dad’s life, she passed out.”

“Did she hurt herself?”

“No, I caught her. But when she didn’t revive right away, Dr. Brooks told me to take her to this room and put her to bed. And before you ask, no, I didn’t undress her. Ashley and Vanessa took care of that chore.”

Lana chuckled. “So she’s just wiped out, then?”

“Yep. That’s all. Well, I need to go finish my rounds. I volunteered to stay and watch over her and they put me to work. Totally unfair.”

“Don’t worry. If I’m not in here, her mom will be. We won’t leave the heroine alone.”

Barry smiled and nodded, then looked at Rachel again. Lana thought she saw a budding case of hero worship in his eyes.

Wouldn't hurt Rachel to be thought of as a hero, she mused.

The big man deftly whirled and walked out with a spring in his step.

A long moment later, a grunt from the bed drew her attention.

Rachel's blue eyes blinked and partly opened. She made as if to sit up, but Lana gently pressed down on her shoulder. "You just lie still, girl. You've earned some sack time."

The blue eyes squinted, then seemed to focus. "Lana? That you?"

"Yes. Just be patient."

Rachel looked around and grunted again, then ran her free hand down her side under the covers. "I'm in a hospital bed wearing nothing but a gown. I'm already a patient."

Lana smiled. "True. It's almost ten-thirty on Tuesday morning. Your father's doing just fine. Your mom's with him now. I'm supposed to relieve her in a few minutes so she can come sit with you."

Rachel lifted each arm in turn. "I guess I can't go nowhere right now anyway. When're they gonna disconnect me?"

"Sometime today if the doctor on call this morning thinks you're ready to get up. The way everyone here is telling the story, you're the reason your mom isn't a widow."

Rachel's head dropped back against the pillow. "So I didn't dream all that last night."

"You did not. Your mother woke you out of a sound sleep, you jumped up on your father's chest and did CPR until the med staff took over, and you impressed the daylights out of everyone who's been by to check on you."

"That's nice." She paused, then said, "Can you call a nurse to unhook me? I gotta go to the bathroom."

Lana smiled wider and pressed the call button. "Yes?" came the immediate response.

"Rachel Harris is awake and needs to run an urgent personal errand."

"Run a personal – oh, of course, I'll be right in."

Rachel lifted her eyebrows. "Very polite. Circumspect, too."

"Circumspect? Have you been reading your Word-a-Day toilet paper lately?"

"No, just detective novels, a series. Hero's name is the same as some Middle English poet or something. Guy just uses one name."

"The author?"

"The main character. Spenser, that's it. The author named him after Edmund Spenser. Keeps sayin' his strength is the strength of ten because his heart is pure. Poetic stuff like that." Rachel shifted on the bed. "Sure wish that nurse would hurry up."

"I think there's a bedpan around her somewhere if you can't wait."

"I can wait. Long as it ain't too long."

Just then a nurse Lana hadn't seen bustled in. "Good morning, Miss Harris! How are we today?"

Rachel glared at her and said, "*We* are gonna wet this bed but good if *we* don't get in that bathroom right about now." She lifted her left arm. "Unstrap this gizmo for me."

The nurse tried unsuccessfully to hide a grin. As soon as the cuff was gone, Rachel unclipped the O2 sensor taped to her finger from its lead to the monitor and lunged out of bed. Lana tried not to laugh as the sheriff's gown refused to fully close behind her as she waddled stiff-legged to the bathroom.

The bathroom door closed. After a moment, they heard the young woman moan and sigh as if she were receiving a relaxing massage. Lana chuckled and the nurse smiled.

"You ought to see and hear some of the things I have to deal with," the woman told Lana. "You'd advocate for a raise in pay for every nurse in the country."

"No thanks. I'm executive secretary for Smallville's mayor, and that's as political as I want to get."

Rachel came out of the bathroom and closed the door, then leaned her back against it. "Can I get dressed now? This here gown don't preserve my modesty at all."

The nurse shook her head. "I'm sorry, you can't get dressed until the doctor clears you. But I can let you put your underwear back on."

Rachel frowned, then nodded. "That's something, I guess. Doctor gonna be here soon?"

"Shortly after lunch. Morning rounds are already complete." The nurse stood and asked, "Are you hungry? You missed breakfast, but we've got some stuff in the vending machines to tide you over until lunch."

Rachel's mouth twisted. "No thanks. I get enough vending food at the sheriff's office. Say, did anybody call my office to fill them in?"

Lana nodded. "Your mom called and talked to Mrs. Howard. She said not to worry, they'd cover for you and that you were supposed to take care of your father, your mother, and yourself, all together and in that order." She stood and walked to the closet. "Here's your underwear. Ooh, turquoise. Nice color. Anyway, I can go get something from a fast food place or the cafeteria if you want." Lana turned to the nurse. "I can bring her something from outside, can't I?"

"She's not critical care, should be released today, so yes, you can bring in anything non-alcoholic. We've had a few patients try to cheat that way, so there are rules."

"No problem there. She doesn't drink alcohol." Lana grabbed her purse. "What can I bring you, Rachel?"

"Uh – thanks. They's a Arby's close by, ain't there?"

"There is. I'll go tell your mom that you're awake, and if she's hungry I'll bring back whatever she wants, too. What's your preference?"

"Turkey and Swiss cheese and some of them curly fries. A big one if you can afford it."

"Will do. Beverage?"

"Biggest sweet tea they got with very little ice. If they argue about that, tell them the sheriff is already as cool as she needs to be. And thanks again, Lana."

Lana smiled. "No problem. Oh, the Kents are coming by in a little while to visit your mom and dad. I'm sure they'll drop in here, too, if you haven't been released yet. Be back as soon as I can!"

With that, Lana bounced out of the room and turned down the hall. It made Lana feel good that she was helping the Harris family this way. Maybe it made up for some of the times in the past she'd been petty and vindictive toward Rachel.

Maybe they could learn to be friends, too. It never hurts to have the cops on your side. Might even help her at work if the mayor found out she was a personal friend of the county sheriff. And in her topsy-turvy out-of-sorts private life.

Maybe Rachel could help her with that situation too. When the time came, anyway.

The young woman behind the rental storage facility counter that morning with a name tag on her shirt that read "Madge," smiled and leaned toward Clark as he completed the paperwork for his storage unit. Madge had been impressed by the big young man. He'd been polite, gentle, patient, and hadn't touched her once, not even when she'd sidled up against him – quite by accident, of course – to point out some of the storage options available.

She watched him unload the appliances from his pickup, marveling at his strength and seeming ease with the heavy loads. Madge had seen guys who looked like pro football linemen grunt and yell and barely move refrigerators and freezers and stoves and washing machines. A few of them had even dropped their loads.

Not this guy, this Clark Kent. He moved his belongings with

gentleness and precision, and he never appeared to reach his limit. His T-shirt revealed the definition of his shoulders and arms, but as long as she watched him he never seemed to strain to move anything. He loaded the facility-supplied hand cart and pushed it up the concrete ramps with ease. He seemed to put out as little effort as he might when pushing a shopping cart, as if he could have carried each load to the top floor storage room in his hands.

On his second trip, just after lunch, he'd filled his truck with boxes. He pulled them out of the bed, from the back seat, from the passenger side of the front seat, loaded the pushcart and ferried them to his room, and he never strained with any of them. The guy was strong, really strong, and he never seemed to get tired or even sweat very much.

He came down after his last trip and walked into the office. "Hi, Madge," he said. "You busy?"

She lifted the phone in her hand. "Got a customer looking for some paperwork at home. Be right with you, Mr. Kent."

He nodded, smiled, then put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall. Madge forced herself not to sigh into the phone.

The woman on the other end came back. "I found my receipt. You know, I was sure I'd agreed to a large room, but the receipt describes a mid-sized one. I'm very sorry to have bothered you with my mistake."

"It's no bother, Mrs. Butler. That's what we're here for. You have a good rest of the day, okay?"

"Thank you, young lady. Goodbye."

Madge hung up and smiled at Clark. She made herself call him by his last name out loud, but he was Clark in her thoughts. Probably always would be.

"How can I help you, Mr. Kent?"

"Oh, I just wanted to thank you for your help. I don't know when I'll be back for my stuff, but you folks just keep charging my credit card."

She modified her smile and hoped she appeared to be a bit sly. "Don't worry about that, sir. We always get paid." They shared a chuckle, then she asked, "You did put a lock on your unit, didn't you?"

"Yes. I prefer combination locks over key locks. Hope that's okay."

"It's fine. I'll go up and put our second lock on it when Ernie gets back inside. He's helping a customer with a rental truck right now."

"Sounds fine to me. I hope I see you when I come back, Madge." He waved and walked out the door to his truck.

Now that he couldn't hear her, Madge allowed herself a sigh. Most guys that good-looking were married, jerks, morons, morally bankrupt, or a combination of at least two of those characteristics. The woman with whom Clark Kent fell in love would be the luckiest woman on the face of the earth.

Madge returned to her duties with a shake of her head. She wasn't getting paid to moon over the customers, not even the luscious ones. And if Ernie ever figured out that she'd been drooling over a man she'd met only today, she'd never hear the end of it.

Clark pulled the truck in the parking space nearest to his front door and got out. He took the two-wheeled dolly out of the bed and carried it into his apartment. One last load for the truck, mostly clothing and a few mementos, were all that were left to load. Then he'd tie a tarpaulin down over everything in the truck bed and point the vehicle's hood to the west.

He stood in the bare front room, remembering all the times Lois had come over. They'd worked on investigations together, hashed out story details, argued over what was and what wasn't likely to get past Legal, played board games, watched videos or TV, shared both planned and spontaneous dinners, and built what

Clark had at one time thought was a strong relationship.

Shows you how wrong a Kryptonian can be, he mused.

The knock on his door brought him back to the present. He walked up the steps and opened the door to see Lucy holding a Chick-Fil-A bag in one hand and a plastic bag with canned soft drinks in the other.

"Surprise!" she called out. "It's just a little going-away gift for you. I want your last memory of this apartment to be a pleasant one."

He lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "I thought the meal at Mike's was for good-bye."

She wiggled the bags back and forth. "I hope you're not saying that you're not hungry, because despite my stomach's empty condition I can't eat all this by myself. Now let me in before I faint from malnutrition."

Clark was grateful for her consideration. "Thank you, Lucy." He glanced at his watch and frowned just to tease her a little. "Let me see – yes, I think I have time for a quick dinner. I'm afraid we'll have to lean on the kitchen counter. All my furniture is in storage."

She walked in, handed the bags to Clark, then nodded at the boxes still in the apartment. "Not much left, is there? I assume that's what's going to Smallville with you?"

"Yep. Clothes, shoes, my laptop, some CDs – my Kerth, of course – and some other kitsch I wanted to take along. I just have to strap it all down in the bed of the truck, stop once or twice for gas, and I'm good to go."

"Just two gas stops?"

"The truck has dual fuel tanks. I can put over forty gallons in it when both are dry."

"I see. Hey, why don't we sit on the floor and make a table out of a couple of the boxes? I know your floor is clean."

He smiled. "Floor with boxes it is. You hang on to the bags for a minute and let me do the stacking."

"Sounds like a deal. I'll even help you load whatever's left when we're done."

Around four-forty that afternoon, Martha walked through the hospital entrance and headed for the elevators. She'd already heard the bare bones of how Rachel had performed CPR on her father for however long it had taken the doctor on call to arrive. The girl had probably saved her father's life, and she needed to know how heroic that feat really was.

She slowly peeked into Mark Harris' room and saw Rachel sitting beside the bed, holding her sleeping father's hand. Martha almost backed out, but Rachel glanced up and smiled. "Come on in," she whispered. "Dad's asleep. He woke up about two hours ago and I talked to him for a few minutes. He didn't make a lot of sense, but he was mostly lucid. Pointed to his chest like it was sore."

Martha smiled. "Did you tell him why that was?"

"No. Figured he didn't need to know just yet. I'll let Mom tell him. She'll make me out to be a big hero."

"You are a hero, Rachel. Don't be modest."

Rachel shook her head. "I ain't no hero. The doctors and nurses did the real work. I just did what any daughter'd do."

Martha reached out and gently hugged Rachel. "Sure, sure. And with no pants on, too."

Rachel reddened slightly. "Heard about that, huh?"

"Yes."

"I guess it's all over town now. 'Naked Sheriff Saves Father.' Make a good headline." She snorted lightly. "Clark would enjoy readin' that."

"Funny you should mention Clark. He should be here by tomorrow evening or Wednesday morning. He'll be staying with us for a while."

The girl's eyes opened in surprise. "Oh. Right. I forgot about

him coming back.” She turned and adjusted her father’s already perfect bedcovers. “He gonna be here long?”

“For a few weeks, at least. He’s on assignment for the Daily Planet.”

Rachel opened her mouth as if to say something, then didn’t. Martha decided to change the subject. “How is your mother?”

“She’s okay, or about as okay as any wife can be in this situation. She’s at home asleep, supposed to get back in a couple of hours. Are you here to relieve me?”

“Yes. It’s your turn to sleep. I see they’ve taken the cot out. You can go home and get some rest.”

“I plan to, but I gotta stop by the office first. Paperwork don’t know nothin’ ‘bout sick days.”

Martha laughed quietly. “Then you go ahead. And get some quality sleep, dear. I’m sure your father will be just fine.”

“Yeah. His doctor said last night was the crisis he had to get past. Should be clear sailing from now on.” She reddened again. “Long as I don’t go to jumping on his chest no more.”

It was Martha’s turn to snort. “Make sure you have your pants on before you go.”

Rachel looked down in sudden alarm, then gave Martha a ‘look’ when she realized she was indeed fully dressed. “Very funny. I’m gonna get enough o’ that kind of stuff from my staff. Don’t need you dogpiling on me too.”

“Good night, Sheriff. Dream sweet dreams of your father coming home.”

Rachel nodded and slipped out of the room.

Martha sat down in the chair beside Mark’s bed and sighed. “Mark, your daughter saved your life last night. The story is all over town, and she’s going to get some great publicity out of this. That’s not why she did it, of course, the public response was the last thing on her mind, but she’s a hero now, and that can’t help but do a lot of good for her reputation.

“I don’t remember how much I told you about our son Clark coming back to live with us for a while. He’s on assignment from his paper to write stories about Middle America for the East Coast snobs.”

She chuckled to herself, then sobered. “The only real problem is that his girlfriend in Metropolis, Lois Lane, has broken up with him, and the breakup was so bad that she’s the real reason he’s coming back. I don’t know if they’re going to be able to mend that relationship. I sure hope so, because he really loves her.”

She shifted in the chair and leaned forward. “I know I don’t have to tell you that Rachel is more than glad he’s coming back. She’s had a thing for Clark for years, and that incident last year with the fake EPA investigation didn’t discourage her as much as I thought it would.” She sat back. “Come to think of it, the way Lois acted then made me think she really loved Clark. Guess sometimes you don’t know people as well as you think you do.”

She sighed again. “I just hope Clark and Rachel don’t get involved with each other. I don’t know how long he’s going to be here, and I don’t know yet how vulnerable he is. If the two of them were to get together, it might be a wonderful thing for both of them or it might be completely devastating for everyone around them.” She shook her head. “I’d hate to see Rachel get hurt. And I’d really hate to see Clark get hurt again.”

Martha patted Mark’s hand. “We’ll just have to wait and see what happens.”

Chapter Eight

Lucy gathered up their fast food dinner trash and tried to compress it into a smaller mass. Clark looked at her as if he were trying to decide whether or not to ask what she was doing, so she said, “I always do this. Takes up less space in the trash can. I try to make it as small as possible.”

“Good thinking.” He smiled and put out one hand. “Allow me, please.” He took the crumpled bag and quickly smashed it into

a cardboard softball.

She shook her head. “Man, you’re strong. I couldn’t get it that small if I jumped up and down on it.”

He quirked one eyebrow and tossed the compacted trash back and forth between his hands. “It’s all in the wrists.”

“Yeah, well, I think you’d best get going while you still have some light. I assume you’re going to stop somewhere and get some sleep.”

“It’s about twenty-two hours of drive time from here to Smallville, so I’ll probably grab a nap somewhere along the way. Thank you for your care and concern, but I’ll be fine.”

“Okay, if you say so.” She stood and gestured at the few boxes on the floor. “Which one of these can I carry without hurting myself?”

It was time to say goodbye. Clark didn’t want to go, but he knew he had no viable alternatives.

For the first time in his life, he understood what a broken heart really felt like.

Lucy tossed the rope to secure the tarp over the boxes stacked in the truck’s bed to Clark. He caught it and knotted it to the cleat on that side, then checked the tension on the rope ties. “I think I’m good to go. Thanks for your help. And for dinner. It was fun.”

“I enjoyed it too.” She looked at the truck again, then plucked one of the lines holding it down. “Yeah, that tarp isn’t going anywhere any time soon. Have you checked the weather forecasts on the way?”

He nodded. “I should have clear sailing until I get to the middle of Illinois. I may stop overnight there if I can find a dry place to park.”

Lucy didn’t answer right away. She took a deep breath, held it for a moment, then sighed. “I wish you weren’t leaving.”

Clark walked to the passenger side of the truck where Lucy stood and leaned against the side panel. “I do too. But I don’t think Lois is going to change her mind now.”

She crossed her arms and huffed. “Me neither. And I’m really gonna give her a piece of my mind tonight!”

“Not too much, I hope. You’ll need it.”

“Huh?”

“Your mind. You’ll need it to keep up with your classes.”

“Oh.” She chuckled. “I got it. Hey, big man, you take care of yourself, okay? Write me a long letter or three and let me know how you’re doing back in Flatland.”

“I will.” He took her hands in his and said, “Goodbye, Lucy. I wish I’d known you better. You’re a good person.”

She smiled. “Thanks. Hey, how about a going-away present?”

“I thought your present was our chicken dinner.”

“Nah, that was a freebie.” She reached up and pulled his head down, then kissed his cheek. “That’s from me.” Then she put her hands on either side of his head and kissed him softly on the mouth and held it. When she pulled away, she left her hands on his face, then breathed, “And that’s from Lois.”

He felt himself blinking. “Wow.” He slowly straightened, then said, “I assume she didn’t ask you to pass that on.”

Her smile melted. “No, she did not. And she’s an idiot. I almost wish you’d fallen for me instead. I don’t care what your secret is, I could’ve handled it.”

He locked eyes with her for a moment, then nodded. “I think maybe you could have.” Then he pulled out of the embrace and looked at his watch. “Sorry, Lucy, but I have to get going now if I want to get to Smallville before midnight tomorrow. Thank you for dinner, thank you for helping me load up and tie down, and thank you for your friendship. I won’t forget it.”

She lifted one hand as if she were about to touch his face, then lowered it. “I won’t forget you either, Clark. You’re a good man and I hope you have a good life.”

“You too. Bye now.”

He pulled his keyring out of his pocket and locked the front door. Then he took that key off the ring, put it in an envelope, and dropped it into his landlord's mailbox. Floyd had been very nice about Clark's abrupt departure, since he had a clean, attractive apartment to rent. Clark had even gotten his security deposit back. He hoped the next tenant would take care of the place.

He turned to see Lucy standing beside Lois' Jeep with a forlorn expression on her face. He waved to her, then climbed into the truck and started it. The big V8 engine roared to life, and he pulled out on the street, headed for the interstate onramp.

His last glimpse of Lucy in his rearview mirror showed her still standing beside Lois' Jeep with her arms crossed and her shoulders drooping.

He wriggled in the seat and took a deep breath. Too bad he had to drive all this way – Superman could have carried the truck to his parents' farm in about fifteen minutes, assuming he'd tied down the tarp properly.

No matter. He was leaving a big part of his dreams behind in Metropolis. But he still had a job, he still had friends, and he still had Superman. He could – and would – continue patrolling the city. Distance was not really a big problem for him.

And he was sure to encounter Lois on one of those patrols. They would be formal encounters, maybe even a little unfriendly. She'd try to restrain her volcanic fury and ask questions in a calm tone. He'd be standoffish and a bit cold to her. He wouldn't be deliberately rude, but he wouldn't smile at her, either. Of course, she probably wouldn't want him to be nice to her.

He refused to let himself imagine her greeting Superman and calling him "Clark" in front of the entire city press corps.

Surely she wasn't that angry.

But wouldn't bet real money on it.

Lois looked up from the kitchen sink where she was washing dishes when the door opened. "Lucy!" she yelled. "That you?"

"Yes."

"Are you in for the night?"

The sound of locks being fastened was clear over the noise Lois was making. "Yes."

Lois shut off the water and turned to face the kitchen doorway. "Are you going to stick to one-word answers tonight?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I don't think so." Lois dried her hands and threw the towel on the cabinet as she marched to the living room. "Hey, Punky, what's the matter?"

Lucy stopped halfway to the bathroom and turned. She looked as angry as Lois had ever seen her. "*Don't*. Call. Me. Punky." She paused for a long, deep breath. "Not tonight."

"Why not?"

Lucy took two quick steps toward her sister and stopped just out of reach. "I went to see Clark. I wanted him to know that at least one Lane sister cared about him."

Lois' face darkened. "I told you, I don't want to hear about – about that guy. You want to talk to him, date him, move in with him, marry him, go ahead! I don't give a – a hoot!"

"I'm going to tell you this much. He left for Smallville tonight. He put most of his belongings in storage and packed up a pickup truck with what he'll need at his parents' place. And he didn't want to go."

"All that matters is that he's gone."

"He's driving by himself. It's about two full days of driving, too. He'll be exhausted when he gets there. And you don't give a flying flip, do you?"

"No. I don't. All I wanted was him gone and now he is. I'm happy."

"You say that now. You say he's hurt you, but I know you ripped out his heart and stomped on it right in front of him. You have no idea how deeply you've hurt him."

"What about what he did to me? He lied to me for two years!"

Lucy waved one hand across her body as if batting a fly. "So what? If you really loved him like you said you did, you'd figure out a way to forgive him. But no, the great Lois Lane, Ms. Perfect Personality herself, can't abide imperfection in the man she claims to love. She'd rather push him out of her life than do the hard work of fixing the relationship. You have no—"

"*That's enough!*" Lois screamed.

The two sisters glared at each other, both on the knife edge of throwing punches and kicks. Lois fumed silently, panting through clenched teeth. *Lucy can't know what I know about Clark! She doesn't realize how deeply he hurt me, how thoroughly he betrayed me! She doesn't understand all that I've gone through in my life! She has no right to criticize me!*

Lois finally broke the staring match and spun back toward the kitchen. Lucy growled, "You know I'm right about this."

Lois stopped and half-turned. "No! You're wrong!"

"Clark is a good man. Better than you deserve, especially right now. You—"

"I said *that's enough!*" Lois snarled back. "You can do whatever you want with or to or about that man but I do *not* want to hear about it!"

"That's because you're afraid to hear the truth!"

Lois bounded back into the living room and shoved Lucy in the chest, hard, with both hands. Lucy fell to the floor on her back and missed hitting her head on the table by inches. Lois stood over her, panting, her hands curled into claws.

Lucy slowly got to her feet. "That's your free shot. You won't get another." She turned toward her bedroom, then stopped and faced Lois again. "I'm going to say this right to your face so you'll know I mean it. Lois Lane, you are my sister and I love you, but right now, right at this moment, you have to be the stupidest, most idiotic bitch who has ever walked the earth. If Clark Kent loved me like he loves you, I wouldn't care if he came from Saturn, had eight toes on each foot, and ate live lizards for breakfast. You don't deserve him. I hope you never see him again, because you'd just hurt him worse."

Lucy held her ground for a moment, then turned and walked into her bedroom. She shut the door gently and Lois heard the lock click.

Lois's feet might as well have been super-glued to the floor. Not since their early teen years had they had a fight like this one. And not since Lucy was nine had she cursed at Lois.

It was almost enough to make her consider changing her mind about—

NO!

She wouldn't back down, not on this and not with Clark. He was a liar! He used her, teased her, made her think he really cared, then he slapped her in the face with this – this thing! How could he think she'd understand? How could he think she'd forgive him?

She flung herself on the couch and grabbed a pillow. She started to scream into it but could only sob.

She cried herself to sleep on the couch that night.

After he dropped off several personal messages at the Planet's front desk, said messages to be delivered to Perry's desk first thing in the morning, Clark left the city and drove west on I-70. He continued until the weather closed in around five a.m., then pulled into a Love's Travel Stop and Truck Stop just north of Richmond, Indiana. There was a covered parking area with a few spaces open. He pulled into the one he thought would best shield the truck from the rain and turned off the engine.

This was a part of the state over which he'd flown many times, but he'd never gone to ground here. It was much like Kansas, mostly farm country, just a bit greener and with a few more hills. He wasn't sleepy, but since he was parked here

anyway, he decided to brave the rain and grab breakfast.

The coffee-skinned waitress was young, slender, of medium height, with her Afro mostly contained in a hair net. She stopped in front of Clark with her eyes on the order pad in her hand and muttered, “What’cha want?”

Apparently her smile hadn’t awakened yet that morning. That was okay with him, though – Clark didn’t feel like smiling either. “Stack of pancakes, side of bacon – make it really crisp, please, so it doesn’t bend when you lift it – two slices of toast with strawberry preserves, a tall glass of water and a cup of coffee.”

Her eyes lifted after she stopped writing. “Anything else? We got a couple o’ boxes of Krispy Kreme doughnuts fresh from their store. And some bagels with sour cream, too. Supposed to be just like the ones in Metropolis.”

He smiled reflexively. “Maybe after breakfast. Have to watch my waistline, you know.”

Still missing a smile, she nodded. “Name’s Deidre if you need anything.”

“What’s your name if I don’t need anything?”

She gave him a sleepy glare for a long breath, then said, “Too early, honey. Lemme get them pancakes. You want maple syrup?”

“You have any strawberry?”

She shook her head. “Sorry, sweetie. This ain’t IHOP with them ninety-two dozen flavors of syrup. We got maple, buttermilk, and honey.”

“Maple’s fine. Thank you, Deidre.”

Deidre nodded once, tore off the order slip, and put it on the rotating holder in front of the kitchen. “Hank!” she called. “Make this bacon crisp, okay? Customer says if it bends it ain’t right, so pick it up with a fork before you call me.”

“Yeah, yeah,” came the reply. “I’ll make it crisp.”

“Just don’t burn it this time!”

All Clark could hear in return was someone he assumed was Hank muttering unintelligibly under his breath. Another day he would’ve been amused by their byplay. Not today.

A customer had left a newspaper a couple of seats away. Clark leaned over and picked it up, then refolded it to see the front page.

It was the sports section of the Wednesday morning edition of the Palladium-Item from Richmond. The front page headline read Metro Tigers Rally Late, Beat Visiting Chicago Cubs In Ninth Inning on Monday Night.

Must be a slow news day in Richmond.

He turned to the comics page and caught up with the Peanuts gang, the latest antics at Dilbert’s unnamed company, and looked at the ongoing tale of woe involving two married couples in a theater group. The men were angry with each other over something about one of the wives having smiled at a third man. At least, that’s what Clark thought it was about. It was hard to tell from just those four panels, especially since he didn’t follow that particular strip.

Deidre brought his water and toast. “Pancakes be here in a couple’a minutes. Hank had to mix up some fresh batter. Here’s your butter and strawberry cheese.”

As she clomped away, he shook his head at the plastic containers beside his toast. Oh, well, not everywhere can be Metropolis. At least they weren’t expired. Maybe he’d get a bagel and coffee to go.

The rain fell with varying intensity for over an hour. Clark sat in the truck and used the time to leaf through the newspaper he’d scrounged from the diner as he slowly consumed his bagel. As he’d expected, the cream cheese in its plastic packet was just a bit on the chewy side, but not quite inedible. It did have a funny aftertaste, though, one that made him glad he was Kryptonian.

As the rain slacked off, he got out and made a circuit around

the truck to make sure the tarp was still secure. A glance at his watch told him he could probably call his parents without waking them up, assuming they’d slept the night before. During their last phone call, they’d alternated between excitement that he was coming home and despair that his relationship with Lois seemed to have crashed and burned.

They had also told him that Mark Harris would probably go home on Thursday, assuming he kept improving. The man would be in for some surgery on his legs down the road, and he’d definitely need physical therapy for a couple of months. His mom had also shared the story of Rachel’s CPR rescue of her dad in the hospital. Clark had laughed obligingly and promised to visit Mark when he went back home.

He sat in the truck and dialed his parents’ number. It only rang once before his dad’s hearty “Hello, Son! Martha! Get on the extension! It’s Clark!” boomed through the tinny cell phone.

Good. They’d finally gotten caller ID. “Hi, Dad. I’m stopped just across the Indiana state line waiting for the rain to stop. I figure if I don’t come up on any wrecks or really busy construction zones, I should be in your driveway before dark tonight.”

“Martha, I told you he’d be here this evening. Hot dog, our boy’s coming home!”

Clark laughed. “Take it easy, Dad. You’ve seen me in the last couple of weeks.”

“Yes, but now you’re coming back home! Have I got some chores lined up for you!”

“Jonathan! You keep at him like that and he’ll rent a place in Wichita just to get some peace and quiet!”

Clark laughed again. “It’s okay, Mom. I don’t mind helping out. Hey, Dad, I was thinking while I was driving, and I wondered if there was a corner of the barn you don’t have to use.”

“A corner of the barn?”

“I’m going to need an office, and my old bedroom isn’t big enough. I’ll need grounded and regulated electrical outlets, a file cabinet, a desk and chair, a couple of lamps, a bookshelf, access to a modem, and a few other things. I’ll do all the work myself, assuming you have a corner you can reserve for me.”

“Hmm. Yes, I think I know just the place. What about the far corner of the barn under the hayloft? You could either put wood panels under the loft floor or put in a mini-roof for the office. Is this something that needs to be secure?”

“Against weather, cows, insects, and the occasional child miscreant, yes. I guess I’ll need a fan, too, maybe even a small air conditioner to keep the computer cool and the printer paper dry. But that’s for later. We’ll brainstorm for a day or so and see what comes out. And I won’t need it for a few days. Perry told me yesterday that doesn’t expect my first story until Wednesday of next week so he can put it in the Thursday morning edition.”

“I think we can make that work, Son. Like you said, we’ll brainstorm until we come up with something good.”

“Thanks, Dad. Hey, I think the rain’s stopped. I need to get back on the road so I can have a late dinner with you guys tonight.”

“We’ll wait dinner on you, sweetie.”

“Oh, Mom, please don’t. I can’t guarantee my arrival time. As long as you have something I can heat up quick, I’ll be fine.”

“If you say so. And I’m going to make sure your room is ready for you.”

“Thanks, Mom. Bye, you two. I’ll see you this evening, hopefully before your bedtime.”

“It will be.”

“Don’t wait up for me. I might be late. If that happens, I’ll try to call before eight to let you know. And if I’m still too far out, I’ll just find a place to sleep and drive in tomorrow.”

“That’s fine, sweetie. Drive safely.”

“We’ll leave the porch light on for you, Son.”

“Thanks again. You two have a good day.”

Martha giggled. “My son’s coming home! Of course it’s a good day!”

Clark smiled despite himself. “If I don’t get off the phone soon, I’ll have to pay rent here where I’m parked. See you guys tonight.”

He pushed the “off” button and shook his head. His parents were such good people, and they loved him unflinchingly. They were exactly what he needed right now.

He wondered for a moment how long he’d miss Lois so much that his chest felt empty.

It wasn’t fair that he be the only one in such pain. He hoped his good-bye letter to her would have an impact. It wasn’t a nice hope, and it wasn’t in character for him, but at the moment he didn’t care one whit. Pain like his should be shared.

Especially with the one who’d created it.

Chapter Nine

Lucy was out of the apartment by the time Lois got up on Wednesday morning. Just as well, Lois thought. Didn’t need another wrestling match in the living room. Someone might get hurt.

Lois deliberately refused to consider that someone – Clark – had already been deeply hurt. She had a job to do and she didn’t need any distractions today.

Lois stepped off the elevator to the newsroom at seven-fifty-one. She paused at the top of the ramp and checked Clark’s desk.

Empty, just as it should be.

Maybe – just maybe – he’s finally taking her seriously.

She sat at her desk to review her notes from Monday and move forward with her latest story, the one that didn’t reveal Clark Kent’s secret identity to the entire world.

Just before nine-thirty, she glanced at the near left corner of her desk where Clark always left a cup of coffee for her. It was always exactly the way she liked it, with the right amount of sweetener and cream, and it always tasted perfect. It also always came at the perfect time, when she needed a quick caffeine jolt in the morning.

But it wasn’t there.

Of course it’s not there, she told herself. The huge liar can’t bring me coffee because he’s gone. And me having to make my own coffee is a small price to pay for that victory.

Her sense of satisfaction was momentarily tempered with a smidgen of doubt – but just for a moment. Was Clark actually gone or was he just waiting for her to talk to Perry? Were they in cahoots, trying to talk her out of her totally justified and completely reasonable reaction? Was Clark waiting at home for Perry’s call to come in and renegotiate his terms with her?

She had to know.

Perry leaned back in his desk chair as he read through the wire report from San Francisco detailing the minor quake that had shaken the city’s eastern suburb two hours earlier that morning. The geologists and vulcanologists and psychics were predicting that *The Big One*, the quake that would slide much of southern California into the Pacific Ocean, was imminent. It wasn’t until the reader – in the fifth paragraph – saw the scientists’ definition of “imminent,” which was defined as “within the next five hundred to ten thousand years,” that the reader’s panic might subside. The psychics’ suggested timeline, however, implied that any SoCal resident who read the headline must move east of Nevada before the evening rush hour or risk drowning in salt water. He decided that he’d send it to Pam to rewrite it and remove the hot buttons from the headline and content.

Before he could lift his phone, a knock sounded at his door.

Lois stuck her head in. “Hey, Chief, you heard from Kent today? He call in sick or something?”

He frowned. At least the young man had a name today and wasn’t just “that guy” or “the liar.” He shook his head and said, “Clark’s not coming in today, Lois. You know why, too.”

She shrugged. “Just wanted to make sure.”

She made to leave, but Perry stopped her. “Come on in. Need to chat with you.”

Her brows drew down and she tilted her head, but complied. “Shall I sit?” she asked.

“Close the door first, but yes, have a seat. This might take a minute.”

She sat. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Couple of things. First off, I know you’re ticked off at Clark.” He lifted his hands as she leaned forward. “Hold it. I want to ask you a question. When should he have told you the secret?”

“What? When should he – That doesn’t make a da—”

“Yes it does! Was he supposed to tell you what he could do the day I partnered him with you? When you two went to Smallville? While you were engaged to Luthor? Maybe when you thought he was shot dead at Georgie Hairdo’s? Or some other time?”

She fidgeted angrily for a long moment, then barked, “Some time before he did tell me!”

He waited for her to elaborate. When she didn’t, he said, “That’s all you’ve got?”

“It’s enough for me!” she snarled.

“Okay, fine. The second thing is that Clark’s not in Metropolis, but he’s still working for the Planet. I’ve assigned him to be our roving Midwest reporter on a travel and human interest basis, writing articles and essays to broaden the typical Metro’s world view. There’s a whole lot of reality outside this city, and people need to see it.”

She frowned, crossed her arms, and sat back. “As long as he’s out of town, I don’t care what his employment status is.”

“Well, I’ve already discussed it with Jerry Palmer upstairs, and he told me that four months is about as long as that assignment can last. Clark will have to either officially resign or come back to this office at that time.”

Her eyes narrowed. “He comes back here and I print it.”

“No, you won’t.”

Her lips drifted apart and her head turned. With some surprise and some asperity, she said, “I’m sorry, Chief, but I thought I just heard you say that you wouldn’t let me print a Pulitzer prize-winning article.”

Perry leaned back in his chair, trying to remain calm. “I can’t stop you from going somewhere else and printing it. What I can tell you is that if you do, you’ll never work for me again.”

Lois’ eyes widened and her jaw dropped. “What? I won’t – you mean you’d fire me?”

Perry lifted his hands to either side and pasted on a political smile. “C’mon, Lois, you’d be too big for us. We couldn’t possibly hold you back from fulfilling your journalistic density.”

“Wh-what? My – my density?”

“Oh, sorry, I meant your destiny. I watched ‘Back To The Future’ with Alice over the weekend.” He leaned forward and got more serious. “Look, Lois, you have to know that the woman who breaks that story will have her choice of jobs anywhere. She’d be a celebrity in her own right. Talk show hosts would pay her buckets of money for an interview. Publishers would stage death matches to win the rights to that book. She might even have her own TV and radio programs. She could investigate and uncover the secret identities of other heroes. Just think, not even Batman would be safe from her nose for news. And I wonder how those other heroes would take that.”

Her eyes widened and her lips parted as he listed some of the possible outcomes of revealing Clark’s other identity. For a

moment he thought she'd changed her mind. Then she regained her composure and frowned again. "You can quit pulling my leg now, Perry. I meant what I said and I'll do it no matter what you say."

He shrugged and lowered his hands. "Okay, Lois, it's your choice. I just wanted you to know where I stood on the subject."

She stood and huffed at him. "I get it. I follow through on my threat and there'll be blowback. I already knew that."

"You didn't think it all the way through, though, did you?"

She put her hands on her hips. "I'll admit that you brought up some unintended consequences I hadn't considered. But you haven't changed my mind one iota."

He nodded. "Fine. I just want you to remember one more thing."

"What's that?"

"Clark's not the only one who'd be hurt by this. You'd be painting crosshairs on everyone in Smallville, not to mention the Daily Planet. Some bad guy would threaten to hurt or kill someone Clark cares for unless Superman does or does not do something. And that—" he pointed at Lois "—includes you."

He paused as her eyes again widened. "Come on, Lois, don't tell me you didn't think of that." She didn't move. His eyebrows rose and he added, "Ah. You *didn't* think of that." He shook his head and exhaled loudly. "Talk about your collateral damage," he jabbed.

She stood stock-still in front of the desk for maybe three more seconds, then spun and all but ran out of the office.

Perry had not enjoyed that conversation, but Lois had to know she wasn't just threatening Clark. She was pointing a loaded firearm at everyone Clark had ever known or spent time around, including herself. And he was sure that aspect hadn't crossed her mind until now.

He looked down at his desk and frowned. He'd forgotten for a moment about the envelopes Clark had left. He'd intended to give Lois' to her while she was in the office. But maybe it was better if someone else handed her Clark's farewell message.

He didn't know what Clark had written to all these folks, but he knew it would cause a ruckus in the newsroom. Perry thought about not delivering them for a long moment, then shook his head. Surely Clark had written what he would've said in person had he had the chance. And he wouldn't deliberately blow up the Planet's reporting staff.

He'd leave that job to Lois. She was much better at it than Clark ever could be.

He picked up the phone. "Jimmy, I need you in here when you get a minute."

Jimmy put down his desk phone and frowned. The call from Perry had come while he'd been sorting pictures of previous Fourth of July celebrations in downtown Metropolis in preparation for a series on the holiday and the city's acknowledgment of it. He thought for a moment, then decided he could park his train of thought on a siding while he found out why Perry needed him with an uncharacteristic lack of urgency.

He knocked on Perry's door and stuck his head in. "Got something for me, Chief?"

The editor nodded. "Two things. First, give this article to Pam and let her whip it into shape. We need it for the afternoon edition. Second, I want you to pass out these envelopes to the people whose names are on the front. Don't worry, this isn't a layoff or a salary reduction. These are personal messages."

Jimmy frowned. "Personal messages from whom?"

"You'll see. You've got one in there. Oh, you need to deliver all of them before you read yours."

Well. That wasn't mysterious at all. "Okay. How many?"

"Nine. No, I have mine, so it's eight. Here you go."

Jimmy leafed through the envelopes, reading the names.

"Lois, Pam, Jack, Eduardo, here's mine—"

"Jimmy! Please – just deliver them. Then go back to whatever you were doing."

"Got it."

The errand took him about four minutes, then he was back at his desk with his envelope. The writing looked like CK's script, which made him look across the newsroom.

Not at his desk. Curiouser and curiouser. Too bad he could never remember where that quote came from. He'd always wondered about it.

He tore open his envelope and began reading.

Lois knew that Jimmy had dropped something on her desk, but she couldn't have said what it was if someone threatened to set her on fire. If she printed Clark's secret, it would put dozens – maybe hundreds – of innocent people in real danger. The secret was far bigger than she'd allowed herself to consider. Releasing it into the wild might be the worst possible thing she could do in her entire life if she lived to be two hundred.

Maybe Clark had a point in keeping The Secret a secret after all.

She shook herself and focused on the noise level in the newsroom.

It was far lower than normal.

Several people were looking at what appeared to be letters, and they seemed to be stunned. One woman – Pam Wilson from the rewrite desk – stood grabbed the first person who walked past her, then thrust the letter into the other woman's face and appeared to say, "Read this!"

Jimmy held a piece of paper in his hand and a shocked expression on his face. What was going on?

Then she saw the envelope with her name on it. *Lois Lane*.

Puzzled, she tore it open and pulled out a single sheet of paper.

Lois:

I know you think I lied to you about my secret without regard for your feelings. I know you believe I haven't been honest with you since the day we met. And I freely admit that you do have some valid complaints on that score.

But you should ask yourself a question, one to which I wish I could hear the answer.

Did you lie to me when you told me you loved me?

Because I believed you. I really believed that when I told you the secret – and I wanted to tell you before you figured it out on your own – you'd be upset, maybe really mad, but I also believed that we could work through that problem and come out of it stronger. I believed that the love I thought we shared was strong enough, deep enough, powerful enough to withstand anything.

I was wrong.

You've all but told me that I've broken your heart. For that, I'm deeply sorry. I wish I could go way back in our relationship and figure out the right time and place and way to tell you. And I truly wish I hadn't hurt you this badly.

But I want you to know that you've hurt me, too. I opened my heart to you, totally and without reservation, and you stomped it into the dust under your feet. You crushed the dreams of my future quite thoroughly, dreams I've cherished almost since I met you. You've convinced me that we have no chance of a future together, whether as romantic partners, friends, co-workers, or even citizens of the same city. I don't know if you'll believe me, but I promise that I will never look for you. I will never check up on you. If we meet again at some event, while covering some story, or just walking down the same street, I assure you now that it will be a complete and total accident. If you have a stalker in your future, I give you my solemn vow that it won't be me. I intend never to see you again.

I hereby give you what you said you wanted. I'm gone from

your life. We're done forever.

Goodbye.

He hadn't signed his name to it.

She sat there as rock-still as if she were a clubbed baby seal. If the letter hadn't been hand-written in Clark's precise script, she wouldn't have thought it could possibly come from him.

Various reactions cascaded through her mind and caromed off each other.

He was gone from her life, just like she wanted.

She'd never see him again.

There was no turning back now.

She'd hurt him terribly.

He'd reacted by trying to hurt her just as terribly.

He'd already hurt her terribly.

He'd never lie to her for the rest of her life!

She'd miss him for the rest of her life.

The betrayer was gone!

Then Jimmy Olsen slammed his hand down on her desk and startled her into nearly falling out of her chair.

"What did you do!" He thrust a piece of paper in her face with his other hand. "What did you do to CK? Why did you make him leave?"

"What? You mean he – let me see what he wrote—"

He snatched his letter back. "He didn't mention you at all! He just said there was a conflict in his life he couldn't resolve! But I can read between the lines! The only thing that would make him leave the Planet is that the two of you hit an iceberg and sank! And I can't believe whatever happened between you two is that terrible!"

She pushed her chair back and tried to mollify him. "Jimmy, look, it's a complicated—"

"I don't care!" he shouted. "You made my friend leave! And I thought you cared about him! I know he cares about you! I thought you loved each other! What's the matter with you, Lois? Are you suicidal or just stupid? How many people—"

"Olsen!" Perry's voice rang out.

Jimmy spun and lifted his letter. "Chief, look at this! Clark's gone! Lois ran him off! We have to find him—"

"Jimmy! Stop it! Come in my office and stop shouting!"

"But we—"

Perry snapped his right index finger up between them and glared at Jimmy, then pointed to his office with that same digit. Jimmy pressed his lips shut, gave Lois one last furious glare, then followed his boss' finger to the office and closed the door behind them.

Lois looked around to others in the office. Everyone seemed to be either staring at her malevolently or whispering to someone else and pointing at her.

Great. Now she was the workplace Jezebel, the one responsible for Clark leaving. Rumors would start to swirl about her, just as they had when Claude had betrayed her. They'd referred to her – just not to her face – as Frigid Bridget, the Ice Queen, the Cold Shoulder, and a few others she hadn't bothered to remember. When Claude had left just weeks after, they thought she'd run him off. She hadn't, although she'd been glad he'd left. And she'd worked past the worst of the aftereffects of the wreckage Claude had created and remade herself into Mad Dog Lane.

But it was different this time. She hadn't run Claude off. He'd left on his own, dodging accusations about his plagiarisms and leaving her personal reputation shredded in his wake.

She *had* run Clark off, and not because of anything evil, bad, or even unethical that he'd done. It *was* her fault this time.

She reminded herself of Clark's betrayal, of his lies, of his deceit and pretense of honesty and love. She hardened her heart against everyone else's contempt and judgment.

She'd do the same thing with her own self-contempt and self-

judgment.

Clark pulled into the Kent's driveway at eight-nineteen on Tuesday evening. As he'd expected, his mother popped out of the front door before he turned the key off.

He stepped out of the truck and caught her as she ran to him, then lifted her and spun around twice. "Clark," she shouted into his ear, "I'm so glad you're home!"

He put her down. "Me too, Mom. I assume you have dinner ready for me?"

"Of course I do! Come on in! Your father has some great ideas for your office and he wants to talk them over with you while you eat!" She grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the front door. "Come on, slowpoke! Your food's getting cold!"

Her enthusiasm amused Clark and he found himself hurrying to keep up with her. The smile he felt surprised him, but he knew it was because he was coming home to find unconditional love and acceptance. He might not have that with Lois, but he had it with his parents.

He'd make sure it was enough.

Still in full uniform, Rachel walked into her father's hospital room and caught her parents gazing softly into each other's eyes. The sight made her smile, like it always did, but this time it also twanged against her heart because there wasn't anyone in her life to gaze into her eyes like that.

She knew she didn't need a man to be a success, to be true to who she was, to be all that she could be, even if she wasn't in the Army.

She also knew that deep down, she wanted someone to love her like that, to love her for who she was, someone she could respect and love right back.

But that was a subject for a later time. Right now she needed to check on her daddy.

"Hey, old man," she said. "How you doin' tonight?"

Both Mom and Dad turned to look at her, those wonderful smiles still in place. "Hey, Sheriff," he drawled softly. "I'm doing okay. Tired, but okay. They think I'll be able to go home Thursday, Friday at the latest."

She stopped beside the bed opposite her mother and touched his arm. "'Bout time. I'm gettin' tired o' comin' by here every night an' findin' you two makin' goo-goo eyes at each other."

His smile changed to amusement. "I nearly lost the two of you, sweetie. I'm just enjoying being here to see my wife and talk with her. Besides, your mother and I have a license to make goo-goo eyes."

"Yeah, just hold the line right there and I'll be fine with it."

Her father laughed quietly, then flinched. His face contorted for a moment, then smoothed out as he exhaled and resumed breathing easily.

Rachel's smile disappeared. "Dad, I'm sorry. Are you okay? Do you need a nurse?"

He shook his head and smiled again. "No, I'm fine. My chest is still a little sore."

"Bruises from the wreck?"

"No." He grinned wider. "From you sitting on my chest and saving my life." He reached out and took her hand in his. "Thank you. From the bottom of my heart – and I mean that literally – thank you."

"Aw, Dad – I'd a done that for anyone."

"I know. But you did it for me. You saved my life, sweetheart. You seriously impressed a couple of doctors and a few nurses." His smile nearly obscured his eyes. "And you did it all without your pants."

Rachel felt her face redden. "I – uh – I was kinda hopin' nobody'd tell you that part."

"Oh, sweetie, every nurse who looks in on me says something

nice about you.”

“Oh? What kind of things?”

“Mostly how my daughter is such a wonderful woman and a terrific sheriff and so I must be a really great dad.”

All three chuckled. Then Rachel said, “Dad, I gotta go home and get some shut-eye. My deputies have done great with me not there all the time, but I’m still sheriff and I still gotta do my job. You know how that works.” She leaned down and kissed his forehead. “I’ll drop by tomorrow sometime.” She turned to her mother. “Mom, you stayin’ the night again?”

Janey nodded. “One more night. I have to get some laundry and grocery shopping done before your father comes home.”

“Okay. Oh! I think I forgot to tell you. Martha and Lana dropped off a bunch more food this mornin’. Lotta canned goods and frozen stuff this time, enough to fill up the pantry and the freezer in the garage. Don’t know if you seen it yet ‘cause you been busy.”

Her mother smiled and shook her head. “You already told me. Now you go on home and get some sleep before you pass out again.” Janey walked around the bed and hugged Rachel. “I love you, honey, and I want you to be healthy so you can restart my heart when I need it.”

Rachel returned the hug, then pulled back a bit. “No problem. But you’ll have to be patient cause I’m gonna put my pants on first.”

Chapter Ten

Clark slowly opened his eyes to a familiar yet unfamiliar room. He frowned for a moment as he considered the question of where he was and why did the room smell so – so fresh and clean and empty? He wasn’t anything like a slob, but his apartment did smell as if someone lived there.

He blinked twice and remembered. He was at home in Kansas, sleeping in his old room where he hadn’t slept for several years, on special assignment from the Daily Planet. He wasn’t in Metropolis. He wouldn’t see his friends in the newsroom today.

And Lois hated him.

That was the worst part.

His exile was her doing. Despite his love for her – and he’d been totally and completely sincere and honest when he’d told her that he loved her – he couldn’t reconcile Lois’ actions and new attitude toward him with his mental picture of a fiery but good-hearted woman who had a lot of love to give. He’d expected some bumps and bruises along the way to a reconciliation, but he’d never given a moment’s thought to Lois shoving him out of her life forever. As far as he was concerned, it had come completely out of the deepest, darkest blue that ever existed.

He’d loved her. Now – now he wasn’t sure.

Maybe she wasn’t really who he’d thought she was.

He remembered Dr. Friskin telling him one day, during the sessions when he’d felt unaccountably apathetic because of exposure to red Kryptonite, that love and hate were two sides of the same emotional coin, and that they resulted in opposite but extreme emotional states. She said that love that was thwarted and frustrated and rejected might flip over and become hate. She cited examples of husbands and wives who’d started out in love, but then one had allowed other people or other things to be a higher priority than the other spouse. First that other spouse was hurt, then if the causes of the hurt weren’t resolved in a mutually satisfactory way, that hurt would turn to disappointment, then the disappointment would turn to resentment, then to anger, then to bitterness, and finally the love the injured spouse had felt was crushed and buried under argument and coldness and hate.

Clark didn’t want to hate Lois.

But she might not give him a choice.

Rachel hadn’t meant to pull another all-nighter, but she had.

The thick pile of office paperwork that she hadn’t been able to avoid the night before was now on Denise’s desk, ready to be filed or mailed or returned for more comments as required. Denise was due in at eight-thirty, so it should all be finished before lunch. Rachel yawned as she drove, hoping Denise wouldn’t call her on the radio and give her more bad news.

The phone call that had her behind the wheel at the moment instead of at home in bed had come in just before dawn, and now she was tooling down the road to Bob Clay’s ranch. Bob claimed that someone had rustled about two dozen cattle during the night, and he’d demanded that the sheriff mount a posse and bring back the thieves dead or alive. Rachel smiled slightly as she thought about bringing them back dead and duct-taped to the hood of her patrol cruiser, just like the old cowboy movies where the rustlers came back draped over their saddles. Or maybe she could just find a tall tree wherever she caught them and hang them from it with the jumper cables she kept in the trunk.

Man, she was tired.

She pulled to a stop just off the road where the tracks of an eighteen-wheeler cut through the soft ground and pointed into Bob Clay’s pasture. She turned on the emergency flashers, then got out and set reflective cones well in front of and behind her cruiser. What she assumed were the tire tracks going in were significantly shallower than the ones coming out. Finally she walked toward Bob’s horse, where he sat slumped in the saddle.

His Stetson barely turned toward her. “Howdy, Sheriff.”

“Hey, Mr. Clay. You know anything more than you – *yawn* – you did when you called?”

He sighed. “Me and Kenny Brown rounded up what they didn’t take. I’m short twenty-six head of prime beef on the hoof. They’re sellin’ right now for about sixty-six dollars a hundredweight, and those four-year-olds are a little over fourteen hundred pounds apiece, so I’m out close to thirty grand if you don’t find ‘em quick.” He pushed the brim of his hat up. “I can’t afford that kind of loss.”

“We’ll do our best, Mr. Clay. Um – don’t you have insurance?”

He gave her a mean look. “Rachel, you know as well as I do that you can’t insure cattle against theft without paying crazy high premiums. When’s the last time you worked a rustlin’ case?”

“Never worked one.”

“How ‘bout your daddy? Ask him the last time he heard o’ rustlers round here.”

Nettled, Rachel gave him back the look. “I will. Just as soon as he gets over almost dyin’.”

“What?” Bob was genuinely startled. “Almost dying? What happened?”

“He had a bad car wreck last Friday morning. Should be comin’ home from the hospital tomorrow or Friday, but he ain’t in no shape to work a case right now.”

The older man climbed down from his horse and walked closer. “I’m real sorry, Rachel, real sorry. I been out o’ town for a week or so, just got back early last evenin’. That’s how I knew the cattle were stolen last night. I checked on ‘em afore I went to bed, but I’m tellin’ you with my hand up ain’t nobody said nothing to me ‘bout your daddy bein’ in a car wreck.”

She relaxed a little. “It’s okay, Mr. Clay. He’s tough and he’s a fighter. And if my momma has anything to say about it, he ain’t going nowhere for good while.”

“Good to hear. Listen, you do right by your family. I’ll work with Tommy and them on this, okay?”

She waved him off. “No. I’m sheriff and it’s my job. It’s what my daddy’d tell me if I’s fool enough to ask him about it.”

The man smiled. “Thank you. I know you’ll do a good job. Anything else you need from me?”

She blinked and refocused her mind. “I already called Whit Parker to come get some plaster casts of the tire tracks. Maybe we

can track ‘em with that, or at least use it as evidence at the trial. And Tommy’s callin’ around to auction houses and the neighboring county sheriffs and the highway patrol to watch for a overloaded cattle truck. I’m just lookin’ from here, but them tracks don’t look like that truck should’a had room for twenty-six head. They either got two trucks or they’re too greedy for their own good. And maybe a little stupid, too. They might get rid of some of them beeves to make room for the rest.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “You know, I didn’t even think of all that. Good thing you’re the sheriff.”

“Thanks. I’ll let you know what we find out. I gotta try to track these bozos.”

“Good luck.” He swung back into the saddle. “I’ll call some o’ my buddies in the cattle business and let ‘em know what’s happened. They’ll be on the lookout for my brand.”

Rachel assayed a wan smile. “Sounds like a good idea. Unless you got something else to tell me, I gotta get going.”

“You get yourself some rest, young lady. Won’t do nobody no good if you get yourself sick or hurt.”

She waved and walked back to her cruiser. As long as she was in the area, she could check the Irigs and the Kents and the Colemans to see if they’d heard or seen anything.

She missed the ignition slot with the key and let her hand drop to her leg. Boy, she was tired.

Jonathan paused his repainting of the back porch rail as his son pulled the back door open. “Morning, sunshine,” he teased. “City life teaching you to sleep late?”

Clark crossed his arms and leaned against the door jamb. “You try driving from Metropolis to Smallville straight through and see how late you sleep the next day. You’re lucky to see me now.”

Jonathan laughed. “It would knock me for a loop and you know it. You get some breakfast?”

“Yes. Mom forced a double stack of pancakes down me. She said I’d need the extra energy, given the list of chores you have for me.”

Jonathan laughed. “Well, we got some fence to inspect and maybe mend, a tractor that’s running rough, and there’s that corner of the barn we need to clean out for your office space.”

Clark nodded. “Thanks. I’ll see about the electrical line when I go into town for building supplies. I think I can just use one of those kit desks for just about everything I need. Some of them have built-in filing drawers.”

Jonathan shrugged. “Sure, that’d work. As long as you can figure out the assembly directions, that is.”

Clark rolled his eyes and shook his head. Instead of keeping the banter going, though, he stepped past his father and down to the yard. “Someone’s coming up the drive.”

“Oh?” Jonathan lifted his head and listened. “Yeah, I hear it now. Sounds like a regular car, not a truck.”

He could see surprise on his son’s face. “It’s a sheriff’s car. Huh.” Clark walked around the house past Jonathan’s line of vision. By the time Jonathan put away the paint brush and made it around the house, Rachel was leaning against the front fender next to Clark.

He walked over and caught their conversation in the middle. “—got in last night. I unloaded my truck, but I haven’t unpacked yet.”

Rachel gave him a droopy-eyed smile. “When’d you get a truck, city boy? I thought only country folk drove pickups.”

Jonathan stepped up beside them and put one hand on Clark’s near shoulder. “Brought it with him from Metropolis. He’ll be here for a while. We’re setting up an office for him in the barn.”

Rachel tilted her head. “Barn? You need office space, you come to the station and talk to Mrs. Howard. I think she said something about a couple o’ open offices near the station

yesterday.” Then she released a jaw-cracking yawn.

Clark shifted closer to Rachel and Jonathan dropped his hand. “Rachel,” Clark said, “I heard about your father. I’m so sorry. He’s doing better now, isn’t he?”

She nodded, but her head seemed a bit loose on her neck to Jonathan. “Yeah. Might come home Friday, maybe even Thursday afternoon. Doctors think he’ll get better faster at home. Gonna have some physical therapy starting soon as the docs think he’s ready.”

“That’s good to hear. I’ll try to drop by and see him after he comes home and gets settled.”

She took a long blink, then smiled. “Thanks. I’ll let everybody know when that happens.”

Rachel turned to reach for the car door and lost her balance. She would have fallen flat on the gravel driveway had Clark not caught her and cradled her to himself.

Jonathan frowned. This wasn’t good. Neither Rachel being too tired to function nor Clark holding her like that was good.

He flashed on the first time he’d held Martha that closely. Rachel was a good woman with no significant man in her life. Clark was a good man who was at an emotionally vulnerable point. Jonathan could only hope that neither of them would read more into that embrace than a man helping a friend who happened to be a woman.

She heard Clark call to her as if he were standing in the far pasture. “Rachel! Are you okay?”

She looked up at him and blinked a couple of times. It felt good being held by Clark, even if he was just trying to keep her from splatting on the ground. She tried to stand, but had trouble putting her feet in the right place.

Jonathan leaned in. “Rachel, when was the last time you slept?”

She almost righted herself. “Oh, long about – Monday, I think.” She blinked again. “Today’s – what, Wednesday? Yeah?”

Clark picked her up in his arms and started toward the front door. “Come on, Sheriff, you need some sleep. I’ll put you on the couch next to the phone so you can call in and tell them whatever they need to know. And I’ll make sure nobody touches your car or your equipment until you wake up.” He turned his head and said, “Dad, can you get the front door?”

She tried to push out of his embrace, but of course she couldn’t. So she surrendered to the inevitable and let him carry her through the door as Jonathan opened it.

Martha rushed in as soon as Clark put Rachel down on the couch, then said something and rushed out again. Clark helped Rachel take off her jacket, then her equipment belt, and finally her boots. By that time, Martha was back with pillows and a blanket. Jonathan picked up the phone and dialed.

“Hello, Denise? This is Jonathan Kent. Sheriff Harris is here at our place and she’s exhausted. She needs to get some sleep – yes, she finally fell out. No, she’s not hurt. I’m just glad she wasn’t driving when it happened. I don’t know. She didn’t have a chance to tell me. Bob Clay? Rustling? Really? How about that. No, it’s the first I’ve heard about it. Look, you need to talk to her while you can. She’s halfway to out cold now.”

Jonathan gave Rachel the phone. “It’s me,” she slurred.

“Young lady, you can’t risk yourself like that! You have some very competent deputies who can take up the slack when you’re not available!”

“Naw, I’m sheriff, and I—”

“You won’t be sheriff if you fall asleep at the wheel and kill yourself! Now give me everything you need done on that cattle theft thing. I’ll make sure Tommy has all the particulars.”

Rachel sighed. That woman could be downright intimidating when she put her mind to it. “Okay. Uh, you know I’m at the Kent place, right?”

“Yes. Start talking.”

Rachel chuckled weakly. “You are a slavedriver, Mrs. Howard.”

“Never mind that! Talk!”

“Fine.” And she did. She even remembered to relate all the things she’d told Bob Clay she’d do or have done.

Clark took the phone from her hand and hung up after she said goodbye, then she felt him lay her gently on the pillows his mom had brought during the phone conversation. She would have thanked him for that, for helping her remove her jacket and equipment belt, and for tucking the blanket around her, but she didn’t have the energy.

Two breaths later, she was gently floating on the ebony sea of Nod.

Just before three-thirty that afternoon, Clark stood up from his office corner in the garage. The kit desk with two full-sized file drawers was assembled, the fancy desk chair was ready for use, and he’d dug the channels for the electrical lines. He’d finished his father’s list of chores before eating the lunch his mother had brought to them in the barn. It was time for a short break.

He quietly made his way into the kitchen and poured himself a glass of his mother’s iced tea. A glance at the couch showed that Rachel was still asleep and breathing easily. She might need a lot more rest, but it wouldn’t help her to sleep all day and then be up all night. He hated to do it to her, but she needed to wake up.

He poured a second glass of tea and walked to the couch. He put the glass on the end table and touched the sleeping sheriff’s shoulder. “Rachel?”

Her breathing didn’t change, so he shook her gently. “Come on, Rachel. You need to wake up so you can sleep tonight.”

She grunted and pulled the blanket up toward her face. Clark grinned and tried once more. “Please, Rach, you need to get up. You have sheriff stuff you need to do.”

She opened one eye and looked around. “Mmrph,” she said. “Mmrph, indeed. Time to get up now.”

The eye blinked slowly. “Izzit Thursday yet?” she mumbled.

He laughed lightly. “Very funny. It’s after three-thirty on Wednesday, and you’ve been asleep for a little over seven hours. It’s time you got up and earned the big bucks the county’s paying you.”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then closed her eye and groaned. “I don’t wanna get up, Mom. Just five more minutes.”

Clark laughed aloud. “Young lady, you have a job to do. Now get up before I get *my* mother in here.”

That eye opened again and she glared at him. “You’d do it, too, wouldn’t you?” she mumbled.

He stepped back and offered his hand. “I would. But I don’t have to, do I?”

She slowly sat up and pushed her hair back from her face. “I guess not.” She took another deep breath and looked up at his hand. “I’ll get up if I can borrow your bathroom for a minute.”

“Of course. Take all the time you need.”

She took his hand and stood. She stumbled against him for a moment, and he thought maybe she hung on to him a second longer than she had to. “There’s a glass of iced tea for you beside the couch,” he said.

“Thanks,” she muttered. She tottered off toward the bathroom.

“I can make you a sandwich if you’re hungry.”

“Mmrph,” she reiterated.

“Leave a quarter by the sink,” he called.

She waved dismissively over her shoulder and closed the door behind her.

Rachel Harris was a nice girl, he thought. She works hard, she’s dedicated, she’s honest, and she seems to have mostly

recovered from that shooting last year. And she’s holding up as well as anyone might, given the circumstances and her family’s problems.

Then a heinous thought tapped him on the shoulder and whispered in his ear: *I bet she wouldn’t blackmail me to leave Kansas if I told her I was Superman.*

The concept startled him. He’d just compared Rachel to Lois, and despite their similarities, there were far more differences between them. Both were fierce contenders for truth and justice, but Rachel was far gentler than Lois. Lois would run through a brick wall to get the truth. Rachel would find a way over or around the wall. Either one would extract the truth, but Rachel’s way left less collateral damage behind. Lois scattered debris all around the impact zone. Where Lois was aggressive and fierce and determined, Rachel was quiet and unassuming but equally as determined.

He shook his head. He still wasn’t sure how he felt about Lois Lane at the moment, other than his simmering heartbreak over the loss of her presence in his life. He didn’t even know if the break was permanent. Who knew whether she would call him tonight and ask his forgiveness and beg him to return to her?

Who knew if she’d ever mention his name again without cursing the day she’d met him?

He was sure that Rachel wouldn’t—

Stop it! he told himself. *Don’t compare Rachel to Lois! It’s not fair to either woman!*

And it’s not fair to me, he growled silently.

He knew he wasn’t ready to let go of Lois, and even if he had let go, he certainly wasn’t ready for a romantic relationship with another woman. He liked Rachel, but he loved Lois.

Despite being thrown away like maggot-infested rotten meat, despite the cutting letter he’d left for her to read after he left Metropolis, he still loved Lois.

Lois stopped typing and looked at the word on her screen. When did you use the adverb form over the adjective again? Never mind, Clark would—

No.

She couldn’t ask him. Wouldn’t ask him. Besides, he wasn’t there. He wasn’t even in the city.

The thought that he’d surely explain the usage to her if she called him on the phone appeared in her mind like a sneaky and treacherous extra-dimensional imp and she quashed it without mercy.

But that didn’t make it untrue.

She took a moment to renew her commitment. Clark was a louse, an emotional abuser, and she couldn’t trust him with her zip code, much less her heart. Lois Lane was far better off in every way without him.

A deep breath later, she looked at the sentence again. Adjective. Yes. Definitely.

Probably.

At any rate, it was time to wrap up this article and send it to Perry. If she’d picked the wrong form, he’d fix it.

A few keystrokes later, Lois sat back in her chair and wondered if Lucy would be in the apartment for dinner. If she was there, would she talk to Lois or take her food in her bedroom again? How long would she enforce the distance between them?

Probably as long as Lois maintained that Clark Kent was persona non grata in the city of Metropolis.

Which meant they might never speak again. And Lois was no longer sure whether this was acceptable collateral damage or a result of a horrible choice on her part.

Her pride wouldn’t let her admit being wrong about him. Even to herself.

Chapter Eleven

Clark pulled into the parking lot at Vincent's Hardware at eight-fourteen a.m. Thursday and shut off his truck. He still had to remind himself that he owned a motor vehicle at all. For the first time in his adult life, his driver's license was a necessary accessory every time he left the house. And Smallville lacked the bus service, subways, and cab companies he'd used so often in Metropolis.

Flying everywhere through the friendly skies of Smallville was tempting, but only for a brief moment. All he needed now was for someone else to know he was Superman.

He walked through the front door and waved at the young man at the cash register. "Hey, Manny," he called. "How's business lately?"

Manny gave him a puzzled Glad-you're-here-to-shop-but-who-are-you? smile, then his eyebrows snapped up in recognition and he all but hopped over the counter. "Clark!" he called out as he embraced the new arrival. "*Mi amigo verdad!* You are back in Smallville! Is this a long visit or a brief one, my friend?"

"Long one, buddy," Clark said. As Manny held the hug, Clark patted him on the back and added, "Hey, come on, I'm glad to see you too, but people are gonna start talking."

Manny laughed and released him. "Of course, of course! And you have come to Vincent's Hardware solely to greet your old friend and high school backfield mate, the man who blocked for you on those many touchdowns and gained you both fame and glory!"

Clark smiled back. "That's one reason, yeah, but I also want to pick up some electrical supplies. I'm running a power line to my parents' barn and I hope you have what I need to make it happen."

"Of course we do! You require heavy-duty cable, yes? How much?"

"I think ninety feet will do it. I'll need some PCV pipe, too."

Manny pulled a small notebook and a pencil from his shirt pocket. "To keep it from burrowing animals and water, yes?"

"You got it. I'll need two grounded outlets, boxes included, an overhead light fixture, and a small breaker box for the main tap."

Manny's smile shrank. "This is not a simple extension cord, then. It is a permanent addition to your parents' property?"

"Yep. Why?"

Manny lifted his hands palm up to either side and shrugged. "I can and will make whatever materials you require available to you, my friend, but a project such as this requires permission from the electric utility before you begin your project. You must also have the work certified by a licensed electrician before sending power through it."

Clark blinked. "When did that get changed?"

"Four, perhaps five years ago, when Pastor Phillips asked one of his members to perform an electrical repair. The zealous young man went beyond the specifications given him, and due to his ill-directed efforts, a fire broke out in the church building during Sunday evening service. No one was injured and the fire was quickly contained and extinguished, but the county assembly decided that all such — er, 'upgrades' — must be certified by professionals. It is not merely electrical repairs and additions, either. Extensive building repairs, any added rooms or exterior walls, and many plumbing enhancements are also restricted."

"But my folks don't live in Smallville proper."

"They do live within the county and the regulations apply. I am sorry, Clark, but I do not wish for you to be fined or even arrested for your innocent actions."

Clark sighed. "Okay, I guess I can wait little bit. Can I pick up those items today? I'd like to have them ready when the county okays the project."

"Hmm. I must first make sure I have everything on this list. If

you will allow me five minutes, I will examine my stores."

"Sure. I'll just poke around and see what I can find."

Manny vanished to the back room as Clark looked around the store. Mr. Vincent hadn't changed the layout much. Clark smiled as he browsed the section of hand tools. The hammers, saws, screwdrivers, drills, and accessories all looked familiar, but he noted that the prices had gone up. And the store displayed two brands of nails and bolts that hadn't been on the shelves the last time he'd shopped here. He sighed as he realized that he'd expected Smallville to remain exactly the same after he'd left, like a prehistoric insect trapped in amber, and not be affected by things like higher costs or new materials and products or time.

Guess life goes on and change happens everywhere, he mused.

Manny came back and said, "Clark, my good friend, at this moment we have neither the breaker box nor the PVC piping you will need. There is a delivery truck due Friday afternoon, and if you wish I will set those items aside with the others you require."

"What time will the truck get here?"

"Perhaps two o'clock, perhaps six o'clock. The delivery is from Wichita and depends on others delivering to the supplier on time, so it cannot be scheduled so precisely."

Clark shook his head, then nodded. "Okay. I'll swing by Saturday morning. Nine o'clock too early?"

"If the truck does not contain all of the items you require, I will call you on Friday evening. What is your number?"

"Just call my parents' farm. I'm living there now."

Manny frowned slightly. "Truly? Has something untoward occurred in your employment with the Daily Planet?"

Clark's eyebrows rose a little. "You know where I work?"

"I believe that everyone in Smallville and the surrounding counties has that information. You may blame your father for that. He often boasts about your accomplishments at the newspaper, and rightfully so, I think. He is quite proud of his son who has done so many excellent things."

Clark couldn't help the smile that grew on his face. "He tells me that a lot, but it's nice to hear it from someone else, too." He reached for his wallet. "How much do I owe you?"

"No, no," Manny said. "I will accept your payment when delivery is made to you on Saturday and not before! Mr. Vincent does not require pre-payment of items unless they are special order products, things we do not normally handle. These items are all part of our usual inventory."

"Okay, if you say so. See you in a couple of days."

"I hope so. And do not forget to call the electric company!"

Rachel frowned at the report in her hands. Bob Clay's cattle had been found on the south side of Smallville at the railroad freight station, but not until after the thieves had sold two head to an unlicensed butcher in northern Oklahoma and the remainder to a cattle buyer from Arizona. The buyer was adamant that either the county or the sheriff refund the purchase price before he surrendered the cattle or he would ship them to his corporate home. The butcher had been arrested by local police in Alva, who had outstanding warrants on him, but both beeves had already been slaughtered and most of the choice cuts had already been sold. The sales were all cash and therefore untraceable. And the original thieves were still at large, although now everyone had descriptions of the truck, including the license plate number, and detailed descriptions of two of the gang members.

If she got to Judge McCreary before lunch, maybe he'd sign the order to surrender the cattle. The buyer hadn't transported them from the corral where he'd turned over the bag of cash to the thieves, so this wouldn't involve an out-of-state seizure. Wouldn't that be a headache and a half.

She stood and opened her office door. "Denise, I gotta go see Judge McCreary 'bout Bob Clay's cattle. Need a court order from

him to take possession. Soon's I get it, I'm heading south to the corral down by the train yard. I'll call Bob when I head out."

Denise nodded as she made notes on a pad. "Got a call for you from your mom. Seems your dad is going home this afternoon and she wants you be there to help her with him if you can shake loose."

Rachel paused, then nodded. "Long as nothin' bad pops up, I'll be there. She say what time?"

"Between two and five. It depends on how long the resident takes to finish his rounds."

"M'kay. Gimme a holler on the radio if she calls you."

"Got it. You need a deputy with you when you see that cattle buyer?"

"Naw. I can handle Plunkett. That man's all hat and literally no cattle."

Denise spluttered a laugh. "Your jokes are so bad you make Clark Kent look like a real hero comic. That sounds like something he'd come up with."

Rachel froze. It was weird how Clark kept coming up on conversation or just in her mind lately. And now he was back in Smallville.

And he'd carried her in his arms as if she'd been a damsel in distress and he a knight on his snowy white charger.

No. That was not a productive train of thought. His truck wasn't pure snowy white. And she was not any good at all at damseling.

Suddenly Denise was beside her. "Rachel? Honey, you okay?" She paused, then quietly asked, "Did I do wrong when mentioned Clark?"

Rachel sighed. "No, you didn't do nothin' wrong. It's just been a really weird week."

Denise patted her on the shoulder and smiled. "Okay. You go get those cows back for Bob. I'll hold down the fort here."

"Make sure Tommy keeps an eye out for that truck while he's out on patrol. Those dummies might just bring that empty trailer back for a second helping if they think they can get away with it."

"Will do. Drive safely." Denise paused as Rachel turned away, then she added, "There've been too many bad wrecks this year already."

Rachel blinked, then tossed Denise a smile and a wave over her shoulder, then pushed through the outer door.

Whit Bascombe had been with the railroad for thirty-two years, ever since he'd graduated from high school. He'd been freight manager in Smallville for the last eleven years, and eight years ago he'd taken on the station manager's job, too. Whit had always prided himself on his even temper and friendly disposition, and despite being seriously provoked a number of times over the years, he'd never had a physical confrontation with a customer.

Gary Plunkett, the man who'd accidentally bought Bob Clay's stolen cattle, was very close to ending Whit's record.

Plunkett adjusted his store-fresh Stetson and leaned into Whit. "Look, Mr. Bosco, I need—"

"The name is Bascombe! Bascombe! Try and remember that!"

"Fine! Mr. Bascombe, I need a forty-foot cattle car so I can load up my herd. We have a customer—"

"No! I told you I can't give you a cattle car! I told you the county sheriff called my office and told me these cattle is stolen!"

"I didn't steal them!"

"Didn't say you did. All I said was that they's stolen cattle. And you can't ship them anywhere until the sheriff says you can!"

"I can't wait for that! I have a schedule to keep!"

"Sheriff says you can't take 'em."

"I say I can!"

Whit stepped back and crossed his arms. "You got to talk to the sheriff about that."

"I tell you I don't—"

"Are you Raymond Plunkett? I'm Sheriff Harris."

Whit had seen Rachel Harris pull into the parking lot and quietly walk up behind Plunkett as the man fumed and stomped at Whit, and he enjoyed watching the man start and spin when Rachel spoke.

"Sheriff!" Plunkett growled. "You need to tell this man to get me a forty-foot cattle car so I can load my herd! The regular freight run to Phoenix is due this afternoon and I need to get my cattle on that train!"

Whit moved to one side and watched Rachel straighten and fix her face in her best "county sheriff" expression. "He can't do that, Mr. Plunkett. Those cattle aren't yours."

Plunkett almost threw his hat down on the platform, then yelled, "I paid good money for those cattle! They're mine!"

Rachel reached into her windbreaker and pulled out a folded sheet of heavy paper. "Judge Everson McCreary says they're not yours. This is a court order telling you to surrender custody of those cattle to the county sheriff's office."

"WHAT! I will do no such thing!"

Whit almost laughed as Rachel rested her right hand on the handcuff holster on her belt. "If you refuse to accede to a legal order from the court, sir, I will have to arrest you and charge you with grand theft of cattle and obstruction of justice."

Plunkett leaned into her face. "You wouldn't dare, little girl!"

Rachel grabbed Plunkett's shirt collar with her left hand and lifted it. At the same time, she unsnapped the cover on the handcuffs with her right. "I am sheriff of this county, sir! You will submit to this court order and obey my legal orders or you will go to jail!" She pulled his face closer to hers and squinted up into his eyes. "Is. That. Clear."

He held her gaze for a long moment, then apparently decided it wasn't a good idea to test her. Shoot, Whit already knew that. He'd seen Rachel face down some pretty rough customers, most of 'em not dumb enough to make her reach for her cuffs. Plunkett had almost gotten himself plunked in jail.

Plunkett gritted his teeth and said, "It's clear, Sheriff. The court says they're stolen. You may take custody."

Rachel slowly moved Plunkett back, giving him a show of her upper body strength, then abruptly released his collar. "Good. The county thanks you for your cooperation, sir." Only then did she refasten the snap on her handcuff case.

In a low but sharp voice, Plunkett answered, "You'll hear from our company lawyers, Sheriff. This isn't over."

Rachel nodded without taking her eyes from his. "That's your right, Mr. Plunkett. I know Judge McCreary will be happy to talk to your team of attorneys. He likes to discuss the finer points of Kansas law with other members of the legal profession. And they can discuss how your bosses paid under market value in cash for cattle without gettin' a proper bill of sale."

Plunkett took in a long breath through his nose and held it for a long moment. Then he huffed it all out at once and turned away. The last Whit saw of him was his big Stetson bumping into the top of the doorframe of his rental car as he jumped in and roared out of the parking lot.

Whit turned to Rachel and chuckled. "You sure showed him how the cow ate the cabbage! Good job, Rachel." He saw her eyes harden slightly and raised his hands to placate her. "Sorry. I meant, Good job, Sheriff."

Her expression softened a little. "That's better. Is it okay if I keep 'my' cattle in this corral until Bob Clay comes to get them?"

"No problem. Me and Bob go way back. Course, he goes farther back than I do."

Rachel laughed. "I gotta get goin'. My daddy's going home this afternoon and I wanna be there." She turned to go, then stopped and said, "And if Plunkett comes back, you call me, y'hear? I don't wanna have to arrest you for shootin' him."

Whit nodded. “Will do, Sheriff.” She raised one eyebrow at him, so he added, “Just wanted you to know I ain’t forgot already.”

“Gotcha.”

“And tell your daddy that I’ll be by to see him next week. We got some fat that needs chewin’ over.”

She chuckled. “I’ll tell him.”

Lois glanced at the clock and frowned. Nine-thirty already? Where had the morning gone? It seemed as if she’d just walked through the door.

She shook her head and focused on her current assignment. Perry had given her a quickie for the Metro section on drunken driving in Suicide Slum. She had an outline ready. All she needed were the facts and figures Jimmy was supposed to bring her.

She looked up and scanned the room but didn’t spot her quarry. She frowned again and drew in a breath to yell for him but was interrupted by a soft “ahem” behind her right shoulder.

Lois turned and looked. “Kim! Hey, girl, what brings you here? You looking for Jimmy?”

Kim smiled shyly and nodded. “We’re supposed to have lunch together today, but I just found out that my schedule at the station got changed, and I’m on the air from eleven to three for the rest of this week and next week instead of three to seven. I wanted to reschedule our date for Saturday, but I can’t find him.”

Lois smiled. “That may be my fault. He’s digging up some statistics for me on my next story. I expect him pretty soon.”

“Good. I’ll have to leave by ten to get there in time to take turnover from the mid-morning team. Mutt and Jeff are fun on the air, but not so much if you’re late to relieve them.”

“Yeah, we have a few folks like that in the newspaper business, too. You can wait here if you want.”

“Oh, I don’t want to interrupt you. I know you’re busy.”

“I am, but I can spare a few minutes to chat. Where was he taking you today?”

“The Fudge Castle, I think. He said you’d given it a good review.”

Lois chuckled with her. “Trust me, it’s great. Their desserts are divine.”

Perry suddenly appeared over Kim’s shoulder and smiled. “Well, if it isn’t the famous Kim Demarco of WMET oldies radio! I really like hearing your voice on the air, especially when you play ‘Hound Dog’ or any of the other great ones.”

Kim smiled back. “Thank you, Mr. White. I hope I’m not butting in, but I wanted to see Jimmy and talk to him for just a minute.”

“No problem. Why don’t you step into my office while you wait? He’ll be coming by here to check with me anyway, and I don’t think I’ve ever told you about the time Elvis first sang with Ann-Margret on the ‘Viva Las Vegas’ soundstage.”

Kim glanced at Lois, who shrugged helplessly, then followed Perry as the old editor rehashed yet another Elvis anecdote to her.

Lois smiled, then turned back to her word processor. The slap of a folder hitting her desk made her jump away from the keyboard. Her hand flew to her throat as she recognized her assailant.

“What the – Jimmy! What are you trying to do!”

Jimmy leaned in close. With narrowed eyes and clenched jaws, he quietly said, “I don’t want you talking to Kim. I don’t want you to speak to her. I don’t want you around her. And I especially don’t want you giving her any relationship advice.” He paused and grunted, then said, “Is that clear?”

“What? Jimmy, what are you—”

“You ran CK off and I don’t want you infecting Kim with whatever evil you’ve picked up! I’m not asking you, Lois, I’m telling you. Don’t. Talk. To. Kim.”

“Wha – why you little pipsqueak! How dare you order *me*

around?”

He leaned in even closer and put his hands on her desk. “Call it good advice, call it a warning, call it an order, call it what you want. I don’t want you talking to Kim. I think she and I might have a future together, and I don’t want you to screw it up for me like you did with CK.”

That was too personal. She couldn’t let that stand. She leaped to her feet and inhaled to yell at him but stopped when Kim called out, “Jimmy! Over here!”

Lois looked over her shoulder at Perry’s office, where Kim was smiling and waving at Jimmy. The young man narrowed his eyes at Lois for a quick moment, then sped around the desk and all but bounced to Kim’s side. She reached out take his hand, and for a moment or two the girl saw no one but Jimmy Olsen.

The tableau reminded her of something—

Oh, no.

She and Clark had put on similar displays of constrained affection in front of Perry until recently. The memory cut like a sword and weakened her knees.

She had to get out of there.

Conditioned reflex caught her purse strap as she half-sprinted, half-staggered to the ladies’ room. She flopped on the couch and dug in her purse for a tissue before she ruined her makeup.

The room seemed to be empty. Her muffled sobs echoed off the tile walls and resonated with the metal stall dividers. It took just a few moments to regain control, but those few moments undermined her justification for running Clark out of the city. Jimmy’s ambush had knocked her off-balance and muddled her sense of right and wrong.

But just for those few moments. Lois quickly forced back the sobs, wiped away the tears, and repaired her makeup. She glared at the mirror and saw a determined, modern, independent woman staring back. She repeated the catechism she’d memorized since the incident she mentally referred to as The Night of The Betrayal.

A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.

The best man for a job is a woman.

Men only take from women and never give anything back.

I drink from a bottle filled with men’s tears.

I am complete and whole within myself.

I need no man to complete me.

By the time she’d wrapped up her silent catechism, her reflection’s eyes were once again hard and dark. The woman’s mouth was thin and firm. The nose in the mirror flared once, then slowly relaxed.

Lois felt whole again.

With the force of a thousand massive bulldozers, she shoved any residual feelings for Clark Kent into her emotional Grand Canyon and watched them tumble to the lowest level and crash into the raging river below. The swift current smashed them against the rocky walls and broke them into tiny fragments, then scattered them along its deep channel. She’d utterly destroyed those emotional artifacts forever.

Once more.

They wouldn’t dare rise again. Not this time.

Chapter Twelve

Rachel rolled her police cruiser down the road toward the Clay ranch, thinking about Clark. It was a dangerous activity for her, and she knew it, but the man would not leave her thoughts. It was as if she’d ceded a part of her mind to him over the last few days and he’d taken up residence without her realizing that he’d stepped through the door.

It hadn’t helped that he’d rescued her when she’d almost fainted in his driveway. If any other man had tried to carry her inside, she’d have fought like a sleepy tigress. But Clark’s touch had relaxed her and made her pliant enough to let him take care of her.

Memories of their senior prom teased her frontal lobe. It had been a night to remember. They had danced and laughed and she'd let him into her heart without quite meaning to. She'd known she was letting herself in for a big dose of heartache, but Clark was too good a guy for her to shut him out of her life completely.

And the way they had initially connected back in high school was actually funny. No other guy had asked her to the prom, probably because they were intimidated by her father, the county sheriff. In fact, she hadn't expected to attend until she was put in the unusual and quite unexpected position of rescuing Clark Kent.

Just before the end of lunch period on the Monday before the prom on Friday, someone stage-whispered "Fight!" ahead of her in the hallway. She followed the crowd until she heard Bobby Clanton talking, but she didn't understand what he was saying because of his thick drawl until she turned the corner. It looked as if Clark was trying to walk away from the bigger braggart, but Bobby kept pushing or pulling his shoulder to turn him back. Bobby was trying to provoke Clark into a fight, one Rachel believed Bobby would lose badly.

"Couldn't keep your girl happy, could ya, Kent?" Bobby taunted. "She's happy with me cause I'm a real man and not some brainy nerd. I don't walk away from fights. And I can satisfy the head cheerleader!"

Several in the growing crowd – the ones who look for school fights just for the entertainment value – laughed or whooped. Clark just shook his head. "I'm not fighting you for any reason, Bobby," he answered, "not now, not tomorrow, not ever, and certainly not over a girl. Lana is free to date whoever she wants to date. If she wants to go to the prom with you, that's between you and her." He turned his gaze to Lana, who might as well have been glued to Bobby's left arm. "I think she's made that clear to everyone. Me included."

"Ha!" Bobby shouted. "I knew you were chicken!"

Before Clark could respond, Rachel stepped between the two boys and faced Clark. "Hi, Clark. Hey, I know I told you I wasn't sure I was going to the prom, but I've talked with my mom and I've decided to go. Are you still open to bein' my escort?"

Clark's eyes flicked between Rachel and Bobby, then back to Rachel. They both knew he hadn't asked her to the prom. And in that moment, his eyes changed slightly, and she knew that he understood what she was really offering him – a way to save face and avoid a fight.

A long two seconds later, he pursed his lips and nodded. "Sure, Rach. I'd like to take you. Can I call you tonight to settle all the details?"

She grinned. "Sure." After a glance at the wall clock, she added, "Oh, I have to get to class. Call me tonight about seven, okay?"

Then, with deliberate intent and with malice aforethought, she lit Lana's fuse.

Rachel put her hand on Clark's shoulder, stood on tiptoes, and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. When she turned around, Lana's face was convulsed in fury – for about one second. Then Lana regained control and smiled at Rachel with deadly intent.

"Bye, Lana," Rachel said. "Have a good time at the prom."

She walked through the small crowd without looking back. Several of the cheerleaders were in the crowd, too. Two of them bared their teeth at her in mute threat, but others who weren't cheerleaders smiled or nodded. One junior girl clapped her hands silently and winked.

My good deed for the day, thought Rachel. Sow discord and division among the cheerleaders and the student body. It would certainly fall on fertile ground, especially given the way those girls fought among themselves.

Rachel wondered how many of them would end up alone on prom night.

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It was a good memory that led to—  
Not now, she chided herself. You got a job to do, girl! Get to it!

She'd think about the phone call later. After she talked to Bob Clay.

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Bob waved her down as she pulled into his main drive. One button push later, the driver's window was down. Gotta love modern technology, she thought.

Bob Clay smiled and leaned on the open car window frame. "I got 'em back, Sheriff, all but the two those characters sold to that Oklahoma butcher. They're over in the east pasture. And the Oklahoma state trooper I talked to said I'd eventually get some money back on the ones that butcher got."

"Good to hear, Mr. Clay. Anything I need to do for you today?"

"Nope. Your deputies did good work. And so did you."

"I got good people working with me."

"That's true, but they'd likely not be so eager work so hard if they didn't like and respect you. You're doin' a great job and I'm gonna vote for you next election!"

"Thanks. Can I print your endorsement on my campaign posters?"

Bob stepped back, put his hands on his hips, and smiled wide. "You sure can. Just let me know when you want it. In fact, I'll put that endorsement in writing."

She smiled. "Sounds great. Hey, I'd stay and chew the fat with you, but my daddy's comin' home this afternoon and I gotta get some stuff from the pharmacy."

He touched the brim of his Stetson. "No problem. You tell Mark that I'll be by to see him in a few days. Gotta give him some time to get situated."

"I'll tell him. Bye, now."

As Bob backed away, Rachel turned the car around on the grassy loam and slowly slipped back onto the paved road. She picked up the radio microphone and triggered it.

"Mobile three to base, mobile three to base. Y'all got your ears on back there?"

A moment later, Denise Howard answered. "Base responding. I'm here, Sheriff, but I'm alone at the moment. Tommy's responding to a one-vehicle traffic accident in front of Maisie's diner. Seems some pretty young thing was flirting with a guy in a sports car, and he tried to lay down some rubber to impress her. He forgot to look where he was going and he wiped out the east downtown mailbox. Over."

Rachel took a moment to laugh, then pressed the talk button again. "Copy that. What about Billy? Over?"

"Billy's patrolling around the junior high school. We got a report of a sketchy-looking guy in a windowless gray van cruising around during lunchtime. He's sure he's about to arrest a serial sex offender just before he commits a really heinous act. Over."

"He might at that. Remember that bulletin we got last week about that attempted kidnapping over in Kingman? The van he's lookin' for sounds like the one they warned us about. Over."

Denise violated radio protocol and sighed into the microphone. "Yeah, you're right. Will you have your portable unit with you? Just in case Billy gets lucky on that van. Over."

"I will. Soon's I sign off, though, I'm headin' to the pharmacy for some prescriptions and then on to home. My daddy's leavin' the hospital today and I need to be there to help make sure he gets settled in good. Anything else? Over."

"Not on this end. Tell Mark that we're all pulling for him. Over."

"He knows, but I'll tell him. Thanks, Denise. Mobile three, over and out."

She hung the mic on its holder under the dash and checked

her mirrors. The road was still clear and the sky was hazy but calm. She saw Wayne Irig's mailbox flash past, and it reminded her that the Kent farm was the next driveway on that road. She also remembered that Clark was back in town.

The two of them hadn't had any really private one-on-one conversations since that phone call the Monday before the prom.

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Right after dinner that Monday, Rachel helped her mother clear the table, as usual. Then she fetched her geometry textbook, a spiral notebook, and three pencils from her room and set up an impromptu study area at the end of the table.

Right by the telephone extension on the kitchen wall. Her father mock-frowned at her. "You waiting for a call, Rach?"

She nodded. "Clark said he'd call me about seven. I think I'm going to the senior prom with him."

The sheriff's eyebrows rose. "Really? That's – surprising." He opened his mouth to say something else, but obviously changed his mind. After a moment, he nodded. "Have fun with whoever takes you, okay?"

She smiled. "I will, Daddy." She made shooing motions with her hands. "Now y'all just go watch TV or somethin'. I got some extra credit to do for my geometry grade."

"You need a study partner?"

"Not tonight, but thanks for the offer. I may check with you in a couple of days, though."

"Okay, sweetie. Love you."

"Love you too, Dad." She pointed at the doorway to the living room. "Now git."

He laughed and departed. The last thing she heard from him was something he said to Mom about their "bossy old daughter." Then they laughed together.

Rachel smiled. She loved hearing her parents laugh, especially when they were all three together. She couldn't remember one real fight between them, not ever. They'd had disagreements in her hearing, of course, and even a couple of shouting matches, but none of those incidents had ever gotten physical.

Her father had arrested a number of men who'd assaulted their wives or girlfriends, and he'd always come home disgusted that any man would hit a woman he claimed to love no matter what he claimed she'd said or done. He'd told Rachel repeatedly that if she ever dated a guy who hit her, she could either handle it herself or tell him. Either way, he expected that the guy would never touch her again as long as the bucket of slime lived.

Rachel always mentioned that to her dates before they left her house. Not one of them had ever pressed against her boundaries.

She pushed aside the thought that Clark wouldn't need the reminder.

She was halfway through solving a formula to figure the volume of an unequal nine-sided three-dimensional theoretical construct when the phone rang. Her pencil, the formula she was trying to solve, and the variables of the problem all fled from her grasp as she leaped to answer.

"Hello!"

"Hi. Is that you, Rachel?"

"Yes. Clark?"

"Yes. I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

"You didn't. We're done with dinner and I'm doing my geometry homework."

"In that case, I'll make this short. Are you really willing to go to the prom with me?"

She took a breath and let it out slowly. "Yes. It won't wreck my life if I don't go, but if I do go I know I'll have a good time." She licked her lips and added, "And if I go with you it'll be a really great time."

She could almost hear him relax and smile. "Thank you. I would be honored, Miss Harris, if you would accompany me to the prom this Friday evening."

"Thank you, Mr. Kent. I am most pleased to accept your kind invitation."

He chuckled. "That's good. Especially since you maneuvered me into making it."

She wrinkled her nose and frowned a little. "Yeah, I'm sorry about that. I just didn't want you and Bobby to start throwing punches. Someone might've gotten suspended or hurt."

"Or both."

"Exactly. A girl has to protect her prom date."

He paused for a moment, then said, "There's something wrong with either your logic or your timeline, but it's not worth arguing the point. At what time shall I call for you on Friday evening?"

"My, my, aren't we formal all of a sudden. Lemme see, the prom starts at seven, so, is six-fifteen too early? That gives us plenty of time for pictures and Mom oohing and aahing over the corsage you'll bring for me and Dad staring at you with bullets in his eyes."

He laughed softly. "You're right, we have to budget time for the important stuff. Six-fifteen sounds like a good plan. I'll see you then."

"We still got classes this week, remember? You'll see me tomorrow."

"You're right. Um – would you like to eat lunch with me tomorrow? I'm bringing some of my mom's peach cobbler."

It was her turn to laugh. "For a piece of Mrs. Kent's famous cobbler, I'd have lunch with Bobby Clanton."

"Really? Problem with that is that Bobby won't have the cobbler. I will."

"Then I will gleefully have lunch with you, Clark, and I will joyously feast on your mother's famous dessert."

"Ooh, a formal acceptance. I'm looking forward to it. And you can tell me what color corsage will go best with your dress. Until tomorrow, then."

"Good night, Clark."

"Good night, Rachel. And – thank you. For everything you've done for me today."

She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat and said, "You're welcome." Then she gently placed the handset on the hook.

I'd do so much more for you, she thought, if you only knew me better.

Then she shook her head and sat down. Mooning over Clark was a lonely kind of fun, but it wouldn't lift her geometry grade. And she still had to talk to her mom about her dress.

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 She had to stop thinking about Clark so much. It wasn't good for her mental health.

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Lois stuck her head in Perry's office just before she normally left for lunch. "Hey, Chief, you got anything you want me to take care of this afternoon?"

"Not right now. You heading out?"

"If you don't have any assignments for me, yes. I need this half-day to take care of some banking and investment and legal stuff."

"You can't do it over the phone or the fax machine?"

"I've got to sign some papers, and I have to do that in person. Congress, in their infinite wisdom, has not yet made electronic signatures legally binding."

Perry sighed. "I understand. That's too much to get done during a lunch break. Sure, go ahead. Just don't get carpet tunnel disease from writing your name so many times."

Lois smiled. "I think you mean 'carpal tunnel syndrome,'"

where the tendons in your forearm get irritated from overuse.”

“Yeah, that’s it. You just keep your hands in good shape and bring in some headlines tomorrow.”

She saluted. “Will do, Perry. See you in the morning.”

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The drive home was uneventful, save for the empty feeling in Lois’ chest. It had been there ever since Clark’s departure.

No. Since she’d run him out of town. She might as well have tarred and feathered him and run him out on a rail. Everyone – including Perry – blamed her for Clark’s absence.

Jimmy hadn’t spoken to her except on business, and even then he could barely control his fury. Pam, from rewrite, had stalked past her in the ladies’ room the day before without a glance Lois’ way. Eduardo hadn’t said anything, but he had stopped in front of her desk that morning for a long moment and sighed deeply. No one had engaged her in casual conversation since those letters had gone out. The one time she’d tried to initiate a friendly conversation with Judy from Classified, the short redhead had cut her off and all but snarled at Lois to go away and stay away.

When Claude had trashed her reputation, she’d known she was the injured party. Some of the other people in the newsroom – enough, as it turned out – had known that Claude was the bad guy in the relationship, even if they weren’t sure he’d plagiarized Lois’ work. It had made the long and difficult journey back to respect worth it.

There might not be a path back to respect this time.

No. There was one. There had to be one. She’d find it eventually.

But she’d worry about that tomorrow.

Right now, she was headed home for a quick sandwich lunch, then off to her lawyer’s office. She had to disentangle all of her legal affairs from one Clark Kent. She’d never told him that he was in her will, but after today he wouldn’t be. And that reminded her that she also needed to remove Clark from the beneficiary list on her life insurance from the Planet.

Kent wouldn’t benefit from her death, not if she could help it.

As Lois walked in, she smelled hamburger meat cooking. It was a too-familiar scent, and it startled her.

Was he back? Was he here? Would he even *dare* to be here?

A glance to the kitchen told her that Lucy was the chef, not Clark. Relief flooded her mind. “Hey, Luce,” she called out.

Lucy turned her head and lifted her chin briefly, replied “Sup,” then turned back to the stove top.

Lois tried again. “Is that just for you or is there enough for me?”

Without looking, Lucy answered, “You can have these. I’ll cook up a couple more.”

“You sure it’s no trouble?”

Lucy’s jaw tightened so that Lois could see the muscle in her cheek jump. “It’s fine, Lois,” she ground out. “It’s only a few minutes to make more.”

Lois cautiously moved closer. “Okay. Do you want me to get the condiments and plates out?”

“Sure.”

Ah, thought Lois, she’s still mad too.

Lois turned, then pulled out and loaded two plates with burger buns. The fridge disgorged ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise, pickle relish, an onion, a tomato, and a small head of lettuce, all of which landed safely on the table. Lois knew she wouldn’t burn any of that. Clark had taught her how to—

No!

Ignore that memory!

Delete his smiling, lying face from that mental image!

She suddenly became aware of Lucy standing beside her.

“What!”

“Your burgers are ready,” Lucy said in a flat tone. “I need to get past you to get to the freezer for mine so I can cook them.”

“Oh. Uh – right. Thanks.”

Lois picked up her plate and moved to the table. She put her plate down and waited for Lucy to finish in the freezer, then she put ice in a glass and filled it with water.

Tea might make her think of the betrayer again.

A couple of minutes later, Lucy joined her at the table. They each prepared their burgers silently. They ate silently. They each cleared their place setting silently. Lois returned everything not eaten to the refrigerator silently.

As Lucy put the broiler pan in the sink to soak, Lois blurted out, “Come on! You have to talk to me some time!”

Lucy didn’t look at her sister. “No I don’t.”

Lois huffed. “We can’t spend the next few months acting like the other’s invisible!”

Lucy turned off the water and turned to leave the kitchen. “I can.”

Lois crossed her arms and blocked Lucy’s path. “You’re still ticked off about Clark, aren’t you?”

Lucy stared at her sister’s hands. “Yes.”

“You still think I was wrong to make him leave.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you understand?” Lois dropped her hands and began pacing through the living room. “He lied to me! He’s no better than any other man in my life! They’ve all lied to me and betrayed me and broken my trust! And Clark is the worst one of them all! I don’t ever want to see him again!”

In the same flat tone, Lucy said, “You’ve made that perfectly clear. I’ve heard you out and I still think you’re an idiot and that you’ve seriously damaged your own chances for any future happiness. What man are you going to find who’s better than Clark?”

“None of them!” Lois screeched back. “I’m done with men, with romance, with love, all of it! I’m staying single for the rest of my life!”

Still calm, Lucy replied, “If that’s what you want, more power to you. Now may I go get my briefcase? I have a class at two.”

Lois seemed to lose steam. She sucked on her upper lip for a long moment, then dropped her head and exhaled. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t yell at you. You haven’t done me any harm. I guess we’re just going to have to agree to disagree on this one.”

“Fine. I agree that we disagree. Now may I please go get my briefcase?”

Lois moved back, then quietly said, “Do you want a lift? I’m off this afternoon.”

As she passed, Lucy said, “No thanks. I’ll use my subway pass.”

Lucy didn’t look at her sister as she left.

Why couldn’t everyone see how badly Clark had betrayed her, had hurt her, had shattered her trust in him? Why did no one else see Lois’ broken heart?

She brutally dashed the tear from her eye and grabbed her purse. There were legitimate errands she needed to run, and this was the day to do them.

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Rachel walked into the pharmacy and heard, “Howdy, Sheriff! How’s your daddy doing?”

“Just fine, Mr. Carson. He’s at home, gettin’ settled in. My momma asked me to pick up a couple of prescriptions for him. They ready?”

“They are. You paying now or should I add this to your family’s bill?”

Rachel pulled out her wallet and fished out a credit card. “Put it on this card, please. I’ll file the receipt with the insurance later.”

He did the credit card magic necessary to produce the store copy, which he placed on the counter beside her card. “Sign here, please.”

“You better keep this signature. Be worth some money someday.”

He laughed politely at the old joke. “It’s worth something now. Your bank will send my bank some money, then you’ll send your bank some money, then your bank will loan someone else that money, and that’s how the world goes around.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” She picked up the bag and headed out. “I’ll tell my daddy that you asked after him.”

“Didn’t have to. Already knew how he was.”

She stopped and looked at the bag, then nodded. “I guess some pharmacists know as much as a lot o’ doctors.”

“About some things, yes, but not about others. For instance, I can give out those medicines in your bag, but I wouldn’t and couldn’t prescribe any of those meds for your daddy or anybody else. I can’t diagnose illnesses or fix injuries. But his doctor can and should. That’s why they earn the big bucks and pay the high malpractice insurance premiums.”

Rachel chuckled. “Glad I’m in law enforcement, then. Have a good day, Mr. Carson.”

“You too, Sheriff. And tell your daddy I’ll be by to see him soon.”

She shook her head. “You might have to stand in line. Lots o’ folks wanna come see him.”

“Be worth it. He’s a good man to know.”

She waved to him and pushed out through the door. A lot of good people set store by her daddy, she mused. Made her feel proud of him.

At the same time, it put pressure on her to measure up to his example. She wanted him to be proud of her. That wasn’t an easy bar to reach, but she was determined to do it.

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Rachel walked through the back door and put the drugstore bag on the dining room table. “Hey, old people!” she called out. “Young impressionable daughter in the house! Y’all behave yourselves, y’hear?”

Mom’s silver laughter and Dad’s muted huffs told her they were both in the master bedroom. Rachel knocked on the door and said, “Hope everyone’s decent in there, cause I’m comin’ in.”

In a flat, slightly sarcastic tone, Mom said, “Eek. Oh my. Mark, I hope we don’t scandalize our only adult daughter.”

He wheezed what sounded like a laugh. “Sorry, Janey, but I’m not up to scandalizing her right now. Hey, Only Adult Daughter, can you wait about three weeks to be scandalized?”

Rachel pushed through the door to see her dad in the bed under the covers and her mom sitting beside him in a chair. “I think I could wait all my life for that experience. You two are a bad influence on an innocent young single girl like me.”

Mom smiled and patted Dad’s hand. “Rachel, honey, you need to be patient with us, okay? Your poor old father is going to be laid up for a few weeks.”

“I know,” Rachel answered. “That means y’all won’t be able to scandalize me for a while.”

Dad took Mom’s hand in his. “You never know. I might recover quicker than either of you think.”

Rachel mock-frowned at him and said, “In that case, make sure you put a sock over your bedroom doorknob so I’ll know to stay outta here.”

Her folks laughed, then Dad asked, “Hey, how’s that rustling case you got going? You catch those morons yet?”

“We got Bob Clay’s cattle back, all but two head. We know who the bad guys were, and we got cops in three states lookin’ for ‘em. Dumb as these characters are, it won’t be long.”

He nodded. “Good work. And you did it all with your pants on.”

Mom laughed as Rachel groaned. “You ain’t gonna let that go, are you?”

Dad chuckled. “You tease us about our love life, we get to

tease you about your wardrobe. But I think that’s the last one for a while. You got a real live happy-ending law enforcement story to tell now. Speaking of such stories, did I ever tell you about my first arrest as sheriff?”

Rachel frowned slightly. “Don’t think so.”

He shifted a little higher on the pillows behind him and grunted, then relaxed. “This was back before you were born, about a week after I was first sworn in. Early on a Friday evening before sundown, I responded to a call about a hit-and-run traffic accident east of town. Somebody in an old green Ford F-100 pickup had hit Sarah Keller’s little Toyota from behind. Both Sarah and the two witnesses said she’d stopped at the stop sign before turning onto the state highway, and the pickup just sailed up behind her and smashed in her trunk. The guy didn’t get out to check on Sarah, either. He just backed up and whizzed around her.

“The ambulance was there and the guys were checking her out when I got there. I got the facts on the wreck and called it in to the station. I called Mitchell’s Wrecker service, too, because that little Toyota wasn’t drivable.”

Rachel sat on the end of the bed. “They were all sure it was an F-100?”

He smiled. “That’s my girl. That’s exactly the right question, Sheriff. All three of them insisted that they saw the symbol on the side of the engine compartment. The truck, the green color, and the driver’s behavior made me think of old Cade Yarborough. He was a retired oilfield roughneck. He also had a bad habit of drinking a beer or two – or five – before he left his house to drive around.”

“Lemme guess, he’d gone back home.”

“That would’ve been my second stop, but I knew he also liked to drop in at a bar called The Hungry Wolf on weekends, so I checked their parking lot first. Sure enough, his truck was there, and the front bumper and grill were all bent up like he’d run into something. I checked it with my flashlight and there were bits of what looked the same shade of blue as Sarah’s Toyota. So I walked in to talk to him.”

Rachel felt her brows lift. “Without backup? Wasn’t The Hungry Wolf a pretty tough place?”

He almost smiled. “I was young and pretty tough myself then. And not always too bright. Besides, I was sure nobody’d kill me over a DUI arrest, so I decided to wrap it up as quick as I could.”

“So what happened?” Mom blurted.

Dad didn’t miss a beat. “I sauntered in, walked past three oilfield roughnecks groping a waitress who was laughing along with them and sat down across from old Cade. He had a longneck bottle in his hands and two more empties beside it.

“I looked at him and said, ‘Howdy, Cade.’ He looked up and said, ‘I didn’t hurt nobody, did I?’ ‘Not too bad,’ I said, ‘but you have to come with me to the office. You left the scene of an accident, and you know that’s against the law.’

“‘I know,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry. Please don’t cuff me in here. I don’t want my buddies to see me like that.’

“I gave him the hardest look I had back then and said, ‘You give me your word you’ll let me cuff you before I put you in my car and we got a deal.’”

He paused. After a moment, Rachel demanded, “Come on! Did he go quietly or fight you?”

Dad smirked at her. “He said, ‘You have my word, Sheriff.’ We stood up together and walked to the door. When we passed the table with the roughnecks, one of them looked up and said, ‘You okay, Cade?’

“Cade nodded. ‘We’re just takin’ a little trip, fellas. No need to get upset.’

“When I got him outside next to my cruiser, he stopped and put his hands behind his back. ‘Go ahead, Mark. I know you have to.’

“I put them on as gently as I could and helped him into the

car. He didn't make a sound on the whole trip."

Mom sighed. "What happened next?"

Dad shook his head. "Old Cade was charged with driving under the influence, leaving the scene of an accident, vehicular injury, and causing a traffic accident while under the influence. His lawyer dealt it down to DUI and leaving the scene. He spent eight months in county lockup and lost his driver's license cause that wasn't his first DUI conviction. Sarah spent one night in the hospital, then went home. Cade's insurance paid for Sarah's car and her medical expenses and gave her several thousand on top of that for pain and suffering. Then they cancelled Cade's policy."

Rachel shook her head. "I'm glad you didn't have a problem with him."

"Nope. Didn't even have to touch my handcuff holster until I took 'em out."

Mom shifted on the bed and said, "Change of subject. Rach, were you able to stop by the pharmacy?"

"Yep. Bag's on the kitchen table. Mr. Carson wanted me to say he'd come by sometime next week."

"Lots of people want to come see you, Mark," Mom said. "I may sell tickets."

"They'll have to wait until I get some of my strength back," he returned. "Sheriff, you in for the night?"

Rachel shook her head. "Wish I was. I gotta go back to the station in case we need the manpower. There's two weddings and a college party I know about goin' on tonight, plus whatever action we might get at the bars and dives." She stood. "Gonna be all hands on deck."

Mom smiled. "Okay, sweetie. I'll see you some time tomorrow. I still have to tell your father about that bikini dream."

"Mom, don't tell—"

"What bikini dream?"

Mom grinned and turned away from Rachel. "Your daughter had a dream the other night that you were in the hospital and I found you and danced with you while I was wearing a bikini made of leaves. She said that the more we danced, the more leaves fell off."

Dad's eyes widened. "Oh, really? How many leaves fell off?"

Mom chuckled. "I woke her up before they all dropped."

Dad shifted toward her and took her hand in his again. "Come on, tell me more! Just how it'sy-bitsy teeny-weeny was that leafy bikini? Oh, and maybe you could show me that dance!"

Rachel gagged. "That's enough for me. Mom, you dance for Daddy all you want to wearin' whatever you want. I'm lockin' the front door when I leave and I probably won't be back till early in the morning." She stood and turned to the bedroom door. "Dad, you get well. Just not too quick. I don't think *my* heart could take it if I walked in on — on somethin' between y'all that I ain't supposed to see."

She made a show of hurrying out as their laughter chased her to the front door. She smiled and mentally gave thanks once again that her father was on the mend. And that they'd given her the model of a loving family unit that no one could erase from her mind and heart.

As she walked to her cruiser, she mused, *Now all I have to do is find a guy like that for me.*

Maybe that guy had just come home.

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### Chapter Thirteen

Rachel sighed as she parked her dad's pickup in front of Vincent's Hardware. The Friday night she'd experienced had been rougher than she'd anticipated. Not only had her regular deputies Tommy Smith and Billy Jones stayed on duty with her all night, they'd had to call in part-time deputies Mack Green, Janet Ng, and Red Lawton. The city council would howl at her about the "excessive overtime" this month, but the alternative, to let six different traffic accidents and nine bar fights go unattended by law

enforcement would have been worse. The jail would be full until Judge McCreary could arraign each suspect, and they'd have to have at least one deputy in the station at all times to keep the peace until they were all processed.

At least she'd had time to change out of her uniform and into jeans, T-shirt, and sneakers. She'd have to get her sheriff clothes thoroughly laundered before she could wear them again. Handling drunks was not conducive to keeping clean.

The worst part was the fat lip she kept worrying with her tongue. It still hurt. Stupid Bobby Clanton. He had to pick last night to live up to his supposed ancestry. Rachel still didn't believe he was related to the Clanton family of Tombstone and OK Corral gunfight infamy, but that didn't stop him. When drunk, he was loud and aggressive. Drunk or sober, the boy had fists like hammers.

He was also slow and clumsy when drunk. She'd almost dodged back far enough from the roundhouse punch, but he'd caught her mouth with one knuckle and then paid for it when she'd jammed his wrist up between his shoulder blades and slammed him face-first into the wall. He'd stopped fighting at that point and allowed her to shove him into a cell.

Then she'd looked at the wall he'd hit. The drywall now had a Bobby-shaped broken dent in it. Dust had floated through the air. The dent would have to be repaired. Today. And she'd have to make sure it got done herself. He was very lucky he'd hit the wall between the studs.

She got out of her car and shook her head to clear it. A late model Dodge pickup was parked next to the passenger side of her parking spot. It looked familiar but she couldn't quite place it.

The store's front door had almost swung shut. Rachel might have seen the driver entering the store if she weren't so wiped out.

She pushed through the door and saw Manny hugging a taller man. "My good friend Clark!" he called. "You have come for your electrical supplies, yes?"

Clark's truck. Of course. She hadn't gotten a good look at it when she'd passed out at the Kent place on Wednesday. She wouldn't forget it again.

She watched Clark step back and shake his head. "Sorry, Manny, I jumped the gun. The electric company won't let me turn on that kind of tap on their line without a formal inspection, and they don't have an inspector available for at least three weeks. I can't wait that long."

Manny's face fell. "Oh, my good friend Clark, I am so sorry. I know you truly wished to complete this project quickly. The only consolation I am able to offer is that you owe us nothing for the supplies we ordered in anticipation of your purchase. We would have purchased them for the store whether you wanted them or not. We carry them in our regular inventory."

Clark sighed. "I'm still sorry for the trouble. I wanted to come and tell you in person that you're not making commission on me today."

Manny grinned. "Thank you, Clark. You are a good man, and I am glad you came to see me today. Do you have an alternative plan?"

"I can't take up that much space in my parent's house, so I'll need to rent an office. You know of anything available?"

Rachel said, "I do."

Both men snapped their heads around in surprise. It made Rachel chuckle to herself. She wasn't used to surprising men unless she was arresting them. "Oh, right," Clark said. "I remember now. You said something the other day about office space for rent downtown, didn't you?"

She walked toward Clark. Both men were there, of course, but Clark was her destination. "I don't have the particulars, but Denise Howard does. She'll be at the sheriff's office until eleven or so doing paperwork. If you wanna drop by and ask her about them, I'm sure she'd be glad for the distraction."

He smiled and nodded. “Thanks, Rachel. Sorry, I mean, thanks, Sheriff.”

She smiled back. “You’re welcome. And when I’m in civvies, I’m just Rachel. Especially to my friends.”

With a plaintive note in his voice, Manny asked, “Does that description include me?”

She heaved a theatrical sigh. “Oh, okay, yeah, it does. But that means you have to call me ‘Sheriff’ when I’m in uniform.”

He grinned like a possum with a peach. “I shall remember, my good friend Rachel the sheriff.”

Clark headed for the door. “I’d better go see Mrs. Howard before she leaves. And thanks for the tip on the office space.”

“No problem, Clark. I’ll see you later.” As Clark left the building, she turned to Manny and said, “I need some drywall for the sheriff’s office. A drunk busted a hole in the wall last night and I gotta fix it.”

“Of course, Sheriff Rachel. We carry that in only one size, a six-foot-by-four-foot panel. Will you take it with you or shall I arrange for a delivery? And how many panels?”

“Two to start with. If I need more I’ll come back. I borrowed my daddy’s pickup for the day, so I can take it with me. I just need you to put it in the bed for me.”

“This I shall do immediately. Will you pay for it or shall I bill the city of Smallville?”

“City pays for the materials. I’m providing the labor. I’ll need some drywall tape, a wide putty knife, a drywall hand saw, a claw hammer, a small box o’ two-inch nails, and some joint compound to go with it. We got no tools in the office. Ought to, though.”

“Your order shall be ready in but a moment.”

“Thanks, Manny.”

“Oh, no, Sheriff Rachel, it is I who owes you thanks for preventing last night’s drunken men from damaging my place of business. Or worse, damaging me.”

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Lois knocked on Perry’s office door and leaned in. “Final version of the nursing home story is in your inbox. I think you’ll like this one.”

He nodded. “I’m sure I will. Can you stick around for a little while? I want to give it one more look before I send it to printing.”

“As long as you put it on the front page, I’ll hang.”

He grinned a little. “Hard-charging as always. You can go get something to munch on if you want. This’ll take me about half an hour.”

“Will do. You want something from the concession stand downstairs?”

“Naw. Alice has been after me to cut down on sweets, so she’s sending me to work with what she calls ‘healthy’ snacks.” He curled his lip and shook his head. “It’s like eating wet sheetrock.”

Lois chuckled. “Hang in there, Perry. She’s worth it.”

He gave her a sharp look but didn’t say anything. But she knew what he’d been thinking.

She hadn’t thought Clark was worth the effort to keep him.

Her smile long gone, she stomped to the elevator and hit the “down” button with her fist, then flinched and shook her bruised hand. She had to stop punching hard things or she’d break her hands and then where would she be? There was no one left in the newsroom who’d willingly take dictation from her.

Clark would have done so gladly just to be close to her. At least, he would have done so two weeks ago.

The rebel thought angered her yet again.

The elevator came and she stepped in, then gently touched the button for the first floor. The doors slid shut. Her reflection in the metal of the doors showed an angry woman with little to no compassion in her life.

Fine. She had no compassion. It was Clark’s fault. He’d betrayed her heart, her mind, her trust, her love. He’d lied to her

for years. He’d kept his biggest secret from her as he’d wooed and won her heart, her mind, her trust, her love.

Then with a single sentence, with one confession, he’d dumped the essence of Lois Lane out on the floor and stomped on it with spiked boots. He’d broken her, destroyed her, betrayed her, and she couldn’t tell anyone about it without betraying him in return.

There were times when she was angry enough to reveal The Secret, to purchase air time on radio and TV, to buy half-page ads in every newspaper on the East Coast, to write her story and sell it to the highest bidder. But she couldn’t. If she were to do that, she’d have to admit that she was as much an untrustworthy, unethical, manipulative low-life as he was. And that was one thing she’d vowed she would never do.

As long as Clark Kent stayed out of Metropolis.

The doors opened and she forced herself to walk with something like her normal gait. Doug, the man behind the concession stand counter, looked up and saw her coming, then put four Double-Fudge Crunch Bars on the counter, along with a sixteen-ounce bottle of Pepsi.

Lois slowed as she came closer, frowned at Doug, then said, “What’s this?”

Doug shrugged. “Mid-morning on Saturday, you come down here, you always want a pick-me-up. Saves time if I set it up for you.”

She nodded slowly. “Okay. How about I take two of the bars and the bottle?”

He shrugged again, then tapped the keys of a calculator on the counter. “Fine by me. Comes to, uh, two-fifty-five including sales tax.”

She huffed through her nose as she dug through her purse.

“These things get more expensive every day.”

“Too true. And I got my overhead and profit margin to think of.”

She gave him three ones. He gave her back a quarter and two dimes. She stuffed the candy and change in her purse and carried the bottle back to the elevator.

“Perry better love that blasted story,” she muttered.

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As Rachel parked at the back door of the station, she sighed. She was tired, she wanted to see her daddy, and now she had to repair a wall. She thought about making Bobby Clanton do it, but then his lawyer would scream about forcing persons accused of misdemeanors into hard physical labor and it would ruin any case against him for assaulting a police officer.

The things she put up with as sheriff.

She stepped out the driver’s door and turned toward the tailgate, then heard someone open it. She looked up to see Clark manhandling the wallboard panels out of the truck bed as easily if they weighed almost nothing.

“Hey, Clark,” she called, “do I need to arrest you for theft of county property?”

He balanced the panels atop his head and grinned at her. “I was here, so I thought I’d give you a hand with the wall. Mrs. Howard told me about it. I wouldn’t want you to strain a muscle.”

“I’m a big girl, Clark,” she said dryly. “All I’d need is one deputy to help carry ‘em. I can do the rest.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m here. It’ll save your deputy’s lower back from strain.”

She frowned past her amusement. “Fine. They go upstairs, just to the right of Denise’s desk. Hey, you talk to her yet?”

She opened the back door to the station and held it for him. “Yes. I have an appointment in two hours with Sam Kramer. He owns the building across the street – sorry, you already know that. Anyway, we’re going to discuss my renting some office space there.”

Across the street, thought Rachel. That would be nice.

Clark kept talking as he climbed the stairs. “He has two furnished spaces and one unfurnished space available. I plan to take the unfurnished one if it’s suitable. I’ve already bought a desk and chair and filing cabinet, plus a lamp. That’d be enough for my purposes.”

They finished the climb to the second floor where the sheriff’s offices resided, and Rachel realized that Clark hadn’t pretended to strain with his load.

She also realized that she’d forgotten the other supplies. “Nuts. I’ll be right back. I forgot the tools and stuff.”

Clark leaned the wallboard panels against the wall near the damage – again, without straining – and said, “I can get that for you.”

“Naw, it’s my responsibility. I’ll just—”

He gently touched her forearm and smiled. “It’s no trouble. I like to help. You just wait here and I’ll be right back.”

She sighed with fake exasperation. “Fine. It’s all in a box on the passenger seat.”

He nodded and turned to the stairs. She watched him skip down the steps to the door, again showing no effect from the exertion.

It reminded her of the night of the prom.

*It was the next-to-last dance and he was still beside her, still smiling and chatting with real animation and letting her hold his hand. The corsage he’d given her was still bouncy on her wrist. He’d shown surprising grace and agility while they’d danced, and she’d surprised herself by being more adventurous on the floor than she normally was. All in all, it had been a most wonderful evening.*

*Until Matt Stearman tried to start a fight with Clark.*

*He and two of his motorcycle buddies, all three in ill-fitting suits, had been harassing the occasional couple both inside the venue and outside all night. By the end of the night, Rachel had seen two different girls at different times who’d come back in helping their respective dates to chairs against the wall. Stearman and his buddies had been warned several times not to misbehave, but the dance organizers didn’t have enough chaperones to police the entire area. No one had anticipated this kind of problem.*

*She and Clark had tried to help the second young couple, but the boy, whose name Rachel didn’t know, had refused any assistance. They’d tottered outside to his car alongside Clark and Rachel and driven away. The boy had been grunting in pain and the girl had been crying.*

*Clark turned to her. “I hate this,” he growled. “I hate that these clowns are ruining the prom for so many people.”*

*“Clark, please don’t go looking for trouble.”*

*“I won’t. But if I see them bothering anyone, I’m going to stop them.”*

*She grabbed his arm and tried to pull him back inside.*

*“Please, Clark, don’t do that. You can’t make people act right if they don’t wanna do it.”*

*He turned hard eyes to her: “No more, Rachel. No more. They’re not hurting anyone else here tonight. I will not permit it.”*

*She knew that once Clark made up his mind, no one would change it. She tried anyway. “Come on, let’s catch the last dance. I wanna snuggle up real close to you and make Lana mad enough to spit tacks.”*

*He softened enough to smile. “I think you’ve already done that, but I get the point. Miss Harris, will you allow me the privilege of the last dance of the prom?”*

*She dimpled. Might even have blushed a little. “Why, of course, Mr. Kent. I would be pleased and proud to dance with you one more time tonight.”*

*He offered his arm and she took it. “Then let us—”*

*That was when Matt Stearman stepped out of the dark and called out, “Hey, boys, we got us a couple of live ones here!”*

*Rachel turned to see Matt approaching from beyond the lights in the parking lot with an evil grin decorating his face. She snapped her head around to pick out an escape route, but there were two more thuggish youths approaching from different angles. She could have drawn an equilateral triangle using their positions.*

*This was not accidental. They were hunting. And Rachel and Clark were their prey.*

*“Hold on, boys,” she called out. “My daddy’s the county sheriff, and I don’t think he’d take kindly to y’all messing with his little girl.”*

*One of the others laughed. “Oh, we ain’t here for you, blondie. Not yet, anyway. We come for your boytoy.”*

*“Hey, fellas,” she said, “this guy ain’t no pushover.”*

*“Ha!” the third one huffed. “He won’t be any tougher than the other two.”*

*Clark pulled Rachel toward his dad’s pickup and handed her the keys. “Rach, get in and lock the doors.”*

*“No! I can’t let you—”*

*“Rachel! Please!” He turned to her, almost begging, and whispered, “I have to keep you safe. I gave your father my word.”*

*She took a moment to look into his eyes. In that moment, she decided that he meant it. He’d keep her safe no matter what it cost him.*

*She nodded, took the keys, and retreated to the passenger side of the truck. As soon as she closed and locked her door, she spun around to kneel in the seat and watch through the back window. If they hurt Clark, she’d make sure they wouldn’t get away with it.*

*The three boys closed around Clark until they were almost close enough to touch him. Then they each took one step around the circle to the left and charged.*

*Clark ducked and rolled out of the way. The three boys collided and went down in a heap.*

*Rachel couldn’t believe how fast Clark could move. If she had blinked she’d have missed it completely.*

*Matt was the first to his feet. He lunged at Clark with a vicious roundhouse punch which Clark took on—*

*No. He moved his head out of the way with no time to spare and Matt missed. His momentum made him lean toward Clark, who grabbed Matt’s extended arm and flipped him over his hip to the asphalt.*

*Another boy jumped and wrapped his arm around Clark’s throat from behind and squeezed. Rachel saw Clark’s elbow jab back and hit the boy in the ribs.*

*The boy tried to scream, then crumpled and fell.*

*The third boy, apparently just as dumb as his buddies, tried to kick Clark in the side. Clark caught his foot with one hand, lifted it almost shoulder-high, then came down on the boy’s shin with his free elbow.*

*Rachel heard the bone snap from inside the truck.*

*Matt finally made it to his feet, but when he saw his friends down and groaning, he reached inside his jacket and pulled out a pistol and pointed it at her inside the truck and opened his mouth —*

*And suddenly – impossibly suddenly – Clark held the pistol in his hand. Matt was just as suddenly sprawled against the front grill of the principal’s Volvo with his arms over his chest.*

*As Matt slowly slid to the parking lot, Clark squeezed the pistol. Rachel decided she needed to get out and stop him before he accidentally fired it and—*

*The pistol bent in his hand.*

*Then he turned away and threw it out of her sight over the prom venue.*

*She spun and sat on the passenger side of the front bench seat facing forward. If he didn’t know she’d seen him do those impossible things, maybe he wouldn’t worry that she’d tell*

anyone. As far as she knew, no one on earth knew that he could bend metal with his hand or move faster than humanly possible. Maybe his parents knew. But she'd never tell.

When he tapped on her window, she didn't have to fake being startled. Her head brushed the truck's ceiling when she jumped. "What!" she yelled.

He slowly lifted his hands and spoke just loudly enough for her to hear. "Rachel, it's me. It's Clark. The fight's over. You're safe."

She put her hand to her chest and took three deep breaths, then pushed the door open and all but threw herself in his arms. "Oh, Clark! I was so scared! Where are they? Where did they go? Did they run away?"

Later she was sure his sigh was one of relief that she hadn't seen what he'd done. "No," he said, "they didn't run. They made me fight them. And — uh — it didn't turn out very well for them."

She slowly walked to the truck's tailgate and looked around. The three boys were still in the places where they'd landed after Clark was finished with them. All three were conscious, but groaning in pain and none showed any signs of leaving under their own power.

"Oh, my. These boys gonna need some doctorin'. I'll go find Principal Keller or somebody and tell him they're here. You stay with 'em, okay? I'll be right back."

She'd turned and sprinted as fast as she could in a semi-formal gown back to the prom venue. A number of people were heading for the doors as she banged through them. "Principal Keller! Mr. Keller! We got a situation outside! We need police and an ambulance!"

The middle-aged man materialized out of the mob and stood before her. "Young lady, please! Why are you shouting so?"

She controlled her breathing again and said, "They's three boys out in the parking lot who got hurt somehow. They can't get up and they need a doctor real quick!"

He frowned at her and opened his mouth to speak, but before he uttered a syllable, Mrs. Naughton, her geometry teacher, touched Mr. Keller's arm and said, "This is Rachel Harris, the sheriff's daughter. She's not given to wild stories or exaggeration. You stay here and I'll go look."

Mr. Keller drew himself up, then nodded. "That's a good idea. Everyone stay inside! If there are injured people out there, they don't need an audience!" He turned and grabbed Mr. Holder, the boy's gym teacher. "Go find that deejay and have him play some more music. Something loud and energetic. And then help me get these kids back inside."

Mrs. Naughton crooked her finger at Rachel and said, "Show me where they are."

Rachel started off with Mrs. Naughton trailing in her wake. Rachel stopped a few feet short of the first boy, the one whose shin Clark had snapped, and pointed. "Here's one, the second's just there next to Clark, and the third one's over there by Mr. Keller's car."

Mrs. Naughton looked at the three, then at Clark, then turned and jogged back to the building. Clark sighed and shook his head. Rachel walked over to him, stood beside him, and took his hand in hers.

Neither of them spoke for several long moments, then Rachel said, "Wow. You sure know how to show a girl a good time."

Clark gaped at her for a few seconds, then slowly dissolved into soft laughter. Rachel joined him. Then the boy with the broken leg moaned and said, "They gettin' — a doctor?"

"Yeah," Rachel said. "I hope it's the one who treated the other two boys you idiots beat up."

They boy put his head down and went silent save for his labored breathing. Rachel put her head on Clark's shoulder and said, "You kept me safe. Just like you said you would."

Clark nodded once, then did something he'd not done before

that moment.

He turned slightly, put his lips on hers, and kissed her briefly.

That kiss, despite being so soft and brief, was still the best one she'd ever had. Just thinking about it made her all warm inside her chest.

She was still standing at the top of the stairs when Clark carried the box of supplies in. He smiled once again and said, "I have some time. Can I help?"

That was what he did best, what he lived for. He wanted to help people, to protect them from harm.

"Sure," she heard herself say. "Many hands make light work."

"Sounds good," he replied. "Let's get started."

Clark borrowed a pencil from Denise's desk, tapped on the wall with his index finger until he found the vertical wooden stud behind the drywall on either side of the dent, then drew a rectangle on the broken wall that framed the damage between studs. Rachel used a box knife from the station's junk box to score the existing drywall over the stud, then Clark took over and made the horizontal cut from stud to stud with the drywall saw Rachel had bought. From there, he used the box knife to cut the drywall down to the stud on the left.

When he moved to the right side of the work area, Rachel shook her head and held out her hand. "I said you could help. I never said you could have all the fun."

He chuckled handed her the knife handle-first. She duplicated the cuts he'd already made on the other side of Bobby's outline and opened a hole in the wall. They bumped elbows several times while pulling the broken pieces of wallboard away.

It was a touch of domestic intimacy that Rachel wished could last all day.

In less time that Rachel would have preferred, they had a rectangle of open wall. Clark turned one panel with its long edge on the floor and the short end against one side of the hole. He took the pencil and drew a straight vertical line on the other end that matched the other side of the hole.

He held the box knife out to Rachel. "I'll hold this steady if you'll cut it to fit."

"Done."

She took the knife and scored the panel with it, then grabbed the wallboard saw and cut it all the way through. The trimmed piece of wallboard fit almost seamlessly into the bottom of the hole.

She turned to Clark and grinned. "Good job. You wanna nail it up there?"

He lifted his hands as if in surrender. "It's your jail. I'm just helping."

"Yeah, right." She knelt and grabbed the hammer, then tapped a nail into each corner to hold it against the studs. "Ready for the next part?"

He nodded. "Whenever you are."

Working together, they measured and cut the remaining board to fit the smaller upper portion of the hole, then Rachel held it in place to let Clark nail it down. They stepped back together and smiled at each other.

"Good job, Sheriff," he said. "Just needs a tape and float job and it'll be ready to paint."

"Can't paint it for a few hours. Gotta wait for the compound to dry. And don't you have an appointment to look at an office?"

He shrugged. "I didn't want to leave you in the lurch."

"I'll tape and mud it, then I'll go home. If Bobby Clanton gives me any trouble I'll make him paint it. You did a lot of the hard work anyway, so get going."

"Okay. As long as you have it under control."

"I do. If you do rent one o' them offices, I'll see you later."

"Sounds like a plan to me. See you soon, Rachel."

"Hey, wait! When do I get to read your first column in the

paper?”

He stopped and faced her. “I sent the first one in last night. My boss said he’d get it in tomorrow’s Daily Planet.”

“Why don’t you talk to Mr. Emerson about putting it in the Smallville Post? I bet he’d love to print it. You know, local boy makes good, gets published nationally, that kind of thing. Folks around here would eat that up. Buy more copies of the Post, too.”

“That’s not a bad idea. I’ll check with my boss to see if he wants to allow it. See you around.”

He clip-clopped down the stairs and was gone.

Rachel smiled at nothing for a moment, then turned to pick up the putty knife and open the can of wall compound and nearly ran over Denise Howard. The older woman stood in Rachel’s way with her arms crossed and a concerned look on her face.

“Whoa. Sorry, Denise. Didn’t realize you was there.”

Denise’s voice was low and serious. “You watch yourself, young lady. Don’t let your emotions get ahead of your brain with that man.”

Surprised, Rachel paused, then said at the same low level, “You think he’s out to break my heart or something?”

“No, of course not. I think Clark Kent is a fine young man.

But I was at Martha’s house helping her put that food together for you and your mom when he called. He’s in love with a woman in Metropolis, and she up and broke his heart. Take my advice and don’t try to put his heart back together for him.”

Rachel put on her “sheriff” face. “I appreciate your concern, but you’re puttin’ the cart in front of the horse here. He just got to town and all he’s done so far is what he’d do for anyone. I’m not all that special to him.”

“Not yet, no. But you’d like to be.” Denise held up one hand before Rachel could speak. “I know, I’m butting in. I won’t do it again. Just remember what I told you and take your time.”

Rachel nodded and decided not to discuss the issue any further. “I gotta get this tape and mud on the wall before I disintegrate into little tiny broken-hearted pieces.”

Denise’s left eyebrow tilted up on the outside. “Sarcasm duly noted, Sheriff. Just remember what I said.”

“I won’t. Hey, I really gotta finish this before I go home and see my daddy.”

Denise nodded and returned to her desk. Rachel attacked the wall with more energy that she thought she’d had.

Clark was the gentlest and kindest soul she’d ever met, but he wouldn’t break her heart. Not again. She wouldn’t allow it.

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#### Chapter Fourteen

Clark moused the cursor to the “send” button and emailed his latest offering to Perry. His first four stories had been drawn mostly from his eidetic memory, since setting up his office in Sam Kramer’s building had taken more time than he’d anticipated and had kept him from traveling and doing on-site research. Some of the delays were based on his short finances – he hadn’t yet transferred his checking and savings accounts from Metropolis to Smallville – but the largest block of time that week was spent on Tuesday cleaning and setting up his new office space because Rachel had insisted on helping him. She had slowed him down, not because she didn’t do a good job, but because he couldn’t finish at faster-than-normal-speed while she was there with him.

And it would have been quite rude to tell her that she’d hindered him. Besides, she was pleasant to have around, and it was nice to have a friend to help him.

He’d accepted her explanation that she wanted to repay him for his help repairing the broken wall at face value. But after thinking about that afternoon, he realized that, while she worked hard and did a good job, she often found ways to work either close to him or next him. Every time they’d bumped elbows or reached for the same thing at the same time, she’d smiled softly and backed away.

Just not very far.

To his surprise, he’d found that he enjoyed her company. She was a nice young woman with a demanding job, and she’d taken time out of her busy day to help him. He’d felt no pressure to perform a certain way or meet some undefined and unspoken expectations, and she never hinted that she thought he might be hiding something from her. She didn’t seem to expect anything from him beyond his friendship. She’d even ordered the pizza they’d shared that afternoon and refused his offer to help pay for it.

He thought about Rachel. And he surprised himself again by smiling at the thought.

He wondered for just a few microseconds what she might think about him if she knew he was also Superman, then banished all such speculation from the bounds of propriety and prudence.

\*\*\*

On Thursday at four-seventeen, Jimmy walked past Lois’ desk and slapped a folder on it without speaking to her or looking at her. She’d almost gotten used to being ignored, being isolated from the rest. It barely bothered her now that women chatting away in the ladies’ room or around the morning donuts would suddenly act as if a Cone of Silence descended on them when they saw her. The previous Tuesday, when she’d gone across the street for lunch and sat down at the same table in the crowded cafeteria with Steve Lombard and Karla Peters, neither of them had so much as acknowledged her existence.

It didn’t matter. She was strong and tough. She was Mad Dog Lane. She didn’t need a partner. She didn’t need a man in her life. And she certainly didn’t need Clark Kent by her side.

But being deliberately snubbed in the newsroom, as Jimmy had just done to her, still stung.

She’d endured two full weeks of being marginalized socially and professionally. Today was the fifteenth day since Clark had left the city. In that time he’d sent back five travel pieces, including the one she’d heard Perry tell Eduardo about this morning. The first three had been published, the fourth was scheduled to appear in Sunday’s travel section, and his articles had already generated a surprising volume of mail, both from the Postal Service and from email. The Planet’s new website, set up by Jimmy as an experiment, had also yielded a number of positive comments from readers. And Clark’s quick responses to the readers’ questions had yielded a wealth of ideas for future columns, along with a separate article in Friday’s morning edition to answer selected queries.

Lois’ articles had been praised for accuracy and attention to detail. Clark’s articles had been praised for their humanity. Lois had heard Jimmy’s “Smooth” pronouncement when Perry had mentioned the online feedback in last Tuesday’s staff meeting.

Lois refused to think about what she and Clark could have accomplished together.

The folder called to her and she opened it. As she’d hoped, Jimmy had worked his magic once more. There were names, dates, dollar amounts, and sources, enough to finish her investigation and clobber the cheap shyster who was selling newborn babies to rich parents who wanted children the “easy” way – they either didn’t want to deal with the stress and fuss of a pregnancy or couldn’t conceive naturally and were near desperation.

Perry leaned out of his office at that moment and gestured to her. “Lois? Got a minute?”

“Sure.” She grabbed a pen and a notebook as she stood.

Perry ushered her in – unusual, but not unheard of – then pointed at the chair in front of his desk. “Need to chat about that baby-selling story.”

She started talking before her rear end hit the chair. “I just got Jimmy’s research on the back end of the operation. I haven’t gone through the whole folder yet, but it looks really good. I think

we've got this guy by the short hairs."

Perry's brows rose as moved behind his desk. "The 'short hairs'? Isn't that a pretty colorful euphemism for you?"

She glanced away for a moment. "Yeah, I guess so, but I'm just so disgusted by this creep. He's a very successful contract attorney, but he makes a boatload of money buying children from poor mothers with no other options and 'brokering the adoption'—" she bent her fingers into air quotes "—to the new parents. By this time tomorrow I'll know if he's been reporting that income to the IRS and whether or not his two ex-wives know about it. I don't think they do. I'm going to make him miserable and broke."

He nodded and sat in his chair. "Sounds like you have a good handle on this thing. What about the biological mothers?"

She frowned at him. "What about them?"

"You didn't mention any of them. Are you including them in the story?"

"Only by inference. I doubt any of them would want the publicity."

Perry nodded again. "Probably not. But have you thought about adding a sidebar, or even another story, written from their point of view? Successful lawyer comes into a young woman's life just before she has a baby she can't afford to take care of. He offers her free medical care, both pre-natal and post-natal, if she allows her unborn child to be adopted through his office. He'll take care of all the legal stuff, make sure the baby has good parents, and the mom gets a cash payment for her trouble. She and the baby are both victims. That about sums it up, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, but that's not the story. The angle is that he short-changed everyone in those deals and committed fraud doing it."

"I know. But he wasn't the only one involved."

"Perry, this guy victimized everybody in this scheme! The adoptive parents paid him in the upper five figures for one kid and they thought everything was legal and aboveboard! They didn't know where he found the kids! They never knew he was cheating everyone involved and playing both ends against the middle! Compared to what he charged the adopting parents, the mothers got pennies! I'm taking this jerk down hard!"

"I understand your anger. It's justified. And you're right, he does need to go down. But I don't want you to forget about the people in the story."

She lurched forward and shook her head sharply. "I'm not forgetting anyone! I know those kids had to come from someone's womb! I know some woman went through agony to give birth to each one! And when I'm through with him he'll never be able to do it again!"

"Good. Take him down hard. Help the cops and the DA's office pin him to the wall. Go after this piece of dirt with everything you have."

She paused and blinked, then quietly said, "I – don't understand what the problem is. That's what I'm doing."

"Yes, but you're leaving out the human angle. I've seen your rough drafts, Lois. They're factual, they're arranged logically, they're hard-hitting, and he'll wish you'd never heard his name when the courts are done with him. And when you add in the additional facts and interviews coming from Jimmy's latest research, there are people who will want to tar and feather him, then run him out of town on a rail. Assuming they don't lynch him." Perry's voice dropped a register and he frowned. "But I haven't seen much from you about the innocents involved."

She blinked a few more times, then quietly said, "I still don't understand."

He sighed. "A month ago we would not have had this conversation. This story would have come to my desk with all the anger and passion for justice you're showing now. But it also would have had some heart." He leaned forward. "You don't want to hear this, I know, but it would have been—"

She jerked in place. "No! Don't say it!"

"I have to, honey."

"Please! No!"

"Listen to me, Lois. This story is worthy of a Kerth nomination, maybe even a Meriweather. But it's sterile. It's all facts and figures. It might have been considered for a Pulitzer Prize if you'd written it with Clark." He shook his head. "It definitely would have been even better than it is."

"There are two church-based pro-life groups involved with the birth moms! They're helping them find jobs, get apartments, teaching them life skills! And they're working with the courts to decide if the babies should stay with the adoptive parents or go back to the biological mothers! All that's in my latest draft!"

"I know. And it's good that you give them that much attention. But Clark would have made that part sing. People would've cried on that section. You know it as well as I do."

She lurched to her feet, determined to hear nothing more about the betrayer, the liar, the Kent. "He's been gone for two weeks and he's not coming back! Not if he wants to keep his big fat hairy secret!"

Perry didn't react to her actions or her volume. "I know that, Lois. I'm not saying that he's coming back. I'm just pointing out to you that you're experiencing some of the collateral effects of your decision." He stood slowly and sighed again. "You're a good reporter and a good writer. You're valuable to the paper and to the newsroom. But without Clark, your writing is cold and distant. It lacks the humanity your joint work showed me."

"I thought you said it was good!"

"It is good. But you're writing like you're angry."

"Of course I'm still angry! Can you blame me?!"

"I understand that you're angry, but you don't have to write like it. Clark balanced you, gentled your prose, made the people behind the stories come alive to the readers. This is going to be an outstanding story, but it's also going to read like a TV police procedural script, all head and no heart."

Her voice dropped a register and fell in volume. "Then that's the way it's going to be. I'm not changing a word my story unless you order me to. Now unless you have some more philosophy to share, I've got a lot of work to do."

He shook his head. "No, that's all. Go on back to work."

She spun and put her hand on the doorknob and Perry said, "We got Clark's latest article a little while ago."

She froze in place. "That's nice."

"It's at least as good as the one about South Dakota he sent in last week."

"I'm glad to hear it." Still she didn't turn.

After a long slow breath, she said, "I'm going now, assuming you don't have anything else to tell me."

"That's it. For real this time."

"Good."

Lois forced herself to slow down and not reveal her agitation. The doorknob turned slowly in her hand. The door swung open gently. Her shoes tapped softly against the tile floor of the newsroom. Her chair slipped almost silently from her desk. She sat down and quietly slid her knees under the desk.

Deep in the center of her mind, where her body didn't reflect it, she screamed.

\*\*\*

Clark had just sat down in his office on Friday morning – he still got a kick out of having a whole office all to himself – when someone knocked. "Come in," he called out.

The door opened and Sam Kramer, the building's owner, leaned in. "You got a minute, Mr. Kent?"

Clark smiled. "It's just 'Clark,' Mr. Kramer. You say 'Mr. Kent' and I start looking around for my dad."

Sam smiled back and stepped in. "Of course, Clark. And I'm just Sam. I wanted to make sure you were happy with the office."

"I'm very happy with it. This suits my needs completely. And I had to stop tacking over my mother's dinner table."

Sam chuckled, then waved at the top of the file cabinet to Clark's left. "I see you already have your own coffee maker."

"I'm too used to having the go-juice handy. And the stuff this one brews tastes just fine. Besides, I needed the file drawers for more than just holding up the coffee maker."

"Good, good. Have you met any of your fellow office tenants? All five spaces on the first floor are occupied, but you're up here on the second floor alone except for Jane Clemens. She runs a typing and copying service. She does pretty steady trade for a few of the business folks in town, and she has a lot of clients from the high school and community college during semesters."

"I've waved at and said 'Howdy' to four or five people, but I haven't actually met any of them yet."

Sam nodded. "We'll have to fix that. The other reason I came up was to invite you to the mixer I'm hosting at the VA Post tomorrow night. It starts at six-thirty and there's no admission charge. We've got fresh fish from the reservoir, bass and trout, I think, some home-made desserts, cornbread muffins, fried hush puppies, your mom's apple pie, your dad's special chili, and – what else? Oh, right! One of the hunters is bringing in some quail from his private freezer. And we'll have a contribution box for former sheriff Mark Harris to defray some of his medical expenses. All the rest of the tenants have said they'd be there."

Clark smiled. "It sounds like you're inviting the whole town."

"Just about. I can't get Sheriff Rachel to commit, though. I think we'd fill up that box if she'd come." Sam shuffled his feet a little. "Um – I don't want to ask you something I shouldn't, but I know you found out about this office through her, and since you know her personally, do you think she'd come if you were her escort?"

Clark leaned back in surprise. "Ah. Well. I – uh – I don't know. Tell you what, though, I'll call her and see if I can get her to attend. Six-thirty, you said?"

Sam smiled and nodded. "That's it."

"You know that Saturday is usually a busy day for law enforcement around here."

"Yes, but I also know that our fair sheriff has got a lot of the so-called tough guys around here buffaloed since she arrested Bobby Clanton and smashed his head through a wall. Like to broke his neck."

Clark snorted. "I presume that's Bobby's version?"

"Yep. And she gets meaner, stronger, and more lethal every time he tells it."

Clark laughed aloud. "I'll be there, Sam. And I'll see if I can get Rachel to come. But I can't promise anything. She's still taking care of her parents, too."

"That has to come first, of course, but if she can put in an appearance – whether in uniform or not – I think it would be a big boost to the donation box."

"I don't know. I doubt she'd come just to get money."

"Then don't tell her about it. I haven't. If she already knows, fine, but if not she'll be properly surprised. I can't believe anyone would think ill of her coming, especially since she wrapped up that rustling investigation so quickly."

"Yes, that's – true." Clark's voice trailed off and he looked away for a moment. Then his eyes widened and he grabbed a pencil and started making notes.

After a he scribbled a couple of lines, he looked up and said, "I'll call her, Sam. And I'll get her there if I can. And you've given me a terrific angle for an upcoming column, one I should've thought of myself."

Kramer smiled. "You're gonna tell those East Coast bluenoses about our amazing sheriff, aren't you?"

Clark smiled back. "I certainly am. And let me call her while I'm thinking about your little get-together tomorrow night."

Kramer nodded and stood. "I'll get out of your way, then. See you tomorrow evening. And bring your dancing shoes! There are some young ladies who'll want to trip the light fantastic with you."

"Sounds good. I'll do my best not to actually trip any of them."

"As long as you catch them before they hit the floor, I don't know that they'd mind so much."

\*\*\*

It was exactly six-fifteen on Saturday evening. Rachel paused by Denise Howard's desk and said, "I'm out for the evening at that mixer at the VA post unless something big blows up. Tommy has the primary coverage tonight. Should be lighter than last weekend since we still got most o' those clowns locked up or out on bail."

Denise smiled. "Good. It's about time you took some time for yourself. And I'm glad you're wearing your dark red dress. It complements your figure and it won't flare out too much when you get to dancing."

"Thanks. Hadn't had a chance to wear it in a while. Wasn't sure it still fit right."

"It fits you just fine. I'd bet Clark smiles when he sees you."

Rachel shrugged. Denise's praise made her uncomfortable. "This is as much a working date for Clark and me as it is a real social occasion. He wants to interview me about them cattle rustlers."

"Uh-huh. Interview you. About the rustlers."

Rachel frowned at the older woman. "C'mon, Denise. It ain't like we're plannin' to elope or nothin'. Me and Clark's just friends."

"You forget that I was in your office when he called you yesterday. You were all business when you picked up the phone, but as soon as you heard that young man's voice you perked up like you'd just drunk a quart of espresso. And I heard enough of what he said to you to know that he seems like a very open, sincere, honest man."

"That's exactly what he is. Don't start bad-mouthin' him, okay?"

Denise shook her head. "Wouldn't dream of it. I just want you to remember that he's just had his heart broken and you don't need to be the one to glue it back together."

"Aw, Denise, you—"

"I mean it! I'm coming around to thinking that he's exactly what he seems to be, a really nice guy. Maisie told me yesterday that Clark is one of the rare ones where what you see is what you get. That doesn't mean that I'm going to start dating him."

Rachel huffed and silently counted to five before calmly saying, "I ain't datin' him neither. We're just going to a mixer that Mr. Kramer's hosting. There ain't gonna be no sneakin' around the lake to watch the submarine races."

Denise stared. "You – you don't mean you still call it that, do you? That's what my parents told me not to do when I was younger than you are!"

Rachel grinned. "I dunno what the kids call it nowadays. I just knew you'd know the term. My daddy told my momma last night that when he gets to feelin' up to it, he's gonna take her out to watch the submarine races."

Denise tried and failed to stifle a laugh. "Hah – and – ha-ha – and what did your – your mom say?"

"That she'd go with him if they could find a sitter for me."

Denise's guffaw exploded into the office. One of the prisoners still in the cells lifted his head and croaked, "Hey! Can't a citizen get some sleep around here?"

Rachel turned her head and barked, "You wanna sleep, then don't get yourself arrested for bein' stupid!"

Denise held her hand over her mouth as her shoulders bounced with mirth. Rachel shook her head at the older woman and said, "I better go before I get you in worse trouble."

\*\*\*

Clark's gallant offer to drive Rachel from the station to the get-together just down the road made her smile. It also made her accept. She didn't quite want to call the seven-minute ride to the VA post a date, but it sure felt like one, what with Clark walking her to the truck, opening the door for her, handing her in, and closing her door.

Then he got in the driver's side and smiled. "You look – well, you're beautiful tonight, Rachel. Not that you're not always attractive, you are, but – it just seems like you're extra eye-catching tonight."

She smiled back. "It's the dress. This is just about my best casual dress, and I wanted to look nice tonight. Can't have the sheriff lookin' frumpy at a social event."

"It's not just the dress. It's you."

The compliment made her unaccountably shy for a moment. "Ah – yeah. Thank you." She adjusted her seat belt and said, "I ain't felt this pretty since I went to the prom with you."

He chuckled, then buckled up and started the truck. "I never told you how nervous I was that night. I wanted to make a good impression on your parents."

She almost reached out and touched his hand, but held back at the last moment. "You did. Daddy said you were the nicest boy I ever went out with." She shook her head at the sudden memory. "He also said you were the only one he didn't think he needed to threaten to make sure I got home on time."

He checked for traffic, then shifted into Drive and pulled into the street. "My parents would've had conniption fits if I'd kept you out too late. Never mind your folks."

"Yeah. Daddy said one of the reasons he trusted you with his little girl was because he knew Jonathan pretty well. Said no man as fine as Jonathan Kent would ever have a son who misbehaved with a girl."

"I thank you for the compliment, and I will pass it on to my dad."

She smiled and looked through the windshield. She'd been nervous the night of the prom, too, but she'd done her best to hide it. She must've done a good job, since no one had ever called her on it.

A comfortable quiet wafted into the front seat and stayed for most of the brief drive. As the VA building came into view, the other reason she was with Clark came to her mind. "Hey, you want to interview me about that rustling case now or wait a bit?"

He tapped the steering wheel with the first two fingers of his right hand, then said, "We'd better wait. There's something I didn't tell you about tonight, and I don't think you know it yet."

"What, you're going to kidnap me and hold me for ransom? Doubt you'd get much."

He smiled as he parked the truck in the lot outside the VA post. Lotta cars here tonight, she thought. Wonder what else is goin' on here.

He broke in on her wondering. "You say that now, but you might be surprised at what I could ask for. Mr. Kramer told me this was a get-together mostly for the tenants in his rental offices, but he also said that there are a bunch of people coming to donate to the Mark Harris get-well fund."

Her mouth slipped open and her head turned slowly in his direction. After a long moment, she managed, "The – they – what?"

"Mr. Kramer wasn't sure you'd come if you knew. He wants it to be a surprise, so please don't let on that I spilled the beans."

Well. This was unexpected. She hadn't been surprised by all the food the family had received, nor the good wishes expressed and prayers offered for her father's recovery. Nor had the favors people had done for them, like mowing their lawn and doing their laundry and making sure the garbage was ready for pickup. She'd been thankful, of course, but not surprised, given the community

in which they lived.

This, though, startled her. Rachel hadn't seen any of the medical bills – the hospital was still counting the costs – but even with insurance and their savings, this accident would put a hole in her parents' budget an outlaw biker gang could roar through. Her folks hadn't mentioned it to her, either, probably because they didn't want to worry her. She still felt the weight of the financial burden, even if she wasn't the primary payer.

She suddenly realized her cheeks were wet. She felt, rather than saw, Clark turn off the truck's motor. She dashed at her eyes and found a kerchief beside her cheek.

It was Clark's. He was still a gentleman.

He dabbed at her left eye, then let her take it. She bent over and soaked the hankie but good. He'd have to wring the water out before he put it back in his pocket.

After a minute or so, he scooted over on the bench seat and put his arm around her shoulders. "I'm sorry, Rach," he almost whispered, "but I didn't want you to go in there unprepared. That wouldn't be a nice thing for me to do to you. And you know I won't say a word to anyone that Smallville has a sheriff with the tenderest heart in this part of the state."

She blew her nose and shook her head. "I think – Bobby Clanton would argue with you."

She felt his smile grow. "He's the one whose face made the hole in the wall that we fixed last week, isn't he?"

"Yep. Don't think he'd believe I got a tender bone in my body."

"I know that you do."

Then he pulled her close and hugged her.

The hug surprised her, but only for a second. It was a good-friend hug, not an I-love-you hug, but she didn't care. It was a hug from Clark and she'd cherish the memory for a long time.

After too brief a time, he relaxed and pulled back. She fought off the urge to tighten her grip and instead released him. "Are you ready to go in?" he asked.

"You got a little mirror on the back of the sun visor?"

"Driver's side and passenger side both. They're illuminated, too." She lifted an eyebrow and he added, "This truck came with the deluxe option package."

They shared a quiet chuckle, then Rachel pulled down the passenger side visor. "Soon's I fix my makeup I'll be ready. Can't show up at this shindig lookin' like a racoon. Not with all them people in there." She pulled a small makeup kit out of her purse and opened it. "Wondered why there was so many cars in the lot. Figured there was some kind o' meetin' goin' on I didn't hear about."

He touched her shoulder. "You look great. You always do."

She gave him a warm smile, then returned to her facial repairs. This was not the time to fall into his arms and declare her undying devotion to him.

She'd save that for the second date.

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## Chapter Fifteen

It was time to face the music, both figuratively and literally.

Clark could hear the sound system playing Garth Brooks' "Working On a Full House" before they got out of the truck. He was sure Rachel could hear it before they got to the front door. She hesitated at the entrance and looked at him.

He hoped his smile was encouraging. "Come on, Rach, it's okay. I promise I won't let anyone cook and eat you."

She chortled lightly and nodded. "Yeah, you're right. I'm sheriff of this here county, and none of them law-abiding citizens in there are gonna hurt me."

"That's the spirit." He reached out and opened the entrance door for her.

For a moment he flashed on another difference between Lois and Rachel. Lois didn't always wait for him to open the door for

her, even if they were on a date. And sometimes when she waited, or when he just beat her to the door, she frowned at his courtesy. That usually happened when she was hyper-focused on the story she was working on, but those weren't the only times she raced to be first to grab the doorknob. Rachel never acted as if it was her sovereign right for a man to open the door for her, and she always accepted the social grace with a smile.

He pushed the thought away. Even if the comparisons were valid, this was neither the time nor the place to make them.

She led him into the main meeting room, then she stopped in front of him. The room was decorated like a school dance, with bunting on the crossbeams and around all the tables. An enlarged photo of Mark Harris, in uniform, was propped on an easel behind a table to the left of the DJ setup.

On the table in front of the easel stood an upturned five-gallon water jug with the spout cut down for easier access. It was more than three-quarters full with envelopes, bills of varying denominations, and at least four inches of coin in the bottom, all shiny stuff with no hint of copper. Clark's first thought was that nobody was going to try to steal something that heavy.

His next thought was how Metropolis his previous thought was. This was Smallville. Nobody'd dare to steal that money.

He smiled and stepped back from Rachel because people had started to mob her. Hugs and handshakes and smiles flew past her so quickly she didn't seem to be registering all of them. Everyone's voice competed with the others for her attention. Even the music faded to background sound as the DJ saw that he was no longer the center of attention.

After almost a full minute, Sam Kramer moved to her side, then held up his hand and said, "You folks quiet down now! Quiet down! All right, y'all listen up! As you all know, this gathering is in honor of retired sheriff Mark Harris. You all know about his car wreck a few days ago, that he's hurt pretty bad but he's now on the mend, and you also know his daughter was elected to take over as sheriff when Mark retired a few years back. What you may not know is that she's been taking care of her parents *and* keeping the sheriff's office running smoothly since she put on the badge, and it's been a lot harder since Mark's accident. She even saved her daddy's life while he was in the hospital."

The crowd burst into scattered applause and cheers. It took Sam another minute or so to calm them enough to hear him. "This young lady is a credit to her family, her profession, and to her neighbors, and this evening is a thank-you for all that the Harris family has done for the town of Smallville and the county of Everett."

He paused as thunderous applause broke out around the building, then reached a crescendo that made Clark turn his hearing way down. Sam finally lifted his hand again. When the crowd quieted, he called out, "Every nickel in that water jug will go to the Harris family to help them defray expenses during this time of trial. And don't expect any leniency from Sheriff Harris or her deputies because you contribute! In this county, if you do the crime, you'll do the time. Our outstanding sheriff will make sure of that." He paused and grinned widely. "No matter how much she's wearing."

The crowd burst out in laughter at the reference to Rachel's cardiac massage of her father in her underwear. Naturally, she turned beet-red and shook her head. Her glance at Clark told him that while she could have gone all night without that reminder, it didn't really bother her now. She handled the situation with real humility and aplomb and quiet confidence and he was proud of her.

Clark suddenly realized that he wasn't upset with himself for feeling proud of Rachel. He decided to analyze his feelings later.

If at all.

The DJ, who seemed to be good at reading the room, cranked up Hank William's "Jambalya" as the people started milling

around. As the crowd slid back to open up a dance area, Rachel retreated to Clark's side.

She looked up at him and shook her head. "Not at all what I expected."

He smiled and said, "You handled it very well. Are you hungry, or would you prefer to dance?"

She gave him a crooked grin and put a hand to her stomach. "I'm hungry. Takes a lot of energy to accept all that adulation."

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Rachel's right hand held a hard plastic plate heavy with food, plastic dinnerware poked out of her shirt pocket, and a large plastic tumbler of icy carbonated diet something dampened her other hand with condensation. She looked for an open spot to sit and eat. She'd almost given up when Clark's "Hsst!" in her ear got her attention. He gestured with his head. "I see two empty chairs on either side of an end table. I think they're the best seats in the building."

She looked, saw them, and mentally claimed them. "Come on!"

Her long strides brought her close to the chairs and to another partygoer headed for the same spot. She looked at the interloper and said, "Excuse me, I think I saw them before – Lana!"

Lana Lang's eyes snapped up to Rachel's face, then the shorter woman smiled. "Sorry, Rach. You and Clark go ahead. I'll find another place."

"Uh – well – maybe you—"

Lana shook her head. "Nope. I'll grab another spot. You're the guest of honor, girl. You take them."

Rachel felt real affection for Lana in that moment. "Thank you. I don't care what anyone says, you're a nice person."

Lana frowned for a moment as she digested Rachel's response, then smiled like she'd swallowed a bug. "Yeah, don't listen to the gossips. They have no idea what's really going on."

"Too true. Hey, really, thanks. Hope you find a good seat."

"I will. Hey, Clark. Having a good time?"

From behind Rachel's shoulder, she heard him say, "So far so good."

Lana laughed and gestured with her glass, then turned away to continue her quest for seating. Rachel took the seat to the right of the small table and put her plate down. "You okay with that side, Clark?"

He lowered himself gracefully into the chair and put his glass down. "As long as I have a free hand to grab this fried chicken thigh, I'm good."

She laughed and took a long drink, then unpacked her plasticware and set to work on her own plate. In the middle of Mrs. Peterson's still-warm potato salad, she stopped and said, "This tastes great. I gotta ask her how she gets that sharp little bite in it."

Clark smiled. "It's a combination of cinnamon and some Cajun spices her cousin sends her from New Orleans every month. I don't know the exact formula. Mrs. Peterson sends back fresh apple pies and potato salad. I think they enjoy trading recipes more than they enjoy eating the dishes they create."

It amused her that he knew about the spices and wondered if it was his super-taste or just his Clark Kent charm that had garnered him that tidbit. Then she glanced at his plate and saw that his chicken thigh was already clean down to the bone. "Who made the chicken?"

He shook his head. "I don't know, but it's good. I may go back for seconds."

She forked up more potato salad as Sam Kramer walked by. "Howdy, Sheriff. You having a good time?"

Her fork paused until she answered. "Yes. And thank you again for putting this together, Sam. Y'all did a great job."

A sneaky smile grew on his face. "Were you surprised?"

She chewed and swallowed, then took a drink to wash it

down. “Very. I was expecting maybe fifteen or twenty people, but you must have three hundred folks in here. You’re lucky I ain’t the fire marshal or I’d have to count ‘em to see if you’ve exceeded the occupancy limit.”

“Chief Carson is here tonight. He’s already agreed to look the other way as long as everyone behaves.”

With her mouth now full, all Rachel could do was nod and chew.

Sam chuckled. “I told Tim Keller he should close his car lot and bring all his people here. He didn’t like the idea at first, but I pointed out that all of his customers would be here at the mixer instead of buying cars at his lot anyway. Staying open would just lose him money.”

She swallowed and grinned back. “Subtle, very subtle. So you blackmailed him and the others to drop their spare cash in the bottle instead?”

His face shifted to obviously fake shock. “Why, Sheriff, I’m astounded that you’d think that I put any pressure on anyone to contribute. I merely pointed out that while neither you nor your father would deign to notice who put in money and who didn’t, their neighbors and customers would.” He lifted his palms to either side. “Any resulting consequences to their businesses would be outside my power to influence.”

“Uh-huh.” She tried not to smile wider but failed. She pointed her fork at him and said, “I ought to bust you for picking their pockets.”

“But you won’t. Now let me thank you for coming. You can put a real capper on the first part of the evening.”

“The first part?”

“Yes.” Sam turned to Clark and said, “I’m thinking that our folks would enjoy seeing our very attractive sheriff dance.”

Clark lifted one eyebrow and turned to Rachel. “Would you like to dance, or do you need a few minutes to digest your dinner?”

“I’ll dance if I know the tune. I don’t get to practice much these days.”

“We’ll have to fix that. What tune would get you on your feet?”

She thought of one he might or might not like. “Brooks and Dunn, I think. ‘Boot Scoot Boogie.’ I really like the beat.”

Sam nodded. “I’ll see if Manny has that one available.”

Clark said, “Manny’s the DJ? I’ll have to go check in with him.”

Rachel put down her plate and reached down for Clark’s hand. “After this dance. I just decided I wanna move my feet. Can’t disrespect Alan Jackson’s ‘Chattahoochee.’ It’s a great dancin’ tune.”

Clark let her pull him to his feet, then said, “We’ll talk later, Sam. I think I have my marching orders.”

Sam laughed, then turned toward Manny and the DJ stand. Rachel looked over and saw Manny smiling at the people dancing. Then she pulled Clark onto the floor. “Let’s get started. You ready to be country again, city boy?”

He smiled, but his eyes held a melancholy light that puzzled her for a moment. Then he said, “I’ll do my best, but I’m more Michael Jackson than Alan Jackson these days when it comes to dancing.”

She smiled back and stepped into his arms. “Just do your best and I’ll be happy with it.”

They caught the beginning of the last chorus and stepped through a basic two-step and ended up near Manny’s booth as the music faded. Rachel caught Manny’s eye and he gave her two thumbs up and a huge smile.

As the intro to “Boot Scoot Boogie” slid out of the speakers, she and Clark lined up side by side and started the heel-toe step to the side. A number of other couples filled in around them, and before the first verse ended at least thirty couples were stepping

through a fairly complex line dance.

When the vocalist sang the line “a shot of that redhead looking at me,” Rachel caught Clark’s eye and winked impishly. He rewarded her with a huge smile, then took her hand as they ended the dance close to the center of the floor.

For a moment – one brief, golden moment – all she could see was Clark’s smiling face. Then a thunderous applause rolled over them as apparently everyone in the room gave the two of them an ovation, complete with cheers and whistles and catcalls. She looked around and saw the faces of people she’d known since high school, people who she’d cheered on football fields or basketball courts or baseball diamonds, people to whom she’d written traffic tickets or even arrested, people who’d insisted that they’d never speak to her again, all smiling and clapping.

Lana caught her eye and winked, then mouthed, “Kiss him!” as she pointed at Clark. Rachel realized he still held her hand, but he’d moved a half-step back to defer to her.

Then Lana abandoned stealth and shouted, “Kiss him!” Others took up the cry until it was about all she could hear. She turned to Clark and lifted one eyebrow.

He tilted his head and almost frowned. Maybe he didn’t want to kiss her. Maybe he just didn’t want to kiss her because three hundred people were yelling at them to kiss.

She leaned closer to him and said, “Maybe if we ask them to contribute more?”

His mouth smiled but his eyes didn’t. “Your affection has never been for sale,” he answered. “Even for a really good cause.”

He was right. This was not the time or the place to do something like that. If Clark were to kiss her, it would mean something to her, but it probably wouldn’t mean the same thing to him. She wouldn’t put him in the position of pretending. And neither of them wanted to start any rumors.

Not yet, anyway.

Instead, she lifted their joined hands over her head, then took a quick bow. Clark followed as soon as he realized what she was doing. As she straightened, she forced her hand to release his, and she stepped away from him.

As soon as they separated, the circle broke up and Manny started Mary Chapin Carpenter’s “Down At the Twist and Shout” on the sound system. A woman Rachel didn’t recognize right away ran up to Clark and asked him to dance with her. He smiled and nodded, then slipped into a nice Cajun two-step. The woman was fighting to find the beat, though.

Rachel watched for a few seconds and decided that she and Clark were much smoother together. This woman danced like she was having a fit of some kind.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to see Lana smiling warily at her. “Hey, Rach! Look, I’m sorry about the ‘kiss him’ thing. I shouldn’t have even thought about it.”

“S’okay. I know you wasn’t tryin’ to start nothin’.”

“Thanks. Hey, I need to visit the ladies’ room. Want to come?”

Rachel didn’t really need to go, but it appeared that Lana wanted to talk privately about something, so she nodded. The two women slipped through the crowd to the bathrooms on the other side of the hall.

They met three other twenty-somethings coming out of the bathroom, all of whom took a moment to fawn over Rachel and wish her father all the best. Lana held the door open for her as the two entered the tile palace. The difference in the sound pressure level was a relief Rachel hadn’t realized she needed.

“Where’s your purse?” Lana asked.

“Left it in Clark’s truck. Didn’t think I’d need it tonight.”

Lana smiled at Rachel’s reflection. “It’s a bit overwhelming out there, isn’t it?”

“Just a little.”

Each woman faced a mirror over side-by-side sinks and

fluffed at their hair. Rachel watched Lana glance around to see if anyone else was with them. It was time to find out what was going on.

“Hey, girlfriend, you got me in here to talk, so let’s talk.”

Lana dug in her purse for a lipstick, then shoved it back in. “I have a problem.”

Rachel waited for a long moment, then said, “It’s just us here. What’s your problem?”

Lana cut her eyes at Rachel, then snapped them away. “I – I’m not sure how I let this happen.”

Lana didn’t continue right away. Rachel listened to the music in the main hall and recognized John Fogarty’s “Center Field.” Odd choice for a benefit dance with a country theme, she thought, but maybe someone requested it.

It reminded her of the woman who’d started dancing with Clark a few moments before. “Hey, do you know the gal who was dancin’ with Clark when we came in here? I seen her around but I don’t know her name.”

“What? Oh – I think it was Jane Clemens. She rents one of Sam Kramer’s offices. She does secretarial work and typing for high school and college students. I think she’s a notary public, too. Why?”

Rachel shrugged. “Just wanted to know her name. Now I do.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“I also got tired of not hearing either of us talk.”

Lana glanced at Rachel and almost smiled. “Okay. My problem is – I’m having an affair with my boss and I can’t figure out how to end it.”

Rachel’s eyes slowly bugged out and her mouth drifted wide open. She took a deep breath, then decided not to ask Lana how she got to be so stupid. This was nothing but big trouble for everyone involved.

Lana Lang was the executive secretary to Smallville’s mayor, Roger Hayes. The man had been a University of Kansas basketball All-American back in the mid 70’s, had been drafted by the Detroit Pistons of the NBA, and had wrecked his knee in an exhibition game his rookie year. The injury had forced his premature retirement from the sport, and he’d used his rookie salary to pay for most of his post-grad law school training. He’d parlayed that career into one in local politics, and now he had an eye on state office.

Roger was liked and respected by everyone Rachel knew. He owned property in and around the county, he had a beautiful wife, three popular and high-achieving children in high school or college, and a net worth in the mid seven-figure range.

And now he was having an affair with his twenty-something blonde secretary. If this got out, it would destroy Mayor Hayes, his political future, and his family.

And it would erase Lana’s future in Smallville. Maybe for the rest of her life. The ongoing disaster and continuing fallout affecting both Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton flashed through her mind.

Rachel tried to speak slowly and unemotionally. “Um – I thought you said he wasn’t bothering you since you told him me and you was friends.”

Lana ducked her head and sighed. “I got to know him and I like him a lot and one night about two months ago we worked late and I was exhausted and he drove me back to my apartment and I invited him in for a cup of coffee and – and I don’t quite know how it happened but it did.”

Rachel’s heart finally slowed down enough to let her speak calmly. “I appreciate your trust. You know I won’t tell no one as long as there’s no criminal implications.”

“There aren’t. Roger wouldn’t allow that.”

“I see.” Rachel took a deep breath. “So why are you tellin’ me? And why now?”

Lana pulled a brush through her already impeccable hair. “I

want you to talk me into breaking it off.”

“What? How’m I supposed to do that?”

Lana stopped brushing and leaned her hands on the sink. “I know I need to end it. I know this is stupid and wrong and dangerous on so many levels. But – but every time he looks at me and gives me that little smile I just melt inside.” She sniffed and took a ragged breath. “I don’t think anyone knows about us, but Smallville is aptly named. It’ll get out if we keep on.” She stopped and gasped. “And I don’t want Clark to know. I want to keep his respect.”

That better be all she wants from him, Rachel thought.

Rachel blinked and refocused. “Lana, you know what you need to do. You probably should quit your job, too. Make it a clean break. If you don’t, this’ll bring him down real hard when folks find out. Won’t do you no good, neither.”

“I know.” She straightened and fluffed her hair with her hands. “I think if I tell him that you found out somehow, he’ll make it easier for me. I just – I don’t think I can say no to him if he gets close enough to kiss me. I just need a little help.”

“You wanna use me as a lever to pry yourself away from him?”

The door opened and three giggling high school girls invaded the room, then quieted down when they saw the “older generation” at the sink. Each of the new girls stepped into a stall and kept up a whispered conversation about a high school football player that Rachel didn’t find at all interesting.

Rachel leaned close to Lana and quietly said, “Can’t believe we were ever that young.”

Lana smiled. “Me either. Will you do it?”

Rachel frowned and shook her head. “I gotta think about this. I’ll call you tomorrow afternoon. You gonna be at home?”

Lana’s eyes told Rachel that Lana understood the subtext, that the question was actually whether or not the lovers had planned a rendezvous the next day. Lana bit her lower lip, then nodded. “I’ll be at my apartment. Alone.”

“I got the number. Now let’s get back out there and party some more. I got to dance with the one what brung me.”

Lana nodded and led them back to the hall.

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Rachel let Clark close the passenger door of the truck for her. She buckled her seat belt as he walked around the hood to the driver’s side. It wouldn’t do at all for the sheriff to be ticketed for not being belted in.

He opened his door and stepped in. “Man, I’m still getting used to all the room in this truck. This is one of the few vehicles I’ve ever driven where I don’t have to slide in sideways or scoot backward into the driver’s seat.”

“Where were you that you had to back into a car?”

He buckled up and started the engine. “I spent some time in India a few years ago, and they don’t have many six-footers walking around. The cars over there are really small. Most of the taller guys are thin as a rail, too, and the adults always gave me plenty of room if they didn’t know me because I was so much bigger than most of them.”

“Just the adults?”

He shifted into Drive and pulled out of the lot. “For some reason the kids almost always swarmed me. I remember one village in the north where I stopped in the middle of the town to ask for directions, and before I realized it I was attacked by what seemed like an entire kindergarten class. I had kids on both legs, hanging from my arms and sitting on my feet, and one determined little girl climbed up my back and sat on my shoulders.”

They laughed together softly. “I bet the adults made you stay for a while after all that.”

He nodded. “They made me feel at home. Everywhere I’ve gone, the sweetest sound I heard was the laughter of children. I love it.”

She didn't answer. She'd been thinking about telling him that she knew his secret, but Lana's bombshell in the bathroom had pushed that thought from the front of her mind. And she couldn't tell him what Lana had said. Nor could she decide whether or not to agree to Lana's request to use her in ending the affair.

It was politics, plain and simple. If Lana were involved with a married vacuum cleaner salesman, Rachel wouldn't even consider getting in the middle of things. But Roger Hayes being the mayor put it on a different level, one that Rachel hated to even think about. She wanted to help Lana, and getting her away from a married illicit lover was a good thing, but letting Lana blackmail him with Rachel's knowledge just felt dirty to her. Ending the affair was the best thing for both of them, and for the town, but Rachel didn't want to wade in the deep end of the political sewer.

And that assumed that everything Lana had told her was true. But why would Lana tell her such a story if it wasn't?

Clark's touch on her hand startled her and yanked her back from her muddled thoughts. "What?!"

"We're here."

The noise from the engine was gone. Clark must have shut off the motor. She looked up and saw her cruiser parked across the street, just where she'd left it. All she had to do was get out, walk over, and drive home.

But she couldn't make herself open the door.

"Rach, is something wrong?"

"Huh? Oh. Wrong? Not with me. Just – got some things on my mind."

"Care to share them? Sometimes it's good to share a burden. Two people can often carry it more easily than one alone."

She sucked on her lips. "Yeah, that's true, but one of the things I can't tell you without I break a confidence."

"Ah. Can't have you violate a confidence. You'll have to carry that load by yourself."

"I know. But I – I got another thing on my mind that I think I should tell you."

He turned toward her and tilted his head. "Are these two things related?"

She snorted a quick laugh. "No. they got no relation at all."

"Okay. Then if you think I can help you with the second thing, I'm willing to listen."

She nodded. "I guess – yeah, maybe I need to tell you. It's actually a secret about another person."

"Oh?" He shifted again. "Are you sure I should know this thing? I wouldn't want you to violate a confidence on this one either."

"I won't." She opened her seat belt and turned so that her left knee was in the seat, almost touching his right thigh. "This is actually about you."

The streetlight shining in his face showed his confusion. "How can you know something about me that I don't know?"

"But you do know it." Rachel closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them and said, "Remember our prom? You had a confrontation with Matt Stearman and a couple of his runnin' buddies in the parking lot. You sent me to your daddy's truck for my safety, and after you guys were done playin' around I went inside to get a doctor for them."

His head turned to the front as his eyes stayed on hers so that he looked at her out of the corners of his eyes. "I remember all that."

"I never told you – not till right now – that I saw what you did to those boys. You could've killed them but you just made sure they weren't going noplac."

His eyes left hers and looked forward. "I'm not proud of what I did, but they were kind of drunk and I'd been studying some Aikido moves—"

"I saw you crush Matt's pistol and throw it out of sight over the dance hall."

He froze.

So did she.

He didn't breathe.

She had to take a breath, so she did.

As she let it out slowly, he relaxed and said, "I was really mad that night and I came close to losing control. They'd already hurt a couple of other guys and terrified their dates. And they'd threatened you."

"I know. I was there. And I thought you did what you had to do. You didn't touch any of them until they tried to hurt you. If they'd turned and walked away, you'd a let 'em go."

He shook his head. "And you've known about me since then?"

"I knew you could do some pretty unusual stuff, but when I started readin' about Superman in the papers and that he was based in Metropolis like you were I figured it was either you or your twin brother you never told me about."

He smiled. "Sorry, no brothers. None I know of, at any rate." A long sigh escaped him. "You obviously haven't told anyone else or I wouldn't have a secret."

She shrugged. "I figure if you wanted everybody in Smallville to know, you'd a bought a full-page ad in the Smallville Post. B'sides, my daddy taught me that the sheriff has to keep the secrets he or she knows unless keepin' 'em endangers public safety. People are safer if Superman has a private life where he can let his hair down. You want to make a difference in the world, and that'd be real hard to do if everybody knew what all you could do. Wouldn't have a minute's peace."

He reached out and took both of her hands in his. "Thank you for keeping my secret. And thank you for understanding." He smiled wider. "You're very kind."

She squeezed his hands for a moment, then whispered, "That's why Lois went all medieval on you, ain't it? You told her and it didn't go so good."

He sighed again and dropped his gaze. "She accused me of betraying her trust, of lying to her about something so fundamental to my inner self. But I honestly don't know how else I could have told her. Or when would have been a better time."

She wanted to say that there never would have been a better time, that Lois was beautiful and smart and talented and was a great reporter but she was too high-strung for him, that he needed a woman who might not be as beautiful but who was at least easy on the eyes and wouldn't be a burden to him and would love him no matter what he did or didn't do.

She wanted to tell him that he needed her.

But she couldn't. Not now. Not yet. Maybe never.

So she settled for saying, "I'm your friend, Clark. Always have been. I'll always be your friend." His smile turned impish for a moment, so she added, "And go all sci-fi nerd on me and tell me this is a perfect Star Trek moment. We ain't fightin' Khan and neither of us is dyin' of radiation poisoning."

He grinned. "Nothing of the sort. I was just thinking that this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

She smiled back. "Humphrey Bogart to Claude Rains at the end of Casablanca. My folks got the video from the library 'bout a month ago and I watched it with them."

He tilted an eyebrow. "Let's not go to war together like they did, okay?"

"Don't wanna go to war with anybody. But I do want you to think about this."

She reached up and touched his face, then drew him toward her. For the first time in her life, Rachel Harris kissed Clark Kent on the lips in real life and not for show or politeness or relief but just because she really wanted to.

After two or three seconds, she slowly drew back. "Hope you're not offended. I just – I wanted you to know how good a friend I can be if you want me to be."

He started to say something, but she turned and snatched at the door handle. “Good night, Clark. You were a very gallant date and I enjoyed every moment I spent with you tonight.”

She stepped over, then shut the door quickly without slamming it. As she walked to her car to go home, she debated with herself whether the kiss was a terrific idea or the stupidest thing she’d ever done or would ever do.

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Lois worked the locks on her apartment door as she juggled her takeout dinner and the mail in the other hand. A stupid joke popped into her mind.

*If you’re ever attacked by clowns or acrobats, go for the juggler.*

She stopped and berated herself for thinking of it. Clark had told her that one.

It was irritating, almost maddening at times, how Clark Kent was still so present in her mind. She was starting to have trouble working up a good mad about him.

Just as the door gave up the fight and opened, Lucy stepped out of the elevator. “Hey, Lois. ‘Sup?”

Lois almost growled. Lucy’s laconic greetings had gone – in Lois’ mind, anyway – from cute to puzzling to exasperating and were now approaching vexing. “About time you showed up. I thought your last class was over at three today.”

“It was. I told you I joined a study group. I want a GPA in the top five percent of my class and I’m not done with the semester.”

“Fine. Can you help me with this? Just take the mail and sort it.”

Lucy did so, then pushed the door open, and when Lois was fully inside she shut and locked it. “We got bills, bills, ad for a dry cleaner, more bills, a postcard from Daddy – he’s in New Mexico for some reason – and ooh! I got another letter from Clark!”

Lois put the food on the table and spoke without turning. “I didn’t know if you were going to be here so I only got enough for me. I’m sorry.”

“No problem. We got some hamburgers and sodas at the study group, so I’m not hungry. I assume you want the bills and Daddy’s postcard?”

“Yes on the postcard. I don’t want the bills, but I’ll take them.”

“Cool. Let me know how much I owe you for my part. You want to read Clark’s letter when I’m done?”

Lois bit the inside of her mouth before grunting, “No. You keep it.”

“Fine. I’ll summarize the good parts for you.”

Lois tried to keep the edge out of her voice. “You don’t have to. Really.”

“Still mad, huh?”

“Don’t go there, Lucy.”

“I still think you overreacted in your overreaction.”

“Will you stop that!”

“Sorry.” She clearly wasn’t. “Anyway, Clark’s letters are fun to read and I’m sure there’s nothing in it that’ll embarrass either of us. You just sit down and eat up and listen.”

Lucy obviously wouldn’t be dissuaded, so Lois poured herself a glass of tea and set out her chicken parmesan and veggie medley meal as Lucy opened the envelope.

“Hmm. He says he’s still living with his parents, and that they’re working him to the bone doing chores.” Lucy paused and chuckled. “He emphasizes that the return address on the envelope is his office in downtown Smallville.” She looked up at her sister. “I didn’t think Smallville *had* a downtown.”

“It’s nothing to write home about,” Lois mumbled around a forkful of broccoli.

Lucy laughed. “That’s funny. That’s the very next thing he wrote. I guess you two still think alike.”

Lois dropped her fork on the paper plate, which muted the

irritated noise she wanted to make. “Don’t go there either, Lucy.”

“Okay, okay, don’t get your panties in a bunch. Let’s see – he said that the former sheriff, Mark Harris, I think I told you that he was in a pretty bad car wreck the week before Clark moved, but he’s doing a lot better now and keeps complaining about his physical therapist being an amateur torturer. The town had a fundraiser for him last weekend, and apparently it was very successful.” Lucy stopped and frowned. “Harris, Harris – wasn’t that the sheriff’s name when you were in Smallville?”

“That was Rachel Harris, his daughter. She was elected after he retired a few years ago.”

“Daughter, huh?” Lucy’s tone drew Lois’ attention. “I guess that’s how he knows so much about her dad’s treatment.”

“He does?”

“Yeah. There’s a good bit of stuff in here about the exercises Mr. Harris is doing, how often he goes to therapy, how happy the doctors are with his progress, and how much help his wife is. Mr. Harris must think his wife’s a saint, judging by how Clark describes their relationship.”

Lois fought the urge to stand and leave the room. “What does he say about Rachel?”

Lucy frowned and scanned the rest of the three-page letter. “Not a lot. He mentions that she solved a rare cattle rustling case in near-record time and how there’s talk of a state commendation for her department for the way they handled the situation and that he’s interviewed her about it and is going to write about the case for his column.”

Lois nodded. “Anything else?”

“Well – he says toward the end that he hates that he had to leave Metropolis, and he wishes he hadn’t hurt you, but that this is working out pretty well for him and maybe it was for the best after all.” Lucy lowered the paper and almost whispered, “I think he thinks you might have done him a favor.”

Lois didn’t respond.

Lucy looked further and frowned. “Huh. If I’m reading this right, he’s building a new life for himself in ‘flyover country,’ whatever that means, and – and I think he’s trying to forget what happened between the two of you.”

“Good. It’ll save him some energy.”

Lucy shook her head. “I feel so sorry for you. You better remember that if he can forget what happened to break up the two of you, it’ll mean he can forget about how he felt about you. Are you sure you want that?”

Lois gritted her teeth. “It’s water under the bridge now. The past is the past, not the present and not the future.”

Lucy nodded without speaking, then she refolded the letter and slid it back into the envelope. She put both on the coffee table in the living room. “I have some writing to do for a class assignment, Lois, so I’m heading to my room. If I don’t see you before lights out, have a good night.”

The door closed and Lois was left in the front room with that letter from Clark. Lucy had offered to let her read it, but that wasn’t a good idea. It might make Lois regret shoving Clark out of her life.

Judging by the way Clark had written about his new life and how he seemed to be in close touch with Rachel Harris, maybe he no longer wanted Lois in his life. It was telling that he sent letters to Lucy but not to her. Lois knew that Clark always sent something personal to Perry when he emailed his articles, and she thought that Jimmy had an ongoing email correspondence with him. She hadn’t heard from him directly, nor had she responded to the indirect attempts he’d made through others to communicate. Apparently his latest letter to Lucy hadn’t included such a message.

It was obvious that Lois was no longer a part of his life.

And wasn’t that what she’d wanted?

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## Chapter Sixteen

Rachel put her fork down and dabbed her mouth with her napkin. “You want I should help with the dishes, Mom?”

“That’s okay, honey. I’m glad you were able to come to church with us today. Being sheriff sometimes takes you out of services, and I miss you when you’re not there.”

“I know. I don’t like missin’ ‘em myself. And now I gotta go back to the office and make a phone call.”

“A business call or a personal one?” her dad asked.

Rachel quirked her mouth for a moment, then said, “Both, I guess. And no, I can’t talk about it so don’t ask.”

Her mom’s smile dampened but didn’t vanish. “Aw, then you’re not calling Clark.”

Rachel rolled her suddenly teenaged eyes and whined, “Mom!”

Her parents laughed. Her dad said, “You go take care of business, Sheriff.”

“I’m not puttin’ on my uniform and I’m not really gonna be in the office. I just need some privacy ‘cause this is a very personal and private thing. I hope you don’t mind if I borrow your truck for the day.”

“No problem. It needs to be driven and I can’t get behind the wheel yet. Go take care of the adult responsibilities you carry so well.”

“Will do.” She stood and carried her dishes to the sink. “Y’all need anything while I’m out?”

“I don’t. What about you, Janey?”

“We’re pretty low on laundry soap. I’ll give you some money if you’ll—”

“Nah, I got it.” She scooped up her keys and headed for the door. “See y’all in a bit.”

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Lana stood. Then she sat again. Then she stood and made two laps around her living room. She strode into the kitchen and grabbed a Pepsi out of the fridge, then put it on the cabinet without opening it.

She stopped and stared at the condensation on the three unopened Pepsi cans already on the counter.

“I’m not nervous,” she said to the kitchen. “I’m terrified.”

She opened the fridge and put three of the cans back in the shelf on the door, then popped the top on the one she’d just pulled out. She took a long drink and burped, then put her hand to her mouth. “That’s very unladylike, you know,” she told the sink.

She blinked and thought for a moment, then decided to keep talking to pass the time before Rachel’s call. “That’s an understatement, too. A young lady of my demographic who was really a lady would be too smart to have an affair with a married boss who’s more than twice her age and who’s politically vulnerable to scandal. If Roger were a local lawyer, or maybe a used car dealer, it would hurt him if everybody found out, but *he’s the mayor!* People will find out about me and he’ll never get elected to anything again! It would end his career and destroy his marriage. And who’d trust me, the evil scarlet woman who destroyed Roger’s life and family?”

“It has to stop.” She took another sip. “It never should have started. It’s going to destroy us both.”

Lana paced back to the living room and put her soda down on the end table but didn’t sit. “How could I have been so stupid?” she asked the couch. “Marcy and the kids were out of town visiting her parents. The whole office had been working long hours all week and – and that Friday night everyone else was gone. He finally stopped just before nine-thirty and told me to go home. I told him my car was in the shop – it was, too, they had to replace the alternator – and I’d hitched a ride with one of the other girls and I’d forgotten about my car until I picked up my purse and looked for my keys. Roger offered to drive me home. I said yes. I invited him in for coffee. We sat and talked while the coffee

brewed and he told me I reminded him of his wife when they were first starting out, that I worked as hard as she ever did back then.”

She sighed and turned to the silent TV. “I think he misses those times with her. She’s so busy with the kids and the house and her charitable work that she doesn’t have much time for him and I felt sorry for him so I hugged him and kissed him and he didn’t let me go and I didn’t pull back and he kissed me and I kissed him back and I forgot who I was and where I was and who he was and – and we never got to the coffee.”

Her eyes misted over and she turned to her front door. “It was here! We were right here in this room! He begged me to forgive him and I told him it was as much my fault as his and we both said it had to be a one-time mistake and it couldn’t happen again but it – I couldn’t – he looked so lonely and he tried to hide it and I stayed late one night the next week and we – we – right there in his office and I cried and he thought he’d hurt me but I told him I loved him and he – that’s when he said he loved me too and he said we were both insane and I told him he was right but whatever time he had for me I’d accept and never ask for more.”

She dropped to her knees and wailed. “I have to stop! I have to but I can’t!”

The phone in the kitchen rang. Then it rang a second time.

On the third ring, Lana forced herself to stand and go answer it. She picked up the handset from the wall as the fourth ring ended.

“Hello?” she sniffed.

“Lana? It’s Rachel. You want to talk now?”

“Uh – yeah. Wait, can you come over? I’d rather talk face-to-face.”

Rachel’s huffed breath bounced through the line. “Look, I don’t want to get any more wrapped up in this than I already am. It really ain’t my business, ‘cept it is because it’s mayor stuff and I gotta deal with him, but I don’t wanna end up as the bad guy or have anyone afraid I’m gonna blab. Best thing for you to do is end this yourself without my interference.”

Lana leaned against the wall and slid down to the floor. “I don’t know if I can. I was just telling my living room all about it and they were no help at all.”

“Telling your – your living room?”

“Yes.”

“You mean like – you’re talking to your furniture ‘bout this?”

“Yes. None of them gave me an answer. They’re no help at all.”

There was no sound for a long moment, then Rachel said, “I’m coming over. You still alone?”

“Yes. I don’t expect anyone for the rest of the day.”

“Just hang on, girl. I’m coming.”

“Th-thank you.”

“See you in – wait. You mind if I bring someone else? Someone who’ll keep a closed mouth no matter what?”

Lana started. “Someone else? Who? Pastor Bryant? No, please—”

“No. Not the pastor. You prob’ly wanna talk to him later, but the person I got in mind can help. Knows a lot about keepin’ secrets.”

She sniffed again. “Well – okay. Just – let me tell her myself.”

“I’ll let you do all the talkin’. Be there as soon as we can.”

“All right.”

Lana hung up the phone and wondered who Rachel would bring. She hoped the woman would be as understanding as Rachel had been. Maybe it was someone who’d been in a similar situation and could help her find a way out.

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Lana walked back from the bathroom to the living room and glanced at the clock. Rachel had called over an hour before and she still wasn’t there. Time was passing and she was still impaled and bleeding on the horns of her dilemma. Rachel had to help her!

Lana wasn't sure she could take the stress much longer. It would be horrible to break down crying in the office while Roger's wife Marcy was there and have her learn that — that Lana—

She put herself in Marcy's place and tried to imagine the betrayal and pain and shame and emotional body blows a wronged wife would receive. She'd never thought about it before. She was stealing another woman's husband, something she'd never believed could happen to her. Adultery? Not Lana Lang! Lana was an honest, upright, respected professional woman in the community. She was a churchgoing woman, never drank in public, was never heard to swear or gossip, was friendly with everyone in town. And if she'd built a life with a man for almost three decades and been hit with a hysterical mistress—

She shuddered. Lana Lang was a married man's mistress. The realization made her nauseous.

A mistress was a kept woman who lived in a house or apartment where the man paid the bills and bought the groceries and picked out her clothes and was at his beck and call for sex. Lana wasn't that!

But even if he wasn't paying her to have sex with him, she was still his mistress. Lana was "the other woman" in an illicit love affair. She was disgusted with herself.

And she still didn't know how to end it.

A knock on the door snapped her out of her state. Finally! Rachel!

She strode to the door and yanked it open. "I'm so glad you're—"

Rachel stood at the door with a forced smile on her face. Behind her shoulder, Clark stood there with a similar mouth-only grin.

All three of them stood silent until Clark said, "Hi, Lana. Can we come in?"

Lana backed out of the doorway and turned toward the kitchen. She heard one of them close the door as two pair of steps whispered over the floor behind her.

Lana stopped behind one of the dining chairs and grabbed the back for support. Without turning, she said, "What did she tell you?"

"I told him I had a friend who needed help and I thought he could give it," Rachel answered. "He don't know nothin' past that yet."

"She did tell me her friend was asking her furniture for advice," he added.

"That's what got you here?"

He shrugged. "I didn't think I could do worse than the coffee table."

Lana nodded once but didn't move otherwise. When she reviewed this moment later — much later — she'd probably laugh. Then she'd cry for a long time.

After a short silence, Clark said, "Look, Lana, if this is something you don't think I need to hear about, I'll leave. But you're my friend, and I can tell you're hurting. I'd like to help if I can. And if you'll allow me to try."

Lana sniffed. "And if I say no?"

"Then I'll still be your friend, just outside your home instead of inside it."

Lana almost spluttered a chuckle. "Fine," she managed. "Just — I hope you don't hate me when I — when you know about all this."

"I won't hate you," he said softly. "Shall we sit down? Might be easier."

Lana nodded and sat in the chair she held, then dropped her gaze to the placemat before her. Rachel sat to her left, and Clark sat to Rachel's left, across from Lana.

Lana sighed deeply. "I guess I better start or I'll have to feed you both." She peeked up and saw one corner of Clark's mouth lift. Rachel just shook her head.

"Okay," Lana said. "I — I'm having an affair with my boss and I don't know if I have the strength to — to break it off."

Clark's mouth opened for a moment, then it closed. His eyes stayed wide behind his glasses. He didn't say anything.

Lana looked up at him. "I know you've lost all your respect for me and I don't blame you a bit. I don't have any respect for myself now."

She sniffled and brushed at her nose with her hand. "I wish I could go back a couple of months and change everything, not let him kiss me, not let myself enjoy it, not—" She stopped and waved her hands. "Sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sure you don't want those details. Look, I know this is wrong, I know I'm a horrible person for letting it go on this long, I know it needs to end, but I — I can't! I've tried and tried but I can't make myself tell him goodbye and mean it!"

He sat back and crossed his arms. His face assumed what Lana had always mentally referred to as his "think deep thoughts" expression. He looked around the kitchen, pursed his lips, and made his eyebrows dance.

Lana got up and went to the fridge. She took out two cans of Pepsi and one of Mountain Dew, then put them on the table and sat again. She looked at Rachel and gestured at the cans, so Rachel took a Pepsi and popped the top. The noise drew Clark's attention and he touched the green and black can of Dew. Lana nodded, so he popped it open and took a long drink, then set it down.

He turned and leaned his elbows on the table. "I'd like to suggest a course of action to you. Whether you decide to follow my advice or not, I will never reveal anything we discuss here today to anyone. You have my word."

His word. Clark always — *always* — kept his word. "Thank you," she whispered. "What's your advice?"

"I think you should call in sick to your office tomorrow morning. About nine-thirty, you call an executive recruiter I know in Topeka and tell her you're looking to move up, that you've accomplished everything you needed to do here and you're ready for another challenge. I'll give you her name and number before we go."

Lana closed her eyes and ducked her head. "That almost sounds like I'm looking for a wealthier man to seduce."

Clark shook his head. "If I thought that was how you operated, I would've left ten minutes ago. And I seriously doubt Rachel would've asked me to come with her. This isn't who you are at your core, Lana. You're a good woman who's let herself step into a bad situation, and now you're trying to escape it. You're trying to do that with the least amount of pain to everyone else involved. You're trying to do the right thing."

Lana nodded. "Okay. I call this woman, I assume I fax her my resumé, then what?"

"I'll call Gloria at nine and explain that you're looking for a new job in a new place. I won't tell her anything personal about you. I'll just say that I've known you most of my life and any company who hires you will hit the jackpot."

Tears threatened to spill again. "Thank you. You — I don't deserve friends like you two."

Clark and Rachel each took one of her hands. "We're your friends, Lana," Rachel said. "This ain't a question of who deserves what. Friends support each other. You came through for me when my daddy had his wreck. Now I'm helpin' you out with your wreck. Like Clark said, this ain't you. It's why you're so tore up inside about it. I needed help and you gave it. Now you need our help and we're givin' it." Rachel squeezed Lana's hand. "We got your back, girlfriend."

The fluid tracked down Lana's cheeks and she pulled her hands back. Clark's handkerchief between her fingers surprised her and she glanced up to thank him, but her emotions overwhelmed her and she broke down.

Rachel scooted her chair closer and wrapped Lana in a warm

embrace. Clark didn't touch her, but he didn't leave either. He just sat there with his clasped hands on the table and a soft smile on his face, gentle and strong and helpful like the good friend he was.

Lana didn't deserve such good friends. But she had them and they weren't going anywhere. She would lean on them and borrow their strength and make it through this horrible time in her life.

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Rachel climbed in her daddy's truck and waited for Clark to close his door before she spoke. "Think she'll make the call?"

He sighed. "I sure hope so. I'd like to see her get a fresh start somewhere else." He turned to face her. "And I want to thank you for dropping me into that situation with no warning at all."

She turned the key and pulled into traffic. "I didn't want to be the one to tell you. If she hadn't spilled the beans, all you'd know is that Lana had a problem."

"A problem bad enough for her to consult her couch for suggestions."

She frowned at him. "Quit complainin'. Clark Kent got to help save someone today."

His face changed and she turned back to the road. After a moment, he said, "I'm sorry. You're right. Superman does a lot of that, but Clark doesn't often get the opportunity." He put his hand on hers and squeezed. "Thank you."

His touch made her stop thinking of Lana for a few seconds, then his hand slid away. "You're welcome," she managed. "You want to get an early dinner? Or a late lunch? Or a mid-afternoon snack?"

Clark chuckled. "A meal that comes between breakfast and lunch is 'brunch,' so is a meal that comes between lunch and dinner called 'lunner?'"

She laughed. She always felt good when Clark made jokes, no matter how bad they might be. It meant he was relaxed and comfortable. "What are you in the mood for? We can go to Maisie's or pick up subs or hit the Wendy's drive-through."

He tilted his head in apparent thought, then said, "How about sub sandwiches at the drive-through and we eat at my office? I have a couch Mr. Kramer gave me. He said it came from a dentist's waiting room."

"As long as there ain't no leftover loose teeth in it. Don't wanna get bit in a sensitive spot."

He grinned again and shook his head. "I wouldn't think getting bitten anywhere would be something on your to-do list today. You don't need any added stress."

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Rachel walked back to Clark's office from the second-floor ladies' room with a smile on her face. The half-hour and more that they'd spent with Lana had gone more smoothly than she'd hoped. And Clark's offer to help Lana get out of her situation had been perfect – he'd set up a path for her to follow but hadn't tried to force her to travel it. If she really wanted to get free of her situation, she'd have to take definite action.

The early dinner with Clark had been great, too. For Rachel, the day had been a win all around.

Now all she needed was the courage to take one more step with him.

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Clark tapped the keyboard on his laptop twice more, then sat back and smiled. His latest travel piece was coursing along the Internet to Perry White's inbox, along with his mother's recipe for snickerdoodles and her admonition to Alice to make small batches – unless, of course, she was planning to drop off a basket of them in the newsroom. Drop them off personally, of course, unless she wanted to risk a spike Perry's blood sugar. The man couldn't say no to a donut, a fancy cigar, or a plate of snickerdoodles.

The article he'd just sent was a profile of the Grand Canyon in Arizona. The first written references were from Spanish soldiers – specifically Francisco Vázquez de Coronado in 1540 – who

were searching in vain for Indian gold, but the accounts he found were lacking in the detail he wanted. So his next deep dive into the reference material dug up John Wesley Powell's accounts from 1869 through 1872, when he and his party were the first Euro-Americans to travel down the Colorado River for the length of the canyon.

He'd visited the canyon the previous week. A park ranger named Christie Powers provided her account of hiking the canyon and kayaking the river with a group of her friends. Her help had been invaluable and he'd given her full credit in the article, including her admonition to drink a lot of water whether or not one was thirsty. The temperature at river level, except at midday when the sun shone directly on the bottom of the canyon, was lower than it might have been because the flowing water dispersed the heat. Clark had witnessed Christie's group of hikers emerge at the canyon rim, then had watched every member purchase and gulp a two-liter bottle of water from a convenience store near the railroad terminal. Every bottle had been emptied within thirty minutes. They'd been exhausted and slightly dehydrated but happy.

He caught Rachel's steps as she approached the open door to his office. As she walked in, he impishly chirped, "Welcome back. Everything come out all right?"

She stopped as if she'd tripped, then sneered at him. He laughed and she joined in. "Good thing you can write, Clark. You ain't gonna make it as a standup comic."

"You laughed."

"Only cause you did. Didn't want you to feel too bad laughin' at your own weak jokes."

"Fine, I'll keep my day job."

"Don't you mean 'jobs' as in two of 'em?'"

He sobered. "Yeah, I kinda forgot you knew. It'd be easier to remember if you'd act, oh, I don't know – impressed? Just a little bit?"

She grinned and sat on the corner of the desk closest to him. "I don't act nervous when I'm roustin' drug dealers, even if I'm really so scared I can't breathe good. Bein' sheriff's taught me not to react too much on the outside."

He nodded. "I guess calm and controlled is better than volcanic fury and accusations of betrayal."

Rachel sighed and put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry she blew up like that. That ain't who I thought she was."

"It's not who I thought she was either." He slapped his hands on the desk and stood. "No sense sitting here and moping over the past. Didn't you say you needed to stop at the grocery store for your mom?"

"Yes, but I – I want to talk to you about somethin' before we go."

"Okay."

"Um – I need to sit down first."

He started to return to his desk chair but she stopped him.

"No. I need – can you sit on the couch? With me?"

He felt himself frown for a moment, then he smiled. "Sure."

He sat at one end and turned toward her so that his left knee was on the middle cushion. She sat at the other end with her knees forward.

Her hands grabbed each other and lifted, then settled in her lap. She didn't look at him. Whatever this was, it was important to her. "Rach, relax. Whatever it is, you can tell me. We're friends, remember?"

She nodded and stared at the far wall. "I – I don't want to feel like I'm pushing you to do or be something you don't wanna do or be. I just want you to – to know how I feel."

Uh-oh. This sounded like – he suddenly wanted to hear her say it.

"I want to say – oh, crap!" Her hands flew up and she reddened. "I'm sorry. I don't know the best way to say this but

I've come too far and I can't stop now." She turned to face him. "Clark – can I kiss you?"

He sat up and put both feet on the floor. This time he turned to look at the far wall and think.

She's going to tell me she loves me, he thought. And I don't know what to do about that. But a kiss? How will it hurt?

He turned back to her. "Yes."

She smiled and slid toward him, but stopped as their knees touched. Her hands rose and gently captured his face as she guided her lips toward his.

Her mouth was soft and warm and gentle and he lost himself in the moment.

After a few brief seconds, she pulled back. When he managed to open his eyes, he saw her smile. "How do you feel?" she whispered.

He licked his lips and thought, then told her the truth. "I – I'm not sure. I mean, I like you and respect you and I think very highly of you and that was a very good kiss but I don't—"

She touched his lips with two fingers. "Hush," she breathed. "Lemme try again."

Before he could either object or agree, she leaned in a second time.

This one was – better. It was deeper without intruding, firmer without pushing, intimate without stepping over the line. It was also longer, and he wondered for an instant about her air supply.

Only for an instant.

This time his hands rose to her sides and pressed very lightly. When her mouth slipped to one side of his face, he found that *he* needed to breathe.

She slid under his arm that was against the couch and tightly wrapped her arms around him from under his shoulders. His left arm slipped around her neck and his right wrapped around her ribs. He squeezed very gently and held her close.

They held that position for long moments. Clark hoped Rachel enjoyed the embrace as much as he did.

Finally he moved his lips to her ear. "Is that what you wanted to say to me?"

Her shoulders bounced with suppressed laughter. "Partly." She pulled back and beamed at him from four inches away. "What I really want to tell you is – I love you."

He'd expected it. The words still stunned him. And a small part of him wanted to repeat them back to her.

But he couldn't. Not yet. Not with so much unresolved conflict in his life. He had to explain it to her.

"Rachel, I don't—"

She kissed him again. It would have been rude to talk at that point.

She pulled back and put those same fingers on his lips. "Don't say nothin'. I don't expect anything from you, leastways not now. There's time for that later, assumin' you decide you feel the same way. No pressure, okay?"

He took a breath. "That's kind of how Lana described her feelings earlier."

She pulled further back and nodded. "I know. Difference is, you ain't married and I don't work for you. Y'know, ol' Roger could get a sexual harassment suit filed on him if he don't do right by Lana and let her go." She lifted his hands and kissed each one in turn. "You can't."

He shrugged. "Yeah, but you started this. I might sue you."

She chuckled. "All I'd need to do is get a lady judge, get you in the courtroom so she can see you, let me describe what a good kisser you are, and she'd slap her gavel down and yell 'Case dismissed! C'mere, you red-hot witness you! I wanna make sure the sheriff told the truth!'"

He laughed with her.

He also thought about Rachel. She was kind, she was honest to a fault, she was diligent in upholding the law, she was

trustworthy, she was calm and controlled, and she didn't demand anything of him. On top of that, she was more than pretty, she had a terrific smile, and she really was a wonderful kisser.

He thought he might be a little bit in love with Rachel Harris. And at that moment, he didn't know whether that was a good thing or a bad thing.

He did know that her confession of love warmed his heart. So maybe "good thing" would come in first in that race.

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## Chapter Seventeen

Lois picked up the ringing desk phone. "Lois Lane, Daily Planet."

"Lois!" a voice hissed. "Got something big!"

One of her snitches. But which one? "I assume you'll want your usual fee?"

"I don't care if I get a single Fig Newton out of this! You need to get to the docks and meet the Star of New Troy!"

Ah, Bobby Bigmouth. He always had good stuff. "Why? What will I see?"

"Just get there! Intergang! Lives depend on it!"

"But what—"

"I'll meet you there and fill you in! Hurry!"

"Bobby, I—"

The click in her ear told her he'd hung up.

The last two times she'd talked to Bobby, he'd been surly and barely communicative. She'd gotten good info both times, and he'd accepted the food she'd provided, but he'd refused to banter with her. Apparently he was in the it's-Lois'-fault-Clark-is-gone camp, along with much of Metropolis. Two months – eight long weeks and a couple of days – wasn't long enough for some people to forgive and forget.

No matter. Intergang was trying something involving a cruise ship. And she had inside information on it.

Mad Dog Lane was on the job.

She grabbed her purse, jacket, and work tools, then yelled, "Perry! Going down to the docks! Got a hot tip on something!"

She didn't wait for her boss' puzzled shout of "You what?" before she sprinted up the ramp and down the stairs.

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The dock on the north side of Metropolis wasn't too crowded, but more than forty media people jostled for what each thought was the ideal position. All of them held notebooks or still cameras except for two TV crews with cameras on portable stands. A newly christened cruise ship was coming to the city, and this was an event sure to capture the attention of most citizens for at least an hour or two.

Lois saw Bobby at the edge of the parking area and casually hurried to him. All he had time for was two quick sentences about a threat to the new ship and a name – Sean McKenzie of Intergang, also known as The Mad Bomber – but it was enough. Then he vanished as if he'd never been there.

One day she'd follow him and figure out that little trick of his. Just not now.

In a moment, she was among those who watched as the "Star of New Troy," the newest ship of the Mid-Atlantic Cruise Line, approached its berth on the south shore of Hob's Bay. The ship was due to dock, take on supplies and fuel, perform any necessary last-minute maintenance, then four days later she'd board her passengers for an end-of-summer cruise and set sail for the Florida Keys. Lois shook her head and wondered if she could convince Perry to put her aboard the ship to report on its first voyage. She could sell it as a working vacation – yeah, go as a single woman looking for adventure, and she could just picture how well Perry would—

Not two seconds after the thought came to her, she and the rest of the media teams felt a strong vibration in the dock under their feet. A moment after that, the sound of a distant explosion

reached their ears.

Smoke billowed from the liner's stern even as Lois watched. Bobby Bigmouth had been right again – Intergang was trying to mount a campaign of extortion and intimidation in Metropolis. The cruise line's owners hadn't paid the two million dollar protection fee, and now their flagship was in danger.

Her first panicked thought of *Where is Superman?* was immediately replaced by the angry retort *He's in Kansas, you idiot! Where you sent him!*

Superman was needed here in Metropolis. It was Lois' fault he wasn't available.

She shoved that guilty thought aside and began dictating into her hand-held recorder. "This is Lois Lane at the north dock of Hob's Harbor. The Mid-Atlantic Cruise Line's latest addition to their fleet, the Star of New Troy, has just suffered an explosion in the stern. Unconfirmed reports say that this is not a terrorist attack, but rather the result of the cruise line's refusal to pay a protection fee to blackmailers."

At least Intergang had attacked the ship before the passengers had boarded. Apparently the gang was willing to seriously damage or destroy a multi-million-dollar cruise ship, but weren't willing to risk hundreds of passengers' lives. Of course, the implicit threat to life and limb was right there in the bay for anyone to see, with the ship wallowing aimlessly in the water.

"I can see fireboats already moving toward the liner – their response time is outstanding – and there are people running toward the lifeboat davits on the side of the ship that I can see. They're moving quickly but without panic to evacuate the ship. Two boats are full now and they're lowering—"

Suddenly the big ship shuddered and seemed to shake her shoulders. Nearly all the people on board stumbled and fell to whatever deck they occupied. Lois saw two who tumbled over the side rail toward the water. Then the dock vibrated beneath her feet once again.

It had to be a second explosion, smaller than the first but deeper in the ship.

She didn't have time to record her thought before a red-and-blue smear of color streaked down from the sky and caught the two people who'd fallen overboard just before they could hit the surface. Superman quickly deposited them on shore, perhaps a hundred yards behind the media contingent, then streaked back toward the ship. Many of the media people turned and sprinted to the new arrivals in hopes of getting information from them.

Lois hesitated, then kept watching the ship and recording. "There's been a second explosion, also in the stern. Superman is on the scene and has already rescued two people who fell from the ship. He's moved them to the parking lot, which doesn't have many cars in it, and I assume he wants them to be where first responders can get to them quickly. Yes, that's it, I hear sirens now."

One TV camera crew had run to the back with the balance of the reporters. The other had stayed in place and was still filming. She heard a cameraman shout, "Wow! This is like shooting the Hindenburg crash! And we have better cameras!"

She made a note of the station logo on the camera and decided she'd chew out the camera crew later. She turned back to the ship and fixed her attention on Superman's rescue of the rest of the crew.

"Police cars and ambulances are arriving in the parking lot now. Very quick response times. There are four – no, five lifeboats being lowered on the starboard side of the ship. I can't see the port side from here. Superman seems to be focused on taking people who either can't get to the lifeboats or appear to be injured. Oh, look! Some of the crewmembers are signaling Superman. It looks like they're calling for his help for injured people. Here he comes – yes, he's taking the man he's carrying directly to an ambulance. They have him now, he's being treated, and Superman is already

back at the ship. I've heard no sonic booms from him. I guess the ship is too close for him to move that fast. Or maybe it's not safe for the passengers. He has another person – not bringing this one to shore, he just put whoever that was in one of the lifeboats. Now he's back on the ship – I can't see him, I think he went below deck – wow! He just flew out of the hole in the stern deck, I assume where both explosions happened. He's got two people and he just landed with them beside the ambulances behind me and he's gone again."

She trotted to the end of the pier. "He's at the stern, just hanging in the air – now he's diving in through the hole in the deck. I can't tell what he's doing. Two men on this side of the ship are guiding the remaining crew into the lifeboats. It's hard to be sure from this distance, but I still don't see any panic among them. No one seems to be pushing or shoving others to get off. They all appear to be disciplined enough to do their jobs and evacuate calmly."

She turned to see the TV camera pointed in her general direction. She felt like making a gesture they'd have to censor, but knew that Perry would be mad if she did, so she refrained. Instead, she waved and mouthed slowly and clearly, "Hello, Daily Planet!"

That'll show the TV people who was Number One in the Metropolis news game.

She turned back to the stricken ship. "The ship has settled at the stern and it appears to be listing to port. There's a definite angle on the deck, but I don't see any panic yet. I see two – no, three – no, I make it four lifeboats coming around the bow of the ship from the far side and heading in our direction. As far as I can tell, all of them are full or nearly so. It looks as if everyone will get off safely.

"Superman hasn't reappeared yet. The ship seems to have stopped moving completely. Wait, it seems to be coming back to vertical. Hard to tell from here, but I think the list is correcting. I don't know why at this point, although I believe Superman is at least partly responsible.

"I don't see anyone on the ship – wait, I see three – no, four people on the lifeboat deck. I think at least one of them is an officer. That man is waving and pointing and the other three are paying attention to him. The officer just handed something to one of the men. The three are now running to the bow and the officer is climbing a ladder. I think he's headed for the bridge.

"The fireboats slowed down for the lifeboats and then steered around them, but both of them are at the liner's stern now. They look like they're about – they just started spraying water on the liner! Superman just came out of the hole in the stern deck and zipped down to one of the boats. Now he's back on the liner and that fireboat has changed the angle of the water it's spraying. My guess is that he's directing the water spray onto a hot spot of some kind."

She took a moment to make sure her recorder was working, then continued. "I see two tugboats headed out to the liner now. They're moving slowly around the lifeboats, I assume to keep from swamping them with the tugs' wakes. At that rate, they won't be near enough to the ship to move it for – maybe half an hour.

"Whoa! Superman just dove to the near tug and now he's talking to someone I assume is the captain. Now he's on the other tug. I can't tell – yes, he has some of those huge ropes tugboats use to tow ships. Superman looks like he's looping the ropes onto those massive round things on the bow of the liner where they tie up to the dock – capstans? Yes, that's it! Oh! The tugs are turning to bring the ship to the dock. The fireboats are still spraying the liner's stern – wow! Now Superman is deflecting the water flow from above the deck to the hole in the stern. That's a lot of pressure, too! The smoke seems to be lessening, and he – now he's below the stern deck again.

"The tugs are getting closer to the dock now. Let me look at the ambulance area – yes, it appears that all of the injured are

being treated or have already been transported. Once again, Superman has saved a number of lives here in Metropolis.”

The irony of her last sentence startled her for a moment. He almost hadn't made it. He'd almost been too late.

And if people had died because he'd been too late it would have been her fault.

No! she insisted to herself. None of this is my fault! If he hadn't betrayed me he'd still be here in Metropolis when we need him!

She had to make herself remember that.

She turned off the recorder in her hand and watched the progress of the lifeboats. They seemed to aim for one of the other small boats in the harbor, support vessels or even pleasure craft. It looked like none of the occupants were injured.

She relaxed a little.

The hero flew over her head with one more passenger and landed near the ambulance area, so she started running toward him. As she got closer, she turned the recorder back on and held it high. “Superman!” she shouted. “Superman! Lois Lane of the Daily Planet! Can you give me a statement?”

His eyes met hers for a moment, then his gaze swung away. His face didn't change when he saw her. He had to have heard her. She knew he'd recognized her.

He'd simply ignored her.

The other reporters were shouting questions and pointing microphones at him in a clashing cacophony of query. “Superman!” yelled one of the TV talking heads, one Lois didn't recognize. “What caused the explosion? Was it a flaw in the design of the ship?”

She frowned. Someone had the cart before the horse. Reporters should never – not ever – assume a conclusion before gathering the evidence. And she knew more than that guy did, thanks to Bobby Bigmouth. But she needed confirmation from Superman for her story.

Superman glared at the TV guy and spoke sternly. “I advise you to do what the police, maritime authorities, and the National Transportation and Safety Board will do. They will investigate the cause of this incident and take the necessary steps. At this point in time, there is no reason to assume that either the design or the workmanship in the liner is at fault.”

The TV guy snapped, “So was it sabotage?”

Superman took a firm step toward the man and said, “I already told you that you'll have to talk to the responsible authorities. I can't tell you why this happened because I don't know. I advise you to publish only that which you can confirm, sir, else you might find yourself facing legal action.”

Lois tried again. “Superman! Can you tell us about any injuries among—”

“You'll have to talk to the police and city medical authorities about that.”

“But don't you—”

Superman lifted up a few feet and called out, “I'm sorry, I have to go.”

Then he vanished into the sky.

Well. Clark seemed to be holding a grudge against Lois. She really couldn't blame him. She'd threatened his privacy, his personal life, his family, and his friends. Exposing Clark as Superman would destroy him on a personal level, and she hadn't taken back her threat to do so. No wonder he wouldn't talk to her.

No matter. She had a story to write up. The rift in her heart wouldn't keep her from doing her job.

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Lois was almost to her desk when Jimmy stopped her and handed her a note. “What's this?”

“What does it look like? Read it yourself.” He stalked away without looking back.

She unfolded the note and took another step, then stopped.

Superman had sent her a message.

He wanted to meet her on the roof.

She dropped her purse and recorder in her desk drawer, grabbed a notebook and pencil, then headed to the stairs. She'd be a bit out of breath when she got there, but it was faster than the elevator. And she'd have to take the stairs from the top floor to the roof anyway.

She finally opened the door and looked around. Superman was sitting in the middle of the roof with his arms around his knees and his head held high, facing away from her toward the front of the building. She couldn't see his face.

Maybe he was here to give her the statement he'd denied her at the dock.

Lois walked slowly toward him to give herself time to get her breathing under control. When she was within arm's reach, she stopped and said, “I'm here.”

“I want to talk to you.”

“Okay. Can you tell me if the cruise liner you helped to save today was sabotaged?”

His head turned and he glared at her. “That's not what I want to talk about.”

She told herself to stay calm and matter-of-fact with him. “What do you want to talk about?”

He rocked forward, rose to his feet, and stood facing away from her. “I want you to stop writing about me.”

“Wh-what? Do what?”

“Stop writing about me. No rescues, no disasters, no treaties, no kittens, no nothing. Don't write about me at all. Don't even mention me in a story.”

Stop writing – she *never* thought he'd require that of her. Just who did he think he was, anyway?

His unreasonable demand angered her. “I can't stop writing stories about Superman! The things you do are legitimate news! You know that as well as I do!”

He turned toward her and narrowed his eyes. “Perhaps I should make myself completely clear. I don't want to appear in any story you write. I don't want to be a part of your byline. I absolutely do not want you to ask me questions at a Superman incident.”

She backed up a step to escape his intensity. “You – you can't put a restriction like that on me! You're a public figure! You're fair game for any news organization! You – this is not reasonable! It's not right!”

“And you're such an expert on right and wrong.”

“That was different and you know it!”

He lifted his hands to either side and blew out a breath through clenched front teeth. “I told you my secret because I wanted to share it with you.”

She pressed her lips together and didn't respond.

He took a step closer and lowered his hands. “It was a terrible call. Worst call of my life. You decided – without any real evidence, without stopping to think about it – that I was a bad person and you didn't want me in your city or in your life or at your job or anywhere near you.”

He leaned forward and flexed his fingers as if they were trying to close on their own. “You rejected reality and substituted your own, one without me in it. I have news for you, Lois. If you don't want Clark in your life, you don't get Superman either. We're kind of a package deal.”

She was stunned by his anger. She'd seen Superman – Clark – angry before, but it was always at injustice or criminal activity or the general unfairness of life. She'd never experienced the burst of his fury, never had it directed at her and her alone for something she'd done.

She didn't like it.

She didn't speak for a few seconds. Clark – because he was Clark at the moment, irrespective of his clothing – seemed to

regain control of his temper and stood straight with his arms crossed over his chest. “I thought my letter to you was clear enough. I guess it wasn’t. I hope you understand now that I don’t want you in my life any more than you want me in yours.”

He was in control, yes, but he was still angry. She had to placate him somehow. She lowered her voice and said, “Clark, please listen for a minute. I can’t stop writing about you. Perry’s expecting my story on your ship rescue. It’s going to be a positive story, too. You did a great job and saved a lot of lives.”

He took a breath and let it out, then shook his head. “You have your conditions, I have mine. No more Superman stories.”

“But you can’t—”

“I’ll let you have this one today because it already happened. But no more. Nothing after today’s event. Understand me?”

She felt her own anger rising. “You don’t have any leverage on me. You can’t make me stop writing about Superman.”

“Oh, I think I can.”

“Oh, really? Just how do you plan to do that?”

His arms tightened and bulged as he leaned closer. “I will visit every one of your snitches – as Superman – and tell them how you ran Clark Kent out of the city. I’ll give interviews to every competing media outlet about your lack of trust in Clark and your unreasoning anger at him. I’ll tell every reporter about the way you insulted and angered Superman. And if you decide to publish my secret after all that, it’s quite possible that no one will believe you.”

She stared, uncomprehending. Superman was threatening her! No – Clark Kent was threatening her! Mild-mannered, diffident, compliant, patient, loving Clark Kent was threatening to blackball her in the news business!

If Superman were to accuse her of being a total and complete jerk about Clark, it would seriously damage her reputation. Maybe to the point that she’d become ineffective as an investigative reporter. He was threatening to take her livelihood, her career, away from her.

Just as she’d taken his from him.

She bit the inside of her lip and tried to think of something to say, anything, some response that would soften his anger. But nothing came to her.

He apparently took her silence for acquiescence. He turned, took a step away from her, launched himself into the air, and flew west over the city.

He didn’t look back.

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Lois was re-reading her first draft of her story when Perry sauntered over. “How’s it going? You got all the info you need?”

Without looking at him, she replied, “Everything but a quote from Superman.”

“Didn’t he say something about waiting for the official investigation to wrap up before deciding who did what to whom?”

“He said it to all the reporters at the incident. He wouldn’t give me an exclusive quote.”

Perry sat on the edge of her desk and leaned closer. “I just got a call from a certain party in Kansas,” he said quietly. “The caller filled me in on the limitations you just heard about.”

Lois stopped typing and sat very still. “Oh.” She paused, then asked, “What did he – the party tell you?”

“That this is your last Superman story. Period. End of sentence. Or, as our friends across the Atlantic say, ‘full stop.’ I was told that you’ll have to write about something else – the caller said ‘anything else’ – in the future, as long as you’re in the news business.”

She sat back and pressed her lips together, then softly said, “Don’t you think that’s a bit excessive? I don’t know if I can write the news without including that particular subject.”

“I thought the conditions you set out two months ago were a bit excessive, remember? Now the two of you are on a level

playing field.”

She closed her eyes and leaned forward. “I never thought Clark would stoop to threats, especially threats against me.”

“And he never thought you’d extort him to shove him out of your life, either. Honestly, I’m a little surprised it’s taken him this long to lay the law down to you.”

Her eyes opened wide and her face turned to stare at her boss. “You think I went too far but he didn’t?”

Perry stood. “Doesn’t matter what I think, honey. You proved that. But I can’t have a reporter on staff who can’t write about one of the most important newsmakers in the world. You have to—”

“No!” she blurted. Then, more quietly, she said, “I don’t want to leave! Please! And he didn’t tell me not to write about him for the Planet! He said not at all! He doesn’t want me to write about him for anyone!”

He lifted his hand. “Easy, Lois. What I was going to say was that you need to fix your relationship with Clark. If you don’t want to be in a romantic relationship with him for any reason, or even be friends with him, fine, that’s entirely your choice, but you’ve got to end this war. And it needs to happen soon. Call him, write to him, wire a singing telegram, send him a dove with a message on its leg, I don’t care. You have to fix this and make peace with him, for your own sake as well as for his. And for the Planet’s sake, if nothing else.”

She sighed and turned to face her computer again. “I know. You’re right. About all of it. I was an idiot. Lucy’s right, I overreacted in my overreaction, which was way out of proportion to begin with. I’ll fix it.”

Perry smiled. “Did Lucy actually say you overreacted in your overreaction?”

“Yes. She’s been listening to a lot of lawyers lately.” She rubbed her hands over her face. “Let me think about the best way to do this, Perry. I’ll try to get it done before the end of the month.”

“Good. This is way overdue, Lois. Like I said, how you move forward with Clark on a personal basis is your choice, but you have to move forward. This is intruding into my newsroom even more than before and it has to stop.”

“I know. I’ll do my best.”

He straightened and patted her shoulder. “That’s all I can ask. Let me know what you plan to do and when you plan to do it. If you need some time off, I’ll arrange it.”

“Thanks, Perry. And – I’m sorry.”

He gave her a slightly stern look. “Don’t tell me. Give that apology to the person who really deserves it.”

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“Martha?” called Jonathan. “When’s Clark due home?”

She walked out of the kitchen carrying a steaming bowl of spaghetti. “Any minute now. He said he had to go to his office for a little while.”

Jonathan shook his head. “His office.” He snorted a small laugh. “I never could stand the thought of working inside all day.”

“He doesn’t work inside all day and you know it. He gets outdoors as often as you do.”

“That’s true. Hey, did I just hear him pull up?”

She put the bowl on the kitchen table. “Ooh, maybe he brought Rachel with him again. She’s such a nice young woman.”

“Martha, remember, no matchmaking! We didn’t do so well with Lois.”

“Not our fault. And no, I’m not making suggestions.”

Clark chose that moment to push through the back door. “Hi. Dinner smells good.”

Martha smiled and touched his arm. “Are you alone?”

He blinked and said, “Yes. Why, was I supposed to bring someone?”

Jonathan frowned and leaned against the doorframe. “Your mother thinks you and Rachel make a cute couple.”

Clark frowned. “Can we just have dinner and not discuss my disastrous love life?”

“Oh, honey,” Martha crooned, “are you and Rachel on the outs?”

Clark sighed. “No, Mom. No fight, no relationship, nothing to get out of synch. I’m nowhere near ready for – for whatever collar you’re fitting me for.”

“Clark’s right, Martha. The time has come for us to sit and eat and talk of many things.”

“Of shoes and ships and sealing wax,” Clark answered.

“Of cabbages and kings,” Martha echoed.

Clark smiled a little. “I’m just glad the seas aren’t boiling hot.”

Jonathan smiled back. “Maybe when pigs have wings.”

Clark’s eyebrows lifted. “We’re not having oysters, are we?”

Martha gave them a fake frown. “If you boys don’t sit down to eat the spaghetti I slaved over is going to get cold! Take your places and fill your faces!”

Jonathan chuckled. “I suggest we listen to your mother, son. Her cooking is to live for.”

Martha frowned at her husband. “You’ll live longer if you cut down on your portions! Now dish up my diet spaghetti and get to chewing!”

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Clark cleaned the table at normal speed and rinsed the dishes. “I’m a little tired tonight. Y’all mind if I go up to bed now?”

Martha stood and patted his chair. “Just as soon as you sit down here and tell us what’s bothering you the most.”

“What makes you think anything is bothering me?”

Martha tilted her head and spoke gently. “You barely spoke during dinner. Your ‘flyover state’ columns are getting printed in eight papers besides the Smallville Post that I know about, and Mr. White may have more lined up, but even though you’re getting paid pretty well for it you don’t seem all that happy about it. You’re making progress on that novel we’re not supposed to know anything about. You’ve spent a lot of time with Rachel Harris lately. And you just said ‘y’all’ to us, a word that hasn’t come out of your mouth in years.” She stepped around the chair and touched his hand. “Please, Clark. Let us in. Tell us about it. Maybe we can help you.”

He opened his mouth to tell her no, he was fine, when he realized this was something he needed. His parents were a resource he shouldn’t ignore. And his life was in a bit of a mess at the moment.

He decided at that moment to tell them about Lois but not about Rachel and what she knew. Or what she’d flat-out told him about her feelings toward him.

He slumped down in his chair and put his elbows on the table. “Okay. I was patrolling in Metropolis and I responded to a cruise liner emergency in the harbor today. I think it was a bomb set to disable the ship, maybe sink it, but without hurting too many people. I got the injured off and helped the fireboats control the fire in the engine room. And I got the ship hooked up to a pair of tugs that brought it to the dock. I don’t think the damage will wreck the ship. But the best part was that nobody died.”

Jonathan nodded. “So far it sounds like a good day.”

“And you’ve been back to Metropolis to help before,” Martha added.

“True. That part was pretty good.”

Martha’s ears rotated forward like a cat’s. “Ah. What part wasn’t so good?”

Clark dropped his face into his hands and moaned. “Lois was there. I think she got a tip that something was going down, because she was in full reporter mode from the moment I noticed her.”

“Did you talk to her, honey?”

“No, Mom. Not at the scene, anyway. She’s still mad at me,

remember? I sent a message for her to find me on the roof of the Planet when she got back to work. She came up and I told her that if she didn’t want Clark in her life, she couldn’t have Superman either, and after today she couldn’t publish anything about me.”

Martha’s mouth fell open but no sound issued forth. Jonathan recovered enough to ask, “Did you – how do you plan to enforce that?”

Clark leaned back and closed his eyes. “I told her I’d let it be known – as Superman – how badly she’d treated Clark Kent and ran him out of town, that I’d ruin her reputation and her effectiveness as a reporter.”

Martha shook her head and managed, “Why?”

“I saw Metropolis.” No one spoke for a long moment, then Clark added, “I saw the city I thought would be my home for years. I thought I’d have a place of my own there and friends and maybe a family and it would’ve been a place to put down roots and belong and I just kept thinking that Lois had ripped that life and all that future happiness away from me and I got really mad at her so I decided to take something back from her.” He drew in a deep breath, then sighed, long and tired. “I even called Perry and told him what I told Lois.”

“Oh.” Jonathan frowned in apparent thought for a moment, then said, “That – that sounds like you were exacting some revenge.”

Clark crossed his arms. “I was. It was petty and childish and I feel like a complete heel and I’ll never do what I threatened.”

“Even if she tells your secret?” asked his mother.

“No. Not even then. I was angry and hurt and I felt this – this hole in me where I used to think my life would be like and I just wanted to get back at her for being so – so infuriating and exasperating!”

He stood and walked to the sink, then pivoted on one foot and leaned his back against the cabinet. “I’m really tired of trying to deal with the ghost of Lois Lane in my life. I don’t see any way for us to reconcile. Even today, after two months with no direct contact between us, there was no gentleness in her voice or in her manner. She treated Superman like a quote dispenser.” He crossed his arms and looked at the floor. “Whatever relationship was there before, I’m pretty sure it’s gone now.”

“Sweetie?” his mother asked. “How do you feel about Lois? Right now, I mean.”

He shook his head. “I’m not sure. There are moments when I remember how much I loved her, but they don’t last long because I also remember how much she seems to hate me now and what she threatened to do to me. I don’t know – isn’t it kind of pathetic to love a woman who has rejected who you are and what you stand for? If Superman had a girlfriend who got unreasonably furious and ended the relationship because she found out he was a reporter on the side, wouldn’t he be justified if he put her in his rear-view mirror?”

Jonathan nodded. “I see what you mean. For what it’s worth, son, you have my permission to let Lois go. Assuming that’s what you want, or at least what you think is best. I wouldn’t want you to hate her or do anything to harm her, but I don’t think you have any obligations toward her now. She’s the one who ended things, and she’s the one who won’t take steps to repair the relationship.” He stood and walked to his son, then put one hand on Clark’s shoulder. “It’s your life. You need to live it as you see fit. I only hope you don’t end up hating her because that’d hurt you more than it would Lois.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Clark smiled at his father. “I think it’s time for me to hit the hay. And I’ll remember to be thankful for my wonderful parents.”

Martha stood and hugged him. “And we’ll be thankful for our wonderful son. We love you.”

“I love you guys too. Goodnight.”

Clark slowly climbed the stairs and tried not to listen to his

parents analyze his situation, but he couldn't help it. His mom wasn't whispering, and his dad didn't caution her to quiet down.  
 "Jonathan, we've got to do something! It hurts me to see him hurting so much."

"I know. I feel the same way. But I don't see any options for us. This is something he has to work through on his own."

"Can't we talk to Lois and try to get her to see reason? Or do you think she's managed to completely alienate Clark?"

"I don't know if their relationship can be fixed, but we can't interfere. Clark's a grown man and he has to make his own choices. If he and Lois are going to be a couple, or even friends, we can't be the reason they're together. And if they're not going to be a couple, we sure can't force them together. If we interfere for any reason, it's a recipe for disaster."

Clark heard his mother sigh. "You're right. I wish you weren't, but you are."

He turned the doorknob to his room as his mom added, "What do you think of Rachel?"

"You mean as in Clark and Rachel being a couple? You really think that's a good idea?"

His mom made a "tsk" noise with her mouth. "Like you say, that's up to them. I think Rachel is sweet on Clark and has been for a long time."

His father paused, then said, "I don't think it's a good idea for them to get together right now. Clark's heart is still wound up around and about Lois. He's not ready for another long-term romance, not yet. I'm pretty sure Rachel wouldn't go for any short-term love affair, but I know Clark wouldn't. I'd hope they'd let some time pass first."

She sighed. "You're right again. Okay, I won't drop any hints. But I also won't throw up any roadblocks. I think being around Rachel might be good for Clark."

His dad tapped the table several times, maybe with his finger or the end of a butter knife, then said, "Rachel is a very nice young woman and if she fell in love with a man she'd treat him right and do him a world of good. I just don't know if she and Clark are right for one another." Jonathan sighed deeply. "I also don't know that they *aren't* right for each other."

"Like you said, it's their decision, not ours. You about ready for bed? I've got chores to do tomorrow."

He heard his father heave himself to his feet. "Clark and I need to go over the tractor and the combine tomorrow and make sure they're in good working order. Fall harvest isn't that far off."

Clark shook his head and entered his bedroom. He had work to do the next day, both on the farm and at his office. And he had to decide what to do about Lois.

Did he want an "unrequited love" kind of relationship with Lois Lane? Did he want to love her from afar? Did he want to break from her completely? Did he want to let things ride in an armed truce? Did he want to try just once more to reconcile? Had she left him that choice?

What about Rachel? She'd told him that she loved him and wanted to be with him. She wasn't putting pressure on him, but she'd made it plain that she was open to expanding their relationship from friends to something more. Could he build a life with her, a life that would be centered around a rural area and not the big city? Could she handle being Superman's significant other? Could he live that life with her?

He didn't know the answers to any of those questions. And he wasn't going to get any answers tonight. He needed sleep.

Perchance he would dream a solution to the conundrum that was his life.

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## Chapter Eighteen

Lois didn't challenge Clark's ultimatum not to write about Superman for the next two weeks. She was too busy on the Intergang story about the sabotage of the cruise liner and all the

follow-up articles she could type up. The DA's office and the Grand Jury issued indictments and arrest warrants for seventeen suspects, including the Mad Bomber Sean McKenzie, on charges ranging from attempted murder, interfering with navigation on a city waterway, to illegal possession of explosives and illegal use of said explosives. Lois broke the story on McKenzie and got an "Attagirl!" from Perry.

That string of indictments didn't include the federal charges brought by the ATF and the Coast Guard Criminal Investigative Service, or CGCIS. Intergang's attempt to blackmail the cruise line had boomeranged back on them and put them in deep trouble, from the lowest part-time messenger in the organization to the highest decision maker. And Superman had given several depositions about the placement of the bombs and the apparent intent to disable or sink the ship. It appeared that Intergang had seriously damaged or even destroyed itself with this heinous act. The organization thrived on operating in the shadows, and this act had brought them out into the spotlight. Jimmy had suggested in a meeting that it was like hunting for roaches after turning on the kitchen light at three in the morning. Perry had laughed and told everyone to keep on stomping on their crunchy little heads.

Lois couldn't set aside the time needed to deal with what she'd come to call in her head the "Clark situation." Every reporter in the city was competing for inside information on the ongoing investigations by all the law enforcement entities involved, and she'd been busier than a beaver in a drought. Perry's couch had been her bed half a dozen times during those two weeks. She hadn't had any time for anyone or anything else.

Perry had emailed Clark to clarify that his permission to write about his involvement in the liner story included Lois' follow-up work. Perry had quietly informed Lois that Clark was fine with her chasing the liner story. She wondered how far she could stretch that permission to other articles.

Probably not very far at all.

After those two weeks were done and the bulk of her articles were complete, she still hadn't come up with a valid reason to talk to Clark, nor had she had the time to devote to planning what she would say in that sure-to-be difficult conversation. Lucy was ready to receive her diploma and was already thinking about looking for her own place. Once she moved, it would be extra hard to reconnect with her. So their reconciliation needed to happen now.

She stuck her head in Perry's office. "Hey, Chief, it's five-thirty on Thursday afternoon, I've been in the office for thirteen straight days, stayed late every evening, slept on your couch so often it's got my hip imprint in the middle, I just sent you the final version of everything I have on the cruise liner attack, and I think I've earned a Friday off. How about it?"

Perry nodded. "Sure, Lois. How about the last Friday of August, 2028?"

She made a face at him. "Come on. Really. I need a significant amount of sleep. I promise I'll be available if something breaks. Otherwise I'll see you here bright and early Monday morning."

He frowned slightly. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yes." She stepped in and shut the door, then leaned on it. "I need to set things right with Lucy. And I – I still need to figure out what to say to Clark."

He nodded slowly. "That is a pickle. Yeah, you've been doing yeoman's work lately, so you've earned some time off. Just keep your pager on and stay near a phone. Or you could go get your own cell phone."

She made a different face at him. "Seriously? Those things are pretty expensive. Hey, since I'd be getting it for business, will the paper pay the cost? Or at least part of it?"

"I made that very suggestion to the suits upstairs last week and I think they're actually considering ponying up some money.

But even if they don't, you should think about it for yourself. It'd just about pay for itself in the time you'd save and the coins you'd put in a pay phone."

She nodded back. "I will seriously think about it. Having a phone in my purse isn't such a bad idea. So am I off until Monday? Pending a major story breaking, of course."

He waved. "Go ahead. We'll try to muddle along without you." He sighed dramatically. "I just hope the Sunday edition has a story on the front page."

She ducked her head in fake sympathy. "Me too, Chief. Have a good weekend."

"You too. Eat lots of crow."

She shook her head as she opened the door. "That's going to be on my plate for a while, I think. I'll probably get deathly sick of it."

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Lucy walked into the apartment Thursday evening and saw her sister making a turkey sandwich on toast, something even the worst cook in Metropolis couldn't burn. Lois lifted her head and smiled. "Hi, Punky. You want something to eat?"

It was time to lower the conflict thermostat. Lucy decided, almost on impulse, that it was appropriate for them to stop firing angry words at each other. Lucy was tired of it and Lois needed a confidant. Besides, Lucy loved her sister, irrespective of her recent idiocy.

Lucy smiled back. "No thanks. Just had some pizza with my study group. We're celebrating the last two weeks of classes and cramming for the final finals."

"Final finals? There's more than one set of finals?"

"I finished all my college courses and all that's left is the last set of tests for my certification. Anything after that is regular continuing education courses to keep my certificate current. Other than that, though, no more school, no more books, no more teachers' dirty looks."

Lois chuckled. "So, no sandwich either?"

"Nope. Just a crème soda, assuming you haven't drunk the last one."

"I think we have two left. Why don't you pull both of them out?"

Lucy shrugged. "Okay." As she opened the fridge, she asked, "Is this a special occasion or are you taking a cooking class?"

"Huh? Oh, you mean the sandwich. No, I just got hungry and didn't want to go out for something in case I missed you."

Lucy paused, then finished handing one can to Lois. "Missed me?"

Lois popped the top on her drink and nodded. "We need to clear the air between us."

Oh, good, thought Lucy, she's either about to confess her faults or she's going to rant on Clark again. Either way, it would be better not to argue this time. "Okay, Sis, clear away."

Lois brought her sandwich to the table, then turned to face her sister. "I need to apologize to you. I've been horrible to you for quite a while now and I'm very sorry." She took Lucy's hands in hers and said, "I only hope you can forgive me."

Lucy looked in her big sister's eyes and frowned. "You want me to forgive you."

"Yes."

"Because you've been a very bad girl. For quite a while now."

Lois lowered her eyes to the floor. "Yes."

"Also because you overreacted in your overreaction to whatever Clark's secret is, right?"

Lois almost smiled. "You're not gonna let go of that, are you?"

"Don't change the subject. Just tell me that you're going to change your attitude toward Clark."

Lois closed her eyes and nodded. "Yes. I've been nasty and

unreasonable and terrible to him and I want to make it right."

"Sounds to me like you mean it." Lucy lifted her arms and hugged her sister. "In that case, yes, you're forgiven."

Lois hesitated a moment, then threw her own arms around Lucy and squeezed. "Thank you! Oh, thank you, Lucy! I was afraid I'd pushed you away from me forever!"

"Naw. I'm your sister and I always will be. You can't get rid of me that easily." They slowly slid back from each other until their fingers were entwined again. "I hope it goes well when you talk to Clark."

Lois reached for a tissue on the table, then dabbed at her eyes. "It won't be easy, I'm sure, but I'm going to do my best."

Now, thought Lucy, was a moment for a gentle reality check. "You know he's been in Kansas for over three months now, right? And that he hasn't heard from you all this time, even though he's sent messages to you through me and folks at work? And that he seems to be settling in pretty well back in Smallville?"

Lois nodded. "I know all that. And I – I know it's possible that I've ruined any chance for a friendship with Clark. All I can do is be honest and sincere and open, just like he was with me." She stopped and sniffed. "And now I'd like to eat my sandwich, if you don't mind."

Lucy's smile grew from small to medium, to large, to extra-large, and then right up to Sasquatch. "Lemme heat up part of that leftover pizza and I'll join you."

Before Lucy could pull away, Lois grabbed her around the shoulders again. "I love you, Punky! I'm so glad you're my sister!"

"Me too." She decided to take another risk. "You want to read Clark's letters that he sent me? I'm sure he wouldn't mind. There's nothing personal or private in any of them."

Lois licked her lips, then nodded. "Yes. Thank you. I would like that."

"I'll go get them for you."

"I'll nuke some pizza for you. How many slices?"

"Three."

Lois' eyebrows rose. "That many?"

"Hey, it takes a lot of calories to forgive a sister."

Both women laughed. Then they sat down to eat.

Lucy chased a slice with soda and burped. "Scuze me," she muttered. "Hey, did I tell you about my raise?"

Lois' eyes widened. "No! When does it become official? Are you buying a car?"

"Effective this last payday. Now that I have my certificate, Mr. Carlson says I'm more valuable and he wants to keep me around. I'm going to save up some more dough and get my own place. I think I'm going to stick with public transportation for a while, though. I checked on car insurance in Metropolis and it's horrifyingly expensive."

Lois' face fell. "You – you're moving soon?"

"Sure. A couple of months from now, maybe. You don't need me underfoot all the time. Me getting my own place is actually overdue, don't you think?"

Her sister's eyes focused on the remains of her sandwich. "Are you – is it because I've been so lousy to be around lately?"

Lucy reached out and took Lois' hand. "No, Sis, nothing like that. This is what we agreed to way back when I moved back in with you and because I'm overdue to start adulting the right way. After Johnny – after he died, you helped me keep it together. You gave me a roof over my head, you encouraged me when I was afraid I couldn't handle the schoolwork, you helped with handling Daddy and Mom, and you even loaned me your Jeep a few times. You have been very good to me and I won't forget it."

Lois sniffed once. "Thank you. I know I've been overbearing at times. And I've been impatient with you on occasion, too. And —"

"On occasion!" Lucy burst out. "You're kidding, right?"

Lois looked up and Lucy brightened her smile. Her reward was a small grin. “Maybe more than just two or three occasions. But you’re an adult now, even if I don’t want to admit it. You’re almost twenty-three and you’re not my baby sister anymore.”

Lucy gave Lois’ hand a squeeze. “I’ll always be your little sister. Just remember that I’m a woman too. Hey, I can even see myself coming to you for advice on a boyfriend problem.”

Lois turned her head slightly and gave Lucy a side-eye. “A boyfriend problem?”

“In a year or two, maybe, when you’re a little older.”

They laughed together. Lucy picked up the second slice and offered the third to Lois. After a moment, Lois nodded and took it. It was the best meal they’d shared in months.

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Rachel sighed as she signed the monthly overtime report for her office. It wasn’t that they’d used too much, it was just part of the paperwork that went with the office. Her father had warned her about it. When she was a teenager, he’d taken her to his office several times just to see how much desk work went into being a sheriff, or even a deputy. If not for Denise Howard’s efforts, who’d been the office admin as far back as Rachel could remember, her dad said he would’ve shoved all the paperwork in the dumpster out back and set fire to it.

He wouldn’t have, of course, but he did tell Rachel the truth. One, record keeping was a legal requirement, but the paperwork was still a drag on being a sheriff. Two, Mrs. Howard – whom Rachel did not address by her first name until after she was sworn in for her first term in office – not only watched over all the officers, she made the paperwork as simple and easy as she could for them. If not for Denise, Rachel mused, she would’ve burned every bit of cellulose fiber in the building herself.

She stood and walked to her office door to return the completed forms to Denise, then opened it. She was surprised to see Clark, dressed in slacks and golf shirt and sneakers, sitting on Denise’s desk, apparently trading funny stories and laughing quietly at each other’s punch lines. “Hey, Clark,” she called. “What brings you by tonight?”

He rose with that graceful strength he possessed and smiled. “I wanted to see if you were free this evening. There’s a new restaurant just south of Wichita I wanted to check out and I didn’t want to go alone.”

Rachel pursed her lips and shook her head as a giggling imp whispered in her ear. “I don’t know, I’m kinda busy. Why don’t you ask Denise?”

Clark’s eyebrow rose. Denise’s mouth flew open and she blinked several times. “What – I – you – but – I—” she stammered.

“Hey, you two was gettin’ along just fine when I walked in. I don’t wanna break up a budding relationship or nothin’.”

Denise regained control of her mouth and narrowed her eyes. “You little minx! If he *had* come to ask me to go out with him, I’d already be gone! He’s asking *you*! Now put on your civilian clothes and let him take you out to dinner!”

Rachel didn’t want to let the teasing end just yet. “What about the office? We gotta have coverage for—”

“We have it! Tommy’s on nights this week, Billy Joe’s backing him up, and Gail’s on call! Go be a woman for a night!”

Rachel finally smiled, then looked at Clark as she extended the folder to Denise. “I guess I got my orders.”

“I guess you do. Shall I await milady here beside her faithful guardian?”

Denise growled low in her throat and snatched the folder out of Rachel’s hand. “Faithful guardian my – my left kneecap! I’m not a watchdog!” She thrust a forefinger at Clark and barked, “You! You sit in the chair in front of my desk, young man, and don’t make a sound! I’ve got filing to do, and if you don’t want to end up under ‘junk male’ – spelled m-a-l-e – you’ll keep quiet!”

Rachel chuckled as Clark obediently pressed his lips together and sat. She touched his shoulder and said, “Won’t be but a couple o’ minutes. Have fun.”

His fake put-upon look followed her back to her office. It felt good to tease him and have him tease her back like that.

She hoped it meant that he was as comfortable with her as she was with him.

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Rachel walked out of the Newport Grill near Wichita and tucked her right hand in the crook of Clark’s left elbow. He turned his head to smile at her and put his hand over hers.

Best. Date. Ever.

They’d spoken lightly but freely during the drive and during dinner. She’d complained about her paperwork and he’d responded by griping about the expense vouchers he had to file with Perry White, including occasional charges for airfare. She’d thanked him once again for the very nice profile of her in his column. He’d told her she deserved all of that and more, then asked about the commendation pending from the state. She’d said the state commission was still discussing the wording and trying to figure out how to include the Oklahoma troopers without making too much of their assistance. It was a delicate political balancing act, and she’d told him that she would rather chase armed rustlers than deal with the politics of her job. He’d chuckled and told her he understood completely.

They’d ordered different seafood platters and had traded bites from each other’s plates. They’d shared a slice of key lime pie for dessert, one which Clark had confided was almost as good as some he’d tasted in Florida a couple of years ago. Rachel had shared that the closest she’d ever been to salt water was when she was first learning to cook and had over-salted her spaghetti. The worst part, she’d whispered, was that her mother had made her eat it anyway. The lesson was taught and reinforced.

They’d shared a sweet laugh.

She was more than comfortable with Clark. And he seemed to be comfortable with her, too. Maybe that level of comfort would soon translate into something long-term.

Maybe even something permanent.

As Clark opened the passenger door for her, Rachel sighed and let her head fall to his shoulder. He turned and gave her a quick kiss on the top of her head, then handed her into the truck. “Up you go.”

“Thank you, Clark.”

He smiled at her, then leaned in and gently kissed her lips.

It was the first time since the prom that he’d initiated a kiss between them. It wasn’t a commitment, wasn’t a proposal, wasn’t a vow of undying devotion, but it was, to her mind, progress.

The Best Date Ever got an upgrade in its rating.

She kept herself from grabbing him and pulling him into the truck on top of her, but just barely. Not only did she not want to scare him off by being too forward, she didn’t want the sheriff of Smallville to be seen cavorting with a man in a restaurant parking lot in Wichita. Wouldn’t *that* make her opponents happy? With all that she’d accomplished in the past few months, they were silent for the moment, and she wanted to keep them quiet.

So she let him end the kiss before she was ready.

He didn’t back away very far, and her hand floated up to caress his cheek almost of its own volition. Clark turned his head and pressed his lips into her palm, then smiled and slipped back to close her door.

She buckled herself in as he walked around the truck, then once again looked around at the inside of the truck. His vehicle was a newer and fancier model than her father’s. It had a nicer sound system, cruise control, power windows, a smoother ride, better air conditioning, and less road noise inside the cab.

The best feature, thought Rachel, was that it had Clark in the driver’s seat.

He buckled himself in and started the motor, then turned to her and smiled again. She took his hand and squeezed it, then guided it to the gearshift lever on the steering column and let go.

He chuckled. “Okay, I can take a hint. Home for milady.”

“You may take your sweet time, Jeeves. Your lady isn’t in a big hurry.”

He pulled out of the parking lot and headed for the highway. “Jeeves was a butler, not a chauffeur. I think you mean either James or Rochester. Or maybe Jarvis.”

“Whoever you are, I’d rather talk to Clark on the way home.”

“Okay. We have about forty minutes or so. Should we cover any specific subject?”

It was an opportunity. She could introduce commitment to the conversation and see how he reacted. He might think it was a good idea and suggest they think about getting engaged.

He might also think she was pushing too hard and withdraw from her. The Best Date Ever would become The Worst Date Ever, and it would be her fault.

Sheesh. Inner Rachel was getting more demanding by the day.

She decided to let him lead. “Why don’t you start? I’ll do my best to follow along.”

He negotiated the merge onto the highway as he spoke. “Okay.” He paused, then said, “There’s something I’ve been meaning to mention to you.”

“Oh?” *That’s it, don’t be too eager or demanding in any way.*

“I’ve been talking to Pastor Benton for a couple of weeks. Nothing critical, I mean I don’t have any serious problems to ask him about.”

“Okay.” *No pressure, just let him talk.*

His fingers tapped the steering wheel. “I’ve been talking to him about Lois.”

*Don’t answer this time, just nod and keep listening.*

After a long moment, he said, “I told him – I didn’t tell him about my other job, but I told him that I revealed a big secret to Lois that wasn’t illegal or unethical and she exploded at me and ran me out of her life and it hurt because I told her because I didn’t want any secrets between us because I was going to ask her to marry me and I was sure she’d say yes.”

*Be gentle, be supportive.* “What did Pastor Benton tell you?”

He sighed. “That sometimes people do and say things they don’t mean and deeply regret later. I told him it had been more than three months since then and she hadn’t made any effort to make things right between us. He asked me if I’d tried to talk to her and I told him I had and that Lois had rebuffed every contact I’d tried to make. He asked me what my immediate reaction was when someone says her name. I told him that my stomach clenches and my breath gets short and my eyes narrow and my jaw tightens. They do, too.”

He paused for a moment, shifted his weight on the seat, then said, “Pastor Benton said that I’d been deeply hurt and my reactions were understandable. He also told me that I needed to forgive her and let go of my anger against her. I told him that was easier said than done. He agreed and said that it would be a process to get to the point where I could forgive her, but until I got there that residual anger would negatively affect every relationship in my life.”

*He’s waiting for a response.* “Go on,” she whispered.

His jaw worked and he glanced at her, then looked ahead again. “I think I’m falling in love with you, Rachel. In every way I can think of, you’re a breath of fresh air in my life. You’re gentle, you’re sweet, you are your own woman without slapping people in the face with it, and you say you love me and I believe you. I just – I’m afraid that what I feel about you – at least part of it, anyway – is a reaction to my hurt over Lois. I don’t want to do that. And you deserve better than a broken man who doesn’t know his own heart.”

*Ah. Not what you expected or hoped for. But he’s opened up to you. You have to do the same.*

She took a moment to gather her thoughts, then said, “I love you, Clark. I don’t love you for who I want you to be or for what you can do as – you know. What matters to me is that you’re a hero even when you ain’t flying around in that sexy underwear advertisement.”

She paused while he snorted and chuckled. “I love you because you want the world to be better and you’re willing to make personal sacrifices to make it better. You could’ve told Lois you’d give up Superman if she’d stay with you, but I bet that never even crossed your mind. Superman’s a great guy because you, the man inside the suit, is a great guy. You’re unselfish, you never do things just for the publicity, and you never have traded on what you can do for money or fame. You could be richer than Croesus and run the country if you decided to. You never even considered that neither.”

“No,” he whispered. “No, I didn’t.”

*Lighten it up a little.* “I hope I didn’t just put a bad idea in your head.”

A bit of a smile grew on his face. “No. My parents wouldn’t stand for me acting that way.”

“See, that’s another reason. Anyone with eyes can tell you love your folks and want them to keep bein’ proud of you. They are, you know. And you’d never do anything that would hurt them or disappoint them.” She touched his hand. “And I’m proud to be your friend, Clark Kent.”

He lifted his hand from the wheel and grasped hers. “Thank you. I’m proud to be your friend too, Rachel Harris.”

He held her hand the rest of the way back to Smallville. And when he dropped her off at her office, he kissed her softly and held her tenderly for over a minute.

She’d give him all the love he would accept and hope that someday he’d give her all the love he had.

When that happened – if it happened – she hoped she could be woman enough to take it all in and be the wife he deserved.

*Good work, girl.*

*Thanks, Inner Rachel.*

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## Chapter Nineteen

Lois braked to a stop at the “Welcome” sign, climbed out of the car she’d rented at the Wichita regional airport, and sighed. Coming to Smallville this weekend might be a huge mistake. It was almost noon and she had no idea where to look for Clark. It was Saturday, and Perry had told her that he often worked on the weekends, but if he wasn’t at his office she had no idea where he might be. Besides, he could send emails and submit his articles from any place that was next to a phone plug.

No way would she look for him at the Kent farm. Jonathan might pull out his old 12-gauge shotgun and shoot her. And if he didn’t, Martha almost surely would. They had a family bond that Lois had never really experienced except with them, and each one would defend the other two to the death.

And she’d thrown away any chance of being a part of it.

She stepped back into the car and looked at the gas gauge. She still had half a tank, but she’d need to fill up before she headed back to Wichita for her flight back to Metropolis. Maybe she could ask someone at the nearest gas station for directions to the building and say she was thinking of renting an office there.

As soon as she pulled back onto the road and rounded a gentle curve, she saw the convenience store with three gas pumps in front. The snarky voice deep in her head said that it was surprising to see they weren’t the kind from the 1920’s, the ones where you hand-pumped the gas into a glass container at the top before you let it drain into your car’s tank.

She told Snarky to shut up as long as they were in town. Snarky replied that she’d better find Clark fast or she’d have to

spend the night in a postage stamp-sized town that named itself after its tiny land area.

She mentally slapped Snarky against a trash can beside one of the pumps and she shut up. Lois pulled up beside the first pump.

The man inside came to the door and called, “You know how to use the self-service, ma’am?”

She waved. “Yes. I’ll be in to pay for it as soon as I’m done.”

“Sounds good.” He smiled and waved back. If she’d tried that tactic in Metropolis, the guy would’ve run out to her car, snatched the hose from her hand, and demanded cash or a credit card up front before she could pump an ounce of fuel. There was definitely less stress, less crime, and less traffic in Smallville. Lois could see its appeal for a long weekend getaway.

But she wouldn’t want to live here. Not ever. It was mid-day on Saturday and the town was just too – too *quiet* for her.

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Rachel drove her cruiser past John Paulson’s store on the edge of town. Someone in a late-model sedan was parked by the pumps out front, probably stopped for gas, but she couldn’t see who was driving. The driver might have been in the restroom or out of sight in the store.

But the sticker in the upper corner of the windshield told her it was rented from a location at the Wichita airport. It wasn’t impossible that someone would just drive through Smallville on the way to somewhere else and stop to gas up. Nor was it probable that Rachel knew the driver.

It still gave her a little shiver and she didn’t know why.

She shook her head. She was supposed to meet Clark at his office, change into civilian clothes, then take a long lunch with him. The thought that he might kiss her again made her breath catch.

She thought no more about the rental car.

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Lois paid for her gas, turned down the clerk’s suggestion of a sandwich and soft drink, then asked where the Kramer building was.

The man gave her an odd look, one she couldn’t interpret, then said, “Go down this road into town. Five streets in, turn left on Second. Sam Kramer’s building is on the right, just across from the main sheriff’s office.”

“Thanks.” She turned to go, then realized that he probably was surprised that a stranger knew about the building but not its address.

Snarky opened her mouth and Lois growled. Snarky crawled back into her cubbyhole without contributing anything.

Lois got in and started the car, then sat for a moment. Did she really want to do this? Did she really want to drop in on Clark with no warning and no hint of why she was coming?

No, she told herself. She didn’t want to. But she needed to. She almost had to.

She’d thought about the situation before she’d left Metropolis, on the flight to Kansas, during the drive to Smallville, and she thought she’d figured it out. Clark’s revelation, his hiding of his dual identity, his heartfelt confession, his avowal of love, they were all just him being honest. Her reaction to Clark’s revelation about Superman was the betrayal.

She’d betrayed his trust in her and her own love for him. In a moment of weakness, she’d allowed her stunned shock to overwhelm her good sense and she’d reacted emotionally instead of rationally. Making up with Lucy had reassured her that she hadn’t destroyed her entire life with that one insane act, but there were many more amends to make before she was finished.

She’d tried to apologize to Jimmy the following day, but he’d cut her off. The only way to gain his forgiveness was to make up with Clark somehow. Getting back into Jimmy’s good graces wasn’t why she was here, of course – she was seeking Clark’s forgiveness and his alone. Anything that developed from that

would be a positive collateral effect, but her only goal was restoring the relationship with Clark.

And maybe – just maybe – she could find out if he still felt the same about her now as he had almost four months ago.

Those four months reminded her of Perry’s message. Clark had to either return to the Planet, in Metropolis, very soon, or the paper would have no choice but to terminate his employment. Lois’ problem was that this looming deadline was no longer a lever to get him back. Clark’s columns had proven so popular that he’d gotten the okay to own the reprint rights even while he was still a Daily Planet employee. The Planet got part of the money because he was still an employee, and the reprints in other papers – and a few travel magazines – were delayed at least fifteen days following the first printing in the Planet. But it was still lucrative for Clark, and if he were to decide to freelance them on his own, his income would surely increase, even given the loss of his regular Planet salary.

She couldn’t get him to come back with financial pressure. It had to be a successful personal appeal, one she couldn’t fake. He’d know in a flash if she tried to pretend.

That, of course, assumed that he wanted to come back. His most recent letter to Lucy had been full of chatty news and gossip about Smallville, stories about the former sheriff’s continuing recovery from his car wreck and the two surgeries he’d undergone to further repair his damaged legs, anticipated crop yields, and little hints that his relationship with Rachel Harris had moved beyond just being friends.

If that last were true – that Clark and Rachel had formed a bond that superseded the one he’d had with Lois – it would rip her heart out.

And she deserved every erg of pain it would give her.

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Rachel leaned into Clark’s office. “Hello? Clark, you back yet?”

No response. No sound at all, in fact. If the office had been big enough, she would’ve heard the echo of her own voice.

Rachel frowned. She had little enough time to spend with him as it was, and she really wanted to talk to him. Tommy had asked – very gently but quite seriously – if she and Clark were “going steady” now, and Rachel hadn’t known how to answer. She’d covered it with bluster and fake scolding, but the question bothered her because she didn’t know their exact status as a couple either. She needed to make sure Clark knew that the gossip had caught up with them and the secret appeared to be out.

And she needed him to make some kind of commitment to her, even if it was “we’re just dating.”

She also wanted him to know that he’d heard from Lana. The recruiter in Topeka had connected her with an insurance company in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that needed an executive assistant with experience in local politics. Lana was tailor-made for the job, and she’d moved to Tulsa the same week she’d talked to Rachel and Clark. And while Mayor Hayes knew why she’d moved and that the affair was over and done with, he didn’t know where she’d gone. It appeared that Lana had a good chance to restart her life there. She’d already made a good beginning.

She sat down at his desk and leaned back. The laptop was turned off, but she knew the kinds of things that were on the hard drive. Her own writing efforts were limited to police reports and office paperwork, places where creativity and a clever turn of phrase were just unnecessary. She was still amazed at the different ways Clark could describe a scene, an event, or a person. He was simply brilliant.

And she loved him so much.

She heard the sudden clip-clop of shoes on the hardwood floor in the hall. That wasn’t Clark’s gait, so she ignored the sound.

“Clark? Oh, sorry.”

A woman's voice, low and musical and gentle. Rachel looked up.

"Sorry. Do you know which office is Clark Kent's?"

Short brunette hair. Very pretty. Young and slim. Casual clothes, but still city chic.

*I don't like her.*

Rachel ignored her inner self and stood. "This is his office. I'm waitin' for him too."

The woman's eyes widened. "You – you're a c – a police officer."

"Not a cop. Sheriff. And Mr. Kent ain't in legal trouble." She walked around the desk to face this beauty. "What can I do for – do I know you?"

The woman's hands fluttered in front of her. "You're Rachel Harris? Sheriff Harris?"

"Yes." Rachel looked closer and felt her navel pucker.

"You're Lois Lane. Haven't seen you for over a year, closer to two."

"Uh – no. I mean, yes, I'm Lois, and no I haven't been here for – for a while."

The two women stood gazing directly at each other for perhaps fifteen seconds. It was almost a challenge. Rachel could just about hear the Western gunfighter music in her head.

Rachel finally sighed and said, "I figger you're here to see Clark on a personal thing."

Lois took a step farther into the office. "Personal and professional both."

Rachel nodded. "Okay. I'll get back to my office. If you see him, please tell him I was here."

As she passed Lois, the woman said, "Wait. Please." Rachel turned and tilted her head. "I – I want to ask you something."

Rachel crossed her arms. "Okay."

Lois seemed to deflate a little. "Do you – has Clark told you about me? About – him and me, I mean."

Rachel nodded. "Some, yeah. Enough for me to know you're 'bout dumb as a box o' rocks."

"What do – rocks?"

Rachel turned her head and sighed. "City folk. Think about how smart a rock ain't, multiply that by how many's in a box, and you'll get it."

Instead of acting offended, Lois lowered her eyes and held her purse in front of her with both hands. "I get it. I'm brainless and totally stupid. Or brainlessly stupid. That's pretty much what I planned to say to Clark."

Rachel felt her heart speed up. It sounded like this Jezebel was planning to apologize.

That would be a disaster. But sabotaging the effort would be even worse. Even so, Rachel refused to give up without a fight.

Rachel narrowed her eyes and said, "You got any idea how bad you hurt that man?"

In a barely audible voice, Lois said, "Yes."

The admission startled Rachel. "Oh." She'd been ready to lay into this overdressed fashion model and skin her alive, but the woman's quiet admission of guilt stopped her.

A long pause ensued, and Rachel finally felt the need to break it. "Mind if I ask what all you're gonna ask him to do? Besides forgive you, I mean."

Lois' eyes came up. "I'm going to ask him to come back to the Planet. I know he has no reason to trust me – or even like me – but I really believe his place is there, not here. As well as he's doing now, he can do much more in Metropolis than in Smallville."

"You might be right about that. But do you think he wants to go back and see you every day? To be reminded of what you done to him, how bad you tore up his heart?" Rachel took a step forward and spoke louder. "Do you understand how hard it was for him to leave his friends, his job, his life? To leave you?" She was

almost shouting now. "And now you want him to come back and jump on those razor blades because you think it's what he should do?"

Fluid pooled in Lois's unblinking eyes. "Yes. I won't ask him to partner with me. And I'm not asking him to – to care for me the way he used to. I just want to take away the hurt I caused him and make things right for him."

Rachel's voice lowered and she got in Lois' face. "And what if that hurt's already gone? What if he thinks things are just fine right here in Smallville?"

Lois blinked. The tears fell. "With you?"

Rachel moved back a half-step. "Yes. With me. I don't happen to be offended that he has a really super part-time job."

After a moment, Lois nodded. "He told you." She wiped her face with her hand. "That must mean he – he cares deeply for you."

"I already knew. But he did volunteer the information."

*No he didn't! You told him you knew! That's not what— Shaddup! She don't have to know everything!*

Lois nodded again. "I guess I'm really stupid, then."

"Can't speak to that."

"No, I think you can. Maybe – I think I should just go back home."

"No."

Lois frowned. "What? You want me to stay?"

"You came all this way to see Clark. He'll probably be upset after he talks to you, but if he finds out you was here and talked to me and then left without talkin' to him he'll be even more upset, and I don't want him that upset with me. You need to talk to him and say whatever it is you come to say." She hesitated, then added, "Without me listenin'."

She took Lois' arm and pushed her toward Clark's desk.

"Have a seat. He'll be here before too much longer." Rachel turned to go, then stopped and spoke over her shoulder. "You want him to hear what you tell him, you need to listen to him too. Listen real good."

She strode out of the office and closed the door. Maybe the brunette harpy would stay and have it out with Clark. Or maybe she'd open the window and fly away on her broom. Either way it would be her own choice and Clark would stay free of her.

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Clark pulled into his parking space in front of his office and yanked the truck's door open. He was late for lunch with Rachel and her schedule wasn't as fluid as his was. He'd have to admit he'd gotten stuck in traffic on the road outside Smallville behind a stalled tanker truck, and the state cops were making each opposing lane of traffic alternate on the single clear lane. It had taken eighteen knuckle-popping minutes to drive past the mess, and he couldn't wait to hear her laugh about Superman being caught in a traffic jam.

He shut the door and raced into the building, then almost flew up the steps. The prospect of spending time with Rachel pleased him more than he would have believed three months before. He wondered again if he was really falling in love with her or just reacting to losing Lois.

He slowed to a walk on his floor – didn't want anyone to notice how fast he was or hear his shoes super-clopping along. He opened his door and said, "Sorry I'm late. I was—"

The woman looking out the window across the office wasn't Rachel Harris.

It was Lois Lane.

He froze in the doorway with his mouth open. Why was Lois here in his office? How'd she get here? Did she want a Superman quote?

His inner voice slapped him and demanded that he throw her out. *Now.*

She turned from the window in the far wall, put her purse on

his desk, and took two halting steps in his direction. “Hi, Clark.”

Her voice was pure velvet and low and lovely and soft and he didn’t say anything.

Couldn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry for just showing up unannounced like this, but I wasn’t sure you’d listen to me if we didn’t meet face-to-face.”

He finally remembered how to speak. “Me—” his voice cracked and he started over. “Me too.”

She took another hesitant step and stopped about eight feet from him. “I – I want to talk to you. With you, actually.”

He unfroze and closed the door behind him. He did *not* want Rachel to see Lois in his office. “I’m waiting for someone. In fact, I’m late for that meeting and I hope it’s still on.”

Lois blinked and looked to one side, then turned back to him. “The sheriff asked me to tell you that she went back to her office.”

Oh, great, they’ve already seen each other. It’s going to be like untying another Gordian knot trying to unravel this mess.

Best to cut through the social pleasantries and get to the reason she’s here. “Why are you here, exactly? What do you want to talk about?”

She leaned forward but didn’t take the step she apparently considered. “I want to ask you to – to come back with me.”

He crossed his arms and huffed. “To do what?”

“To work at the Planet.”

“I already work for the Planet.”

“I know. But Perry told me that four months is the maximum you can be on this assignment and still have a job. I don’t want to be the reason you get released.”

“I’m doing pretty well with my column. It’s going region-wide in three weeks. And I’m getting a bigger piece of the pie now.”

“But you’ll still be here instead of in Metropolis where you belong.”

He dropped his arms and took a hard step forward, then stopped when she flinched. “You’re the reason I’m in Smallville. You’re the reason I don’t have a mailing address in Metropolis. You’re the reason someone else has my desk at the Planet.”

“Nobody has your desk.”

That surprised him. “Really? Nobody?”

She shook her head. “Perry wouldn’t assign anyone to sit there. And I don’t think anyone in the newsroom wants to sit that close to me, especially after those letters you left.”

“I didn’t accuse you of anything and I didn’t mention you in any of them.”

She sighed. “No, you didn’t, but you didn’t have to. They all saw that I wasn’t upset that you’d left, Jimmy figured out that – as he put it – you and I had hit an iceberg and sunk, and everyone is still mad at me for running you out of town. No one will talk to me on anything other than business. Even Bobby Bigmouth is angry at me. If I were to drop dead in the newsroom one day next week, a party would probably break out before they called 911.”

“I see.” He watched her face for signs of anger and saw none. “That’s not what I was going for. I didn’t want to disappear without explaining why, but I wasn’t trying to make you the bad guy. Or gal, in this case.”

She shrugged. “I am the bad gal in their eyes.” She moved a little closer. “And in my own eyes.”

He nodded. “Okay. That still doesn’t explain why you’re here. I doubt you came fifteen hundred miles to give me that little tidbit.”

“No. I didn’t.” She took another small step closer. “I came to tell you that I’m very sorry. I was totally and completely out of line, and none of my anger was your fault. It was my fault all the way and I absolutely screwed up by giving you that ultimatum.” She stopped and took a breath. “I’m very, very sorry for the way I’ve been acting. I’ve been wrong from the beginning of this horrendous mess.”

She sniffed and waved her hands. “I want to ask you to forgive me for being so horrible to you. I want to put all of that in the past and ask you to come back to the Daily Planet where you belong.”

“And do what, be partners with you again?”

She shook her head. “No. I know you don’t trust me, and I understand why. I want you to come back because – because I really think you can do so much more there than you can here.”

“Is that what you think?” His hands found his hips and his feet separated as if by reflex. “Or are you trying to get back your Queen of the Newsroom status by bringing me back like a hunting trophy? You must miss being the top dog, Mad Dog.”

Her head jerked to one side as if he’d slapped her. It took a moment before she straightened herself and said, “That’s not the reason. Yes, I think it would be better for me at work if you’re there. But they won’t love me just because you walk back into their lives, just like you – just like I can’t expect you to love me because I’ve come to you to beg you to forgive me and come back.”

He waited. Her eyes dampened.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

He took another and held it, then let that one out slowly.

Lois in tears had always melted his heart before. He’d always broken down and given in to whatever ridiculous or absurd thing she wanted. He’d never been able to stand up to her before when she turned on the waterworks, largely because she’d never deliberately used them against him. Her tears had always come naturally.

She was on the verge of weeping now.

And he found that he was too angry at her to care.

He shifted back a half-step and dropped his arms. “I wonder if you have any idea how much self-control I’m using right now to keep myself from screaming at you to get out and stay out. I was shocked when I saw you in here, but my next thought was ‘throw her out on her ear.’ Literally. All you’re doing right now is rubbing salt in my wounds. And those wounds were healing just fine before you appeared in my office.”

She dashed at her eyes with her fingers. “I know. Rachel told me.”

“What else did she tell you?”

Her gaze fixed on Clark’s shoes. “That she – she cares a lot about you. She didn’t say it straight out, but I think she’s in love with you. And I can understand that you’d rather have a level-headed and calm woman like her than a hot-headed idiot like me. And one who can handle you being – you know.”

She turned to the side and stepped away from him. “I’m not asking for us to pick up where we left off. I won’t ask you to partner with me. I’m not even asking you to like me. All I’m asking is that you come back to Metropolis where you belong.”

She was still trying to make decisions for him. She wanted him to come back. She’d laid out the terms for his return. Granted, they were terms she thought he’d insist on, but she was still setting them.

She wanted him to leave Rachel. She wanted him to throw away a chance at a home and family of his own with a woman who knew everything about him and still said she loved him. Lois wanted to take him away from everything he cherished, from a place where he felt he belonged.

And at the moment, he wasn’t willing to give up any of that.

An almost-random thought hit him. “Does Lucy know about my part-time gig?”

She shook her head. “Not from me. We’ve never talked about it. I never told her what you told me. Never told anyone but Perry.” She huffed without any humor. “When I first told Lucy what I was forcing you to do, she said I was the stupidest bitch who’d ever lived.” She wiped her eyes again. “She was right, too. I was.”

“Have you made up with her yet?”

Lois turned to face him again. “Last week. She warned me that you might not want to come back. Because – because of me. Because of how I’d treated you.”

“Good that you had that warning. Has she let you read any of my letters to her?”

“All of them. You’re still a wonderful writer. I learned a lot about Smallville I didn’t know before. And I know you’re keeping up with Perry and Jimmy, too.”

He gritted his teeth and crossed his arms again. “What’s your opinion of Rachel Harris?”

She shrugged. “All I know about her is from your letters to Lucy and the column you wrote about her solving that cattle rustling case. She seems – I don’t know what you want me to say about her.”

“The truth as you see it would be nice.”

She closed her eyes and took a breath, then opened them. “I think if you weren’t in either of our lives, I’d like her. At least, right now I think I would. I probably would’ve thought she was full of corn starch six months ago.” She sighed. “But I’ve learned that I’m the one who’s full of – of nasty, smelly stuff people don’t like or talk about in polite company.”

He shook his head and turned away from Lois. “You’re wasting your time. I’ve built a life here – a good life – and I don’t want to leave it.” He turned to face her again. “And it’s not just my relationship with Rachel. I’m still living with my parents, which is great even with the chores. I’ve helped people here in town as Clark Kent. I’ve reestablished several friendships from high school and before. I’ve made new friends with new people. And these people don’t ask anything of me that I’m not willing to give.”

She didn’t bother brushing away the tears this time. “I see. You’re saying that Superman’s base of operations is in Kansas now.”

A flash of anger pushed him two steps closer to her. “You don’t have that right!” he hissed. “You don’t bring Superman into this conversation! He’s not gone, you know that, but he doesn’t have to be in Metropolis to save people there and you know that too!”

She’d flinched again when he’d stepped toward her but she hadn’t moved back. “I’m sorry. You’re right, I shouldn’t have mentioned that name.”

He forced down his fury. “Great. I’m right. But I still don’t want to go back.”

Her lips trembled. Then she took a breath and steadied herself. “Okay. I knew there were no guarantees. But I really do want you to know how very sorry I am, Clark. I was wrong. I freely and honestly admit the entire problem between us is entirely my fault. And if I’ve hurt you too badly, if I’ve let too much time go by, then that’s my fault too. And if I’ve caused any trouble between you and Rachel, I’m really sorry about that too. I had no intention of letting her know I was here.”

“Well, now I probably have to do some damage control with her. She probably thinks you’re going to lure me away from her with your wiles and your emotional appeal to my forgiving nature.”

Lois’ face fell. “You’re – you’re really not coming with me, are you?”

He tried to put all of his strength and anger and hurt into one calmly delivered word. “No.”

She closed her eyes and took a shuddering breath, then looked at him and nodded. “I understand. And I deserve every angry thought you have for me and every barb you throw at me. I hope that someday you can see your way to forgive me.” She turned to pick up her purse, then slowly walked past him. She stopped at the door and said, “And I hope you and Rachel are happy together for the rest of your lives.”

She opened the door, then turned partway and spoke softly. “I hope it goes without saying, but I’ll say it anyway. I will take your secret to the grave with me, Clark. No one will ever hear it from me. No matter what.”

With that, she walked out of the office and out of Clark’s life forever.

He certainly hoped so, anyway.

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## Chapter Twenty

Lois was numb all during her trip back to the Wichita airport. When she’d thought about this leg of her journey before starting out, she thought that by this point she’d be angry or too sad for words or hopeful or – or something! But there was nothing. She might as well have been floating in a sensory deprivation chamber.

She drove on automatic pilot, returned the car without paying attention to what she signed, waited for her flight without moving except for one bathroom visit, and ignored everything and everyone around her. All she was willing to hear was her flight number to Chicago, where she’d change planes and fly back to Metropolis.

She’d planned to eat during the layover in Chicago, but at the moment she wasn’t a bit hungry. In fact, hunger might be a permanent stranger to her now, displaced by her loneliness and a fresh sense of abandonment.

Which wasn’t reasonable. Nothing had changed in regards to Clark in the last two hours. The only thing that was different was what Lois had learned. Now she knew for certain that she’d destroyed any future she might have had with him. He couldn’t wait for her to leave, to drive away and vanish from his life. He might even be hovering overhead, waiting to make sure she actually boarded the plane before he flew back to Rachel.

To Rachel Harris. That was a puzzler. The woman’s mental faculties weren’t in Lois’ class, nor was she as attractive as Lois was, but she was neither dumb nor ugly. Lois had seen the woman’s smile many months ago when they’d faced down Jason Trask and it was very nice. Not beautiful, but still very nice. And she was very good at her job.

Rachel’s character had been easy to see – she was honest and idealistic and pleasant under nearly all circumstances. And she was fearless and softly determined to do the right thing no matter the consequences. She’d shot Jason Trask only when it was the last resort, not just because she could. Rachel obviously didn’t consider Clark’s superhero persona to be either a threat or a betrayal. And Lois was sure that Rachel would look very good in feminine clothes instead of that uniform.

That last thought reminded her of a true story she’d read many years before. A woman recently separated from the Army had appeared in her state’s driver’s license bureau, back in the days when the applicants brought in their own photos. The clerk, a young man, told her she had to have a photo of herself out of uniform – meaning in civilian clothes – not the one she presented wearing her full dress blues. Two days later, the woman blushed deeply as she handed the clerk a 5x7 photo of herself standing at attention – fully naked.

Clark probably thought Rachel would look good out of uniform.

The off-color thought jarred her. Clark would never see Lois out of uniform now. And she wondered if Clark already knew how good Rachel looked unclothed.

No, that wasn’t fair. He’d refused a number of very straightforward offers of sex from a number of other women – Lana Lang, Toni Taylor, Mayson Drake, and especially from Cat Grant. Not one of them had made a serious dent in him. Clark was the kind of man who’d marry a woman before he made love to her. And with Clark, it would really be making love and not just having sex. He’d had several opportunities to push Lois beyond that threshold and he’d never taken advantage of a single one. He

was truly a unique man.

And Lois had shoved him away with nuclear force. She couldn't have done more damage to her relationship with Clark had she blown up the Planet building and bragged about it on national television.

She barely registered people standing up around her. She tuned in and heard her flight called, so she shouldered her purse and fell in step with her fellow passengers.

No one tried to speak to her except the attendant at the gate who verified her flight number and seat assignment. Apparently her despair created a non-interference field around her. Even the people in line with her didn't jostle her elbow.

She trudged to her seat by the window and pulled down the shade. The flight appeared to be only half-full, and it seemed that no one had purchased the aisle seat beside her. Nor did anyone take either of the seats in front of her.

Her isolation suited her black mood.

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Rachel watched through her office window until she saw Lois Lane walk out and get into the strange car across the street. The sight of that rental had given her a bad moment when she'd left Lois to wait for Clark. Had she known whose car that was at the store, she could have – done – something, anything, just to make the witch go away.

Now she'd left and Clark hadn't come down with her.

She'd watched him run into the building knowing who and what he'd be facing once he got to his office. She'd left him there to face his tormentor all alone, with no support or help from her. Knowing that he would not want her there didn't assuage her fears. Even remembering that she only knew the word "assuage" because of her relationship with Clark didn't calm her.

She could wait for him to tell her how things had gone. Or she could go ask him now. She didn't know which choice would be the better one.

If she waited, it might show her trust in Clark and his unspoken commitment to her and to Smallville. It might demonstrate that Rachel knew that some floozie from the bright lights and big city of Metropolis couldn't lure her Clark away.

If she were to go to him now, she might show concern, both for him as a man and for them as a couple. She could also get his immediate reaction to Lois' visit and whatever pressures she'd brought to bear on him.

She'd also know if he planned to leave her.

He'd left her after high school, then once again after Rachel had killed a man to save him. If he left yet again, this time after he'd learned how much she loved him and needed him, how would she survive?

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After Lois drove away, Clark paced around his office several times, then moved into the second floor hallway and paced its length perhaps a dozen times. After the tenth circuit, Jane Clemens opened her office door and peeked out. "Clark? Is something wrong? You're shaking the floor."

He lifted his hand and tried to signal that he couldn't speak at the moment. She must have understood his "can't talk now" gesture because she nodded and withdrew. After a moment he heard her typewriter start its rapid-fire clacking again.

Out of curiosity, he peeked through the wall and into her office and saw a small pair of headphones covering her ears. He listened for a moment and realized that she was typing something someone had recorded and given to her to transcribe. That was surely why she hadn't heard his – his more than a discussion but a bit less than an argument with Lois.

The thought of Lois enraged him yet again.

How dare she. How *dare* she! Four months ago, Lois had crushed his hopes, his dreams, and his heart, and now she wanted things to go back to the way they were! She was – she was

impossible to deal with!

He forced himself to calm down a little. No, she hadn't said she wanted things to go back like they were before. And she'd admitted that the newsroom would be a less hostile place for her if he went back. She'd also insisted that improving her personal situation wasn't her primary reason, that she wanted what she thought was best for him.

Was it, though? Was the Daily Planet what was best for him? In the two years and several months he'd known Lois Lane, she'd insulted him repeatedly, denigrated his talents and aptitude for writing many times, put down his "touchy-feely" style, danced close to him and then pushed him away, almost married Lex Luthor, had been offended when Superman hadn't told her every little detail of his life – like hers was an open book! – and then, to top it all off, she'd accused him of the worst kind of betrayal when he really did open his heart to her and reveal his biggest secret. Worse yet, she'd promised to expose him to the world and put everyone he cared about in danger if he didn't leave the city forever.

Now, unbelievably, she wanted him back. Shakespeare was right. Women were inconstant, unreliable, completely and utterly fickle creatures at the core.

Except – except for Rachel. Surely Rachel wasn't fickle. Surely she was reliable and constant.

He should go see her, to talk to her, reassure her. Meeting Lois like that had to have been a surprise, and hearing that Lois planned to take Clark away surely compounded surprise into the shock. Maybe she'd hug him like there was no tomorrow and cry on his shoulder, or maybe she'd laugh and tell him she'd known the whole time that he wouldn't leave.

Maybe she'd ask him if he loved her.

And he didn't know how to answer that question.

His office seemed to be a haven now that Lois wasn't there and he went in. He sat at his desk and stared out his window at the sky. He didn't respond when Jane stopped typing, walked down the hall, paused by his door, then continued toward the stairs.

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Rachel turned away from her office window and headed for the stairs. She needed to talk to Clark and she couldn't wait any longer.

If he'd decided to go back to Metropolis, she wanted to know now. If he wasn't leaving, she needed to know now. If he was running away to travel around the world and avoid making a decision, she had to know now.

She sprinted past a woman she belatedly recognized as Jane Clemens coming down the stairs. Jane said something Rachel didn't catch, and Jane's briefcase whacked the wall as she spun to avoid Rachel.

No time to be nice. Had to talk to Clark.

Rachel took the stairs two steps at a time and spun on her toes to sprint down the hall to Clark's office. She threw open the door and stopped in the doorway with one hand on each side and panted, "You – you're still here!"

Clark turned away from the window and took a step toward her. She detached herself from the doorway and launched herself across the office and into his arms. The intensity of her own relief frightened her – she hadn't realized how scared she'd been until that moment.

He caught her and held her tight and stroked her hair and whispered softly to her and she didn't understand a word he said because of her sobs. She felt herself rise into the air, then she realized she was sitting sideways on Clark's lap. Her arms were still around his neck and her feet rested on the next couch cushion. And still he held her close.

Rachel's tears finally wound down enough for her to speak clearly. "You know I – I almost expected you to come out and get in that car with – with Lois."

He stroked her hair and kissed her cheek. “No. I told her I wasn’t going back to Metropolis.”

She took a deep breath, then leaned back a little and looked into his eyes. “What did you – did you tell her why you wasn’t goin’ back?”

This was it, the big question. She’d find out now how he felt.

He pulled her head down on his shoulder. “I told her I’d rebuilt my life here in Smallville. That I’d made new friends and reconnected with old ones. And that I was comfortable here.” He tightened his embrace for a moment. “And I told her that you were here.”

She closed her eyes and held her breath for a moment. He hadn’t told her that he loved her, not quite, but it was close. Maybe she could lead him to say he really loved her, trust him to follow her lead and commit totally to her.

But if she did, wouldn’t that make her dishonest with him? Wasn’t their relationship built partly on Lois’ rejection of him and the hurt she’d laid on him? Was his anger at Lois still driving him away from Metropolis and to her side?

He relaxed his hold and she leaned back again. “I think we need to talk.”

He sighed. “Oh, boy,” he breathed. “That’s never a good sign. Movies, plays, books, one of the couple says ‘We need to talk,’ and the next thing you know all heck breaks loose.”

Despite herself, she grinned. “All ‘heck’ breaks loose?”

“You smiled. My work here is done.”

She sat more upright without leaving his lap. “No, not yet. We really do have to talk.”

He nodded. “Okay. I have my suspicions about the subject of this talk, but you have begun so you get to set the agenda.”

“I ain’t got no agenda. I just wanna talk to you about somethin’.”

The ghost of a smile played at his lips for a moment, then vanished. He nodded again. “Then we’ll talk. You start and I’ll chime in when I need to.”

“Fine.” Rachel pulled in a breath through her nose and let it out slowly, then, as gently as she knew how, asked, “Are you still in love with Lois?”

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Lois pulled the shade down on the window beside her seat on the plane and closed her eyes. She was tired, ever so tired, and she’d spent all her energy trying to reason with Clark, trying to convince him to come back to Metropolis with her.

She’d failed. She had nothing to show for her efforts.

He’d given her no hint, no wink-wink nudge-nudge, no indication at all that he might consider coming back to the Planet. He’d rejected the thought out of hand. And he hadn’t said or done anything that would make Lois believe he would ever forgive her. Never mind suggesting that he might still love her. Forget being his friend. Dump the thought of their being partners in the document shredder. Or she could throw it in the incinerator and cackle maniacally as it turned into hot ash. He was still furious with her and she didn’t blame him one iota.

She’d probably never see him again.

She turned to the drawn shade and pressed her face against her thin blanket. Maybe she could cry silently enough that no one would bother her.

She put her arms around the small pillow and buried her face in it.

Time to get on with her empty life.

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Clark stared at Rachel for a long moment, then shook his head. “Wow. Really You go for the jugular, don’t you?”

She slipped off his lap to the couch beside him, then took his hand. “Look, Clark, I know you was in love with her ‘bout from your first day at the paper. It’s real hard to turn off those feelings, and I – a body don’t just decide to stop loving someone in a

minute. Takes a good long while.”

He looked into her eyes and thought, then asked, “Are you talking about how I feel – how I felt about Lois then or how you feel about me now?”

Her eyes changed but she didn’t flinch away. “Both, I guess. I love you. I been in love with you for a long time, ever since high school. I never said nothin’ to you about it cause I’m Smallville and you always been bigger than that. I always knew you wasn’t gonna stay here.” She tightened her grip on his fingers. “But you’re here now and I really thought you was gonna stay this time. And – and if I’m wrong I gotta know.”

He nodded. “I understand. And you deserve to know. But – but I really don’t know my own heart right now.”

He stood and started walking the perimeter of his office, talking the whole time. “I won’t deny that I have a very deep and visceral reaction to Lois Lane. But it’s not a positive reaction. I had to make myself not grab her and throw her out when I walked in and found her here.” He stopped and spun back to face Rachel. “Did you know she cried? The few times in the past when she cried, I folded like wet cardboard. This time it made me angrier than I already was because – well, I don’t really know why. It just did.”

Rachel nodded at him. “My daddy told me about Jimmy and Erin Peters. You remember them?”

“Um – yeah, I think so. Didn’t they get a divorce about twelve years ago?”

“Yep. My daddy told me why.”

He shrugged and wondered where she was going with this. “Are you going to tell me? It seems as if you’re aiming at a point.”

“I am.” She sat back and crossed her arms. Still speaking quietly, she said, “Call came to the sheriff one Tuesday afternoon in the summer back when I’d just turned thirteen. I wanted to ride along with Daddy on some of his calls, and he and I talked Mom into letting me go with him. We went to the Peters’ apartment and he told me to stay in the car. I fussed, of course, but I stayed, cause we could hear them yelling from the parking lot. They was both real mad.

“When Daddy got to the front door – they was livin’ on the ground floor – he knocked on the door, called out that he was the sheriff, then stepped to one side. Good thing he did, too. Erin had a four-ten shotgun and she turned and blew a hole in the door. Jimmy was tryin’ to take it away from her and she knocked him down with it. She swore up ‘n’ down later pullin’ the trigger was a accident. Scared me so bad I almost wet myself.

“Daddy drew his weapon and told her to put it down, and when she did he arrested and cuffed both of them. He put ‘em in the back seat and told me to scrunch down in the front floorboard so they couldn’t see me. His car had the wire cage in the back so they couldn’t get to me anyway and they was both cuffed with their hands behind ‘em, but they was still screamin’ at each other and cussin’ up a storm. Before we left, Daddy told ‘em to hush up and said they was both in big trouble and if they made any problems in his car they’d be in twice as much trouble. They must o’ believed him cause they shut up.

“I watched him take them up to the jail and lock ‘em in separate cells across from each other. Once he locked the doors, they started up screamin’ again. He turned them over to one of his deputies and took me out to the car quick as he could.”

“Amazing.”

“What?”

He almost smiled. “That you still wanted to be sheriff even after all that.”

She almost smiled back. “It was the way he handled them that impressed me at first, that he only used as much force as he had to without hurtin’ ‘em. Then he sat me down and told me that when he first met Jimmy and Erin, they was real in love. Couldn’t keep their lips off one ‘nother. But Jimmy had trouble keepin’ a job and

Erin had to work and they never had kids and they – they just drifted apart and started blamin’ each other for all their troubles. Their love turned to hate over the years until Erin threatened Jimmy with a shotgun.”

She sighed. “Jimmy got released with a fine, but Erin spent eight months in county lockup because she shot at a police officer. She was lucky she didn’t get charged with attempted murder. Their divorce was made final before she got out of jail. Jimmy left the state for Oregon, I think, and Erin went to either Georgia or Florida.”

Now he was confused. What did this have to do with the Clark-Lois-Rachel triangle?

“That’s a tragic story, but I don’t understand now it applies to us.”

“That’s cause I ain’t finished it yet.”

“Oh.” He gave her a small bow. “In that case, please proceed.”

She smiled for real and bobbed her head in return. “Thank you. Anyway, Daddy said that Jimmy told him before the divorce was final that he would’ve stayed married to her but she wouldn’t leave him be. That woman nagged him day and night, never showed him any kindness, never told him she loved him after the first couple o’ years or so of their marriage, and Jimmy couldn’t take it. He said she’d broken his heart and let all his love drain right out and she wouldn’t let him fall back in love with her. It weren’t all her fault, but she didn’t do all she could to fix things and by the time the divorce came through, Jimmy told Daddy that if he never saw Erin again he’d be a contented man. He also said he’d never trust another woman again as long as he lived.”

Rachel fixed his eyes with hers. “Jimmy’s love for Erin turned to hate and he couldn’t let go of it. Even I could tell he was turnin’ mean and bitter. Daddy told me he didn’t see Jimmy ever lovin’ another woman for the rest of his life. Erin had just about poisoned him for everyone else.”

She stood and moved in front of him, then took his hands. “I don’t want you to end up mean and bitter. See, I think there’s still somethin’ inside you that’s tied up with Lois. If you didn’t feel something for her, you wouldn’t get so mad when you hear her name, and you sure wouldn’t have to make yourself not hit her.”

Her hands slipped up to his chest and rested there. “I want to be with you, Clark, but I can’t be with you if you get mean and bitter. And I don’t want to be your second choice. No woman wants that. And you don’t wanna settle for a girl you think is your second choice, either.” She dropped her eyes and snorted lightly. “Or third or fourth. I dunno who else you dated in Metropolis.”

He had to fix this. Rachel was in pain and it was his doing. He couldn’t let her suffer like this.

He tugged her close and kissed her cheek. “Rachel Harris, I love you. You’re my best friend who’s a girl – sorry, a woman – and I wouldn’t hurt you for all the gold in Fort Knox.” He wrapped his arms around her and held her close. “I wish I could tell you that I love you enough to ask you to marry me, but I can’t. Not yet.” He pulled back and lifted her chin with a finger. “I think I’m getting there, though. Can you wait? Can you be patient with me?”

She nodded and blinked away dampness. “Yes. I can wait. I been waitin’ a long time for my knight in shinin’ armor, but I’ll settle for a writer with a laptop.”

He looked over his shoulder at his desk where his computer rested. “A WayneTech laptop?”

She chuckled. “Sure, that sounds fine.” She leaned in and embraced him again. “Be sure to take it with you when you go.”

He smiled and started to say that he already took it—  
What?

What did she say? When he *goes*? Goes where? And why?

He pushed her back and looked straight into her eyes. “Please tell me you didn’t just say what I thought I just heard you say.”

She brushed his cheek with her fingertips. “You got to go back to Metropolis and figure it out. I know you can do everything you need to do from right here. I also know I can be the wife you want to go home to every night. I can handle things at home when you’re not there. I can do my job without you hovering over me all the time.” She pulled his head down and kissed him softly. “And I’d love you and stay with you all our lives.”

His head spun and he actually felt dizzy. “But – if you love me enough to want to marry my why are you sending me away?” He felt his face harden as he took a step back. “And why would you send me to *her*?”

Rachel shook her head. “I ain’t sendin’ you *to* her, like you’re gonna move in with her soon’s you get there. I’m sendin’ you back to figure out your heart. You got to stop thinking you hate Lois, cause if you do end up hating her for real you won’t have no room in your heart to love me. I want you to go back there so you can get shut o’ her for good.” She paused and took a shuddering breath, then said, “Please? Please, do this for me? For what might be – us?”

He closed his eyes and took another step back. Her hands slid down his chest and fell to her sides.

This was not at all what he’d anticipated during a lunch date with Rachel. He’d finally managed not to think of Lois first thing in the morning most days. He’d gotten to the point of not thinking about her every night just before he went to sleep. Clark Kent was actually putting Lois Lane in his past.

Then he’d walked into a Lois ambush that Rachel could’ve warned him about but didn’t and he was a little mad about it. The realization surprised him, and he told himself that Rachel was trying *not* to run his life like Lois still was. Anger at Rachel, therefore, was totally inappropriate.

Yet he was baffled by her plan for him to go back to Metropolis. How would going back to the Planet to work beside a woman who’d broken his heart be a good thing?

“Rachel – I don’t understand.”

She stayed where she was. “Do you trust me?”

It was a trick question and he knew it, but the only possible answer was, “Yes. I trust you.”

She smiled sadly and nodded. “Then you got to go back.” And there was the trap. Disagree and damage their relationship. Agree and go back to Metropolis. He just couldn’t win this one.

He licked his lips. “When? And for how long?”

“Soon’s you can get there. And as long as it takes for you to be sure.”

“About Lois, you mean, right?”

“About her, yeah, and about me. You need to know in your heart which of us you want to love. Or if it’s some other woman.”

“There’s no other woman. There never has been.”

“What I thought. You still need to decide between us, though.”

He took a breath. Then another. Then yet another. He thought furiously as he breathed.

Finally he nodded. “Okay. I’ll go back, assuming Perry will want me back.”

“From all you’ve told me, he’s a smart man. He’ll want you back.”

He ducked his head and bit his lip, then asked, “How long before I can come back?”

She took a short, sharp breath and turned her head, then said, “You come back when you know the answer. I’ll be waiting.”

She moved closer and wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her cheek against his. “Think you know I been chasin’ you ‘bout since you got here. Thought I had you close to roped and thrown, too. But I don’t want a man I have to wrassle with until he surrenders. I want one who wants to be with me for the long run all on his own.”

He held her close. “I think I could be that man.”

She stayed tight against him for almost a minute, then pulled back until her hands were on his shoulders. “I know you could be. But I can’t *make* you be that guy. Wouldn’t be right for either of us. I might end up pointin’ a shotgun at you one night.”

He grinned a little. “Be bad for your reelection campaign, don’t you think?”

She chuckled. “Would at that.” Her face fell. “You don’t have to come find me and tell me goodbye before you go. Rather you didn’t. I don’t think I could take hearin’ it twice.”

He hesitated, then nodded. “Okay. I’m going to keep the office for now. I have eight more months on my lease anyway, and I don’t want to run out on Sam. You still have a key, right?”

“It’s how I got in here before Lois did.”

“Right, right. I’ll call – no. I’ll write to you. Twice a week. And if you don’t want to write back, that’s okay.”

“Depends on what you write.”

He nodded again. “I understand. I’m – I still don’t know about this plan of yours.”

She shrugged. “If you come back to me, I’ll know. If you don’t come back, I’ll know. Remember that old saying? If you love something set it free, and if it comes back, you’ll know it’s love.”

He shook his head. “I saw a poster with that saying on it once. At the bottom, someone had added, ‘If it doesn’t come back, hunt it down and kill it.’”

She snorted a laugh, which was what he’d hoped she’d do. “Okay, Clark, you got me. Now git on back to the big bad city and get your heart right.” She touched his face again. “Will you – will you come to me and tell me how you decide? Either way?”

He turned his head and kissed her hand. “Of course.”

“Good.” She put her hands on his chest and shoved him back. “Now get outta here before I forget I’m a lady and a sheriff.” She waved one hand between them. “Better yet, I’ll leave.”

She turned to the door. “Rachel?”

She stopped in the doorway. “Yes?”

“Thank you. For everything.”

A sad smile appeared on her lips. “No. Thank you for letting me love you.”

And she vanished through the doorway.

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Perry White didn’t much like working all day on Saturday, but Lois was out of town, Eduardo was taking care of two sick kids and a sick wife, Jimmy was on a planned weekend trip to meet Kim’s parents, and he had to take up some of the slack.

He put down his pen and sighed. Finished, and it wasn’t quite two o’clock yet. He could go grab a late lunch and spend the evening with Alice, assuming she’d gotten away from her office on time today. Lois’ brief call to tell him of her failure in Smallville hadn’t helped his state of mind either. All in all, this was not a great day.

Then the phone rang. “Perry White, Daily Planet.”

“Chief? This is Clark. Do you have some time to talk? I have some news I hope you’ll like.”

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Perry put the phone back on its cradle. Clark had agreed to an unofficial six-month probationary return period, contingent on his decision to either remain in the city or return to Kansas. Perry would not force him to work with Lois. For his part, Clark had agreed that if circumstances and the demands of a particular story put them together, he’d behave professionally. If it was okay with Perry, he’d take a desk across the newsroom from Lois, one with quick access to a window and the stairwell. He planned to get a suite of rooms at one of the long-term rental hotels, and the Planet would give him a housing allowance for those six months. He’d keep his office in Smallville for the time being. And Clark would keep Perry up to date on how things were going with him,

including his personal relationships.

Lois had briefed Perry on Clark’s situation with Rachel, so he’d heard Clark’s subtext clearly. There was a young woman in Smallville who wanted to be with Clark full-time, long-term, and permanent, and Clark didn’t think the idea was a terrible one. In fact, he seemed to favor the idea at the moment. So Clark would regularly update Perry on his desire to stay in the office as opposed to his desire to get back to Smallville and this other young lady.

The only question now was when he would let Lois know her trip had borne fruit despite what she thought had taken place.

After thinking about it, he decided he wouldn’t tell her before Clark came in. Part of his decision came from the thought that Clark could always change his mind before Wednesday, his first scheduled day back. And part of it came from a perverse desire to let Lois twist in the wind a little longer and suffer for her sins.

It was a bit petty, he knew, but Lois had disrupted the camaraderie of his newsroom and badly shaken the smoothness of the paper’s operation and he wasn’t quite ready to let her off the hook for it. Oh, sure, things still got done on time, and Lois was still producing good copy, but even with her cast as the villain in the Clark-Lois melodrama, people had still taken sides. Those who were fully on Clark’s side, like Jimmy, had little patience with those who thought maybe Lois had what she thought were good reasons for breaking it off with Clark so abruptly. A few heated arguments had broken out, and two of them had required Perry’s intervention. No blows had been exchanged, but some feelings had been badly hurt and a few friendships had been damaged.

The Daily Planet newsroom was no longer a “happy ship.” And Perry wanted it to be happy again. If Clark and Lois could coexist in peace, maybe that would happen.

With that thought, Perry decided that he’d put Clark back at his old desk. If he and Lois were bound to try to kill each other, he’d rather find out sooner than later. Them being that close together would tell him if their truce would hold. And if they were physically close, they’d have to speak occasionally. It might help to heal the breach. That was the result he’d like to see, and not just because it would help the Planet. He really cared for both of those kids.

And maybe Clark would go back to Kansas in six months or less. He’d just have to wait and see what happened like any other person.

Altogether, though, his day wasn’t so bad after all. There was potential for light at the end of the tunnel.

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## Chapter Twenty-One

Lois dragged herself through the Planet’s lobby to her elevator. It had been four days since her disastrous trip to Kansas, four days since she’d called Perry on her new cell phone from the parking lot of the gas station in Smallville and told him what she’d tried to do and how badly she’d crashed and burned, four days since she’d spoken with Clark for the last time. The cold fist of despair had clamped her heart in its iron grip since the moment she’d walked out of Clark’s office. She feared it would never let go.

And now, on top of that, it was Wednesday morning and she was running late. She’d had trouble waking up, partly because Lucy was busy and out of the apartment most of the time and was no longer underfoot and the uncommon silence bothered her, and partly because she’d stayed up until the wee hours of the morning staring at the end table where the photo of Lois accompanying Clark at the Kerth ceremony had once rested. The picture had been a casualty of her white-hot fury the first night after The Beta—

No. That was wrong. Clark hadn’t betrayed her. She’d betrayed him. And now she was paying the penalty for her stupidity.

She’d pay that penalty for the rest of her life.

The elevator doors opened onto the barely controlled chaos of the newsroom, a place where she'd once reigned as Mad Dog Lane, Queen Of The Newsroom. Now the people there barely tolerated her presence. No one wanted to work with her, but unlike before when they feared her legendary temper, now they shunned her because she'd pushed Clark out of their fellowship. If Cat Grant were still working here, she might have a caustic comment or two about Lois' intelligence or taste to break up the silent monotony.

It was more probable that Cat would shun Lois just as everyone else was doing.

She walked to her desk and glanced at Clark's empty workspace and stopped in surprise.

It wasn't empty. The workstation was powered up and there was a notebook on the desktop. An empty coffee cup sat to the right of the chair – which was pushed back and not under the desk as it had been for the past four months.

So Perry had finally put someone there. She hoped whoever it was would be a productive reporter. Probably a new hotshot who'd set his or her sights on overtaking Lois as the premier headline grabber in town.

She might just let New Person, whoever he or she was, win that contest.

She put her purse in her desk drawer and hung up her windbreaker, then sat down and turned on her computer. It was about halfway through the bootup sequence when Perry leaned out of his office and motioned to her to come see him.

It figures. He saw me come in late and now I'm going to get yelled at. What a wonderful way to start a Wednesday.

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Clark lowered his glasses and peeked through Perry's office wall to watch Lois approach. He'd decided not to rise until Perry called Lois' attention to him. Both he and Perry thought it would maximize the shock value.

As an added bonus, if she dropped dead of heart failure at seeing him, his problem of which woman to pursue would be solved and he could go back to Smallville with a clear conscience.

He still wasn't happy to be here. The last time he'd spoken with Lois in this office, her vitriol had scorched both the walls and his ears.

The memory hadn't faded, but his feelings had changed. The last time, he'd pleaded with her to alter her stance, to listen to him, to try to understand his reasons for not telling her earlier. This time, though, he would not plead. He would not beg her to be reasonable.

This time, *he* would lay down the law.

He would not bargain with her. He would not allow her to set any conditions. The last time they'd spoken here in Perry's office, she'd set all the conditions. True, she'd amended her demands and said "no conditions" in Smallville, but that was then and this was now. Clark would refuse to let her change her mind or her previously stated limits in any way.

She walked to the door – plodded, actually – and opened it. In a listless whisper, she said, "Yes, Perry?"

Perry pointed to the couch. "Got somebody to sit at that desk. Here he is."

Lois took another step into the office, then turned to face Clark.

She froze in place and seemed to stop breathing. Then her eyes glazed over and she slumped to the floor like a marionette whose strings had been suddenly parted.

*Bonus time*, he thought.

Almost as an afterthought, he rose from the couch and moved to her side. As impersonally as he could, he lifted her from the floor and all but dropped her on the couch. Perry shouldered him aside and shot him a stern look that had no effect on his heart. Clark retreated to Perry's desk, out of Lois' line of sight, then

crossed his arms and leaned back against it.

After a moment, she moved her head, grunted thinly, and bunched her eyelids together. Then she blinked and muttered, "Pe – Perry? Wha – I fainted?"

He sighed and gently said, "Yes, but I think you're okay now."

Her hands fluttered for a moment. "I thought – I'm getting a little overstressed, I guess. I thought I saw Clark."

"You did, honey. Clark is right behind me."

"What? He – what?"

She struggled to sit up and had to let Perry help her. When she tried to stand, he put a hand on her shoulder to restrain her and said, "Not yet. You stay there for a minute and get your bearings back."

She looked at her boss with wide eyes. "He said – he told me he wasn't coming back." Then she focused on Clark. "You knew I'd be shocked to find you here. That wasn't very nice, just showing up like this without any warning."

"Probably about as shocking as me walking in my office in Smallville and finding you waiting for me. And I will point out that you didn't warn me, either."

"That was different!"

"How was it different?"

"I – it just was!"

Clark let out a frustrated sigh. "Chief, this isn't going to work. It was a bad idea. I can't work with Lois Lane. I'll just have to submit my resignation and take over my travel column and the syndication rights."

"No!" Lois jumped up and stumbled against her boss, then righted herself and barred Clark's way to the door. "Please, no! I'm sorry! I'm really sorry! I shouldn't have said that. Not any of it."

Clark uncrossed his arms and leaned into her face. "Your saying it isn't the problem, Ms. Lane. It's that you thought it in the first place."

"Now hold on, both of you," Perry said. "Lois, I didn't tell you Clark was coming back starting today because I wasn't completely sure he'd actually come in. Clark, I think you can give Lois the benefit of the doubt here. You did startle her pretty badly just by being here."

Clark moved back a half-step and straightened. "That's true. But she should be accustomed to receiving shocks from me."

Lois' head moved as if she were about to speak, then she didn't. Her gaze traveled down to the floor between them and she sighed as if she were deflating.

Perry lifted his hand for a moment, then lowered it. "Look, you two need to work this out between you. I'm just gonna step back and be ready to referee in case it gets too physical. Okay?" He suited his actions to his words. "All right. Start working it out."

No one spoke for a long moment, so Clark asked, "What are your conditions, Lois?"

Her gaze rose slightly. "You mean for you coming back to live and work in Metropolis?"

"Yes."

She shook her head. "There aren't any. I don't have the right to set conditions for you."

"So it's okay if we don't work together?"

Her eyes fixed on his chest and she spoke in a low monotone. "I'm not setting any conditions and I'm not making any demands. I'm just glad you're back."

He moved back another half-step. "Okay. Now let me tell you about my conditions."

She raised her sunken eyes to look into his and nodded.

"I'm not going to tell everyone here that you had nothing to do with my departure. In fact, I don't plan to talk about that to anyone. It's no one's business but mine. Got that?"

She nodded again but didn't speak.

"I'm also not going to let you take credit for getting me to come back. As far as anyone will know, I left because of something between me and Perry and you had nothing whatsoever to do with it. The reason you didn't act sad to see me gone was because you were on Perry's side even though you didn't know all the facts. But it's resolved now, and we've all signed non-disclosure agreements so we can't discuss any details of the situation with anyone."

The side of her mouth twitched as if she might smile, then didn't. "That's a bit complex, isn't it?"

"If you have something better or more believable, let's hear it."

She frowned in apparent thought for a moment, then shook her head. "Not at the moment. And we need to maintain whatever cover story we put out at the beginning, so let's go with your invention." She shrugged. "Now that I've had a chance to think about it a little, your narrative doesn't sound so implausible." She looked away and added, "And it will explain why I'm not jumping into your arms to welcome you back."

He ignored the oblique compliment. "You also need to know that I'm here primarily because Rachel pretty much made me come."

That got her attention. Her mouth made an "O" and her eyes turned into mouse-sized dinner plates. "She – she *what*?"

"You were right about her. She's in love with me and she wants to marry me, but she doesn't want to be my second choice. She sent me back to Metropolis and the Daily Planet so I could be sure she was the woman I really wanted."

Lois finally took a breath. "She – she has a question about *that*? How could she doubt the way you feel about her?"

"I don't want to go into any more detail. Let's just leave it at that."

He could tell she didn't want to leave it, but she closed her mouth and relaxed her eyes. "Okay. Is there a – a time limit on your return?"

"Six months maximum, or until I'm certain. Honestly, if she hadn't been so adamant about it and sure that I'd come back to her if I really loved her, I wouldn't be here at all. But she asked very nicely, so here I am."

She flinched at his last statement. After a moment, he realized why.

He'd done what Rachel had asked, and he'd done it without arguing. Oh, he'd discussed it with her, and he'd questioned her logic, but in the end he'd done it because she had *asked* him. Rachel hadn't advised him, admonished him, ordered him, or demanded that he accede to her wishes. She had just asked.

And here he was in front of the woman who, four months ago, had threatened to obliterate his entire life's structure if he refused her demand that he leave the city.

Never mind Lois' state of mind. Her feelings weren't his problem.

He increased his glare at her. "Now, I'm back at work, but I have to go check out of my hotel and check into the Mother Hubbard by the freeway. They have furnished suites for long-term rent and I've already made a reservation."

"Fine with me," said Perry. "Lois, you got anything to add?"

Her eyes flicked to Perry, then back to Clark. "Just – I'm glad you're back. I'll try not to make things more difficult for you."

She was being nice. Sort of, anyway. He needed to reciprocate. "Thank you. I will do my best not to treat you badly in public."

Her mouth thinned. "I see. That's – fair, I suppose, given the way I've treated you."

He nodded, then turned to Perry. "If it's okay, I'll get started on getting into my new place."

Perry nodded and smiled. "You shouldn't have to fix it up, anyway, not like the last one."

"I hope not. I'm going to make the rounds and shake some hands in the newsroom before I leave. I should be back right after lunch."

"Sounds good, son. Make sure you get a room with a balcony."

Clark grinned at his boss. It was the most obscure and oblique reference to Superman anyone had ever made to him, and he appreciated both the sentiment and the obvious intent behind the remark. "Bye, Chief." He turned to Lois and nodded to her, then as he passed her on the way to the doorway, he muttered, "Bye, Lois."

He shut the door behind him and started for Jimmy's desk. Behind him – as she had to know he would – he heard her mutter, "I'll help with your exit lines, too, Farm Boy. Overdue library books and Cheese Of the Month Club won't get it done."

He almost tripped on a nonexistent seam in the carpet, then steadied himself. At least Lois felt confident enough to snark at him. And alert enough to do it when he shouldn't have been able to hear her and couldn't respond.

As he walked toward a suddenly jubilant Jimmy, he realized that he was almost amused by her snark. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to be in the same newsroom with her.

Or maybe, when he thought about it, he'd be irritated at her presumption. Maybe it hadn't been intended to be a friendly crack. Maybe she'd been trying for sharp and slightly uncomfortable. At the moment, he didn't know how she'd intended him to take it.

No matter. He'd made the commitment and he'd see it through. The next six months might be survivable after all. As long as Rachel answered the letters he planned to send her on a regular basis, that is.

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Denise Howard picked up the mail and began sorting it. All of the legal documents went in a stack for either the judge or the sheriff. She'd sort those out last. Anything personal went to the inbox on her desk for distribution the next time she saw whoever's mail it was. And everything else from a Smallville zip code went in a stack for the lowest-ranking deputy present to cull through.

There were two legal envelopes for the sheriff and three for the judge. Denise stood and knocked on the sheriff's office door.

"Yes."

"It's Denise. Got a couple of things for you."

"C'mon in. Ain't too busy right now."

Denise entered and handed the mail to Rachel, then sat in the chair to the left of the desk. "One's from Overland Park over by Kansas City and one's from Topeka. You want me to wait while you open them?"

Rachel picked up one envelope and seemed to look at it without seeing it. She'd been moody and distant ever since Clark had left three weeks before. It hadn't affected her work, not yet, but Tommy had asked Denise about it two days before.

It was time to get some answers. "Rachel? How's your dad?"

Rachel blinked. "Huh?"

"I asked you how your dad was doing. Is he out of physical therapy yet?"

The younger woman perked up a bit. "Not yet. Won't be much longer, though. And he's done with havin' surgeries. He's still goin' and gripin' at his therapists. Course they all think he's a sweet old man cause he smiles as he gripes and they know he's kiddin' anyway. And he kinda sorta flirts with 'em sometimes, too, and it gives Mom a chance to fuss at him and threaten to make him do the exercises all over again at home. Nancy – she's his main therapist – always tells Mom to give him an extra stretch for her."

They shared a laugh. "Have you gotten a letter from Clark yet this week?"

Rachel's smile thinned. "Oh, yeah, every week, get one on Tuesday and Saturday, just like clockwork. He writes about the

newsroom, about his buddy Jimmy, about Lois' sister Lucy – she's a certified paralegal in New Troy now, working some long hours and making good money – about Perry White, about the stories he's working on, and he complains about the long-term rental place he's in. Says it's not a bit like his old apartment there. Calls the place the Hanoi Hilton, says he's got a next-door neighbor who wants to be a professional dancer and the girl keeps him up late practicing her tap routines."

Denise chuckled. "Sounds like Clark." She hesitated, then ventured, "I – ah – noticed that you mentioned Lois' sister but not Lois. Isn't Clark writing about her?"

Rachel turned her chair away from Denise. "No, not much. He did say she's trying to stay away from him and being nice to him when they do talk. They ain't working on no stories together yet, but he said they say 'Howdy' at the coffee pot or the vending machines. And Lois bought him a package of Double-Stuff Oreos last week and told him it was his 'Welcome to Metropolis' gift."

Denise nodded. "Sounds like she's trying to be nice to him." "Yeah."

Denise put her hand on Rachel's wrist and sighed. "But that's not what you think, is it?"

Rachel turned to face Denise and put her hands in her lap. "I can't tell. I dunno if he's gonna come back or not. I really, really want him to come back." She closed her eyes and sniffed once. "I want him to come back to me."

"I'm pretty sure he knows that."

"He does. He also knows I ain't puttin' no pressure on him to come back. I want him to make his peace with Lois and come back to Smallville and marry me."

Denise's voice was barely audible. "I know. And I'm sorry you're hurting so badly."

Rachel shook her head. "Don't matter. Life goes on whether I'm happy or miserable." She picked up the envelope postmarked Topeka and tore it open. "Lemme see – good, that commendation for recovering Bob Clay's cattle is finally coming. Says the Kansas Attorney General wants me in the capital – ah, two weeks from Monday – to officially receive it from the governor." She fanned herself with it. "Your sheriff is gonna be famous."

"And reelected next year."

Rachel chuckled lightly. "Yeah, maybe. Voters got short memories, though. Likely I'll hafta do somethin' else real fancy before then."

"How about the other one, the one from Overland Park?"

"Let's find out." She opened the second envelope and started reading, then leaned back in her chair and laughed aloud. "This is rich. The sheriff in Overland Park has arrested a suspect on a burglary complaint and wants a copy of his police record sent up there – ah, he says he wants it 'posthaste.' That means right away, don't it?"

"Yes. Who's the suspect?"

Rachel laughed again. "Bobby Clanton."

Denise spluttered. "Bobby Clanton? Our old friend from the Hole-In-The-Sheetrock Gang? The man who put his face print in our wall?"

"The very one. Do me a favor and pull his jacket and photocopy it right away. I wanna get this in the mail today before the funny wears off."

\*\*\*

Lois lunged into the elevator without looking and dodged the anonymous person inside it to hit the lobby button. She was more than ready to get out of the newsroom this Monday evening. Clark was being a little nice to her, but it was the controlled and impersonal nice you show a person you don't like and she hated that. She'd rather he snarl at her than be fake-nice.

She looked up at the mirrored wall in the elevator car as the doors closed and saw Clark behind her. He looked as surprised as she felt.

She half-turned and said, "I'm sorry, I didn't look before I barged in. It wasn't deliberate."

He lifted one hand, palm out, in a "peace" gesture. "It's okay. I never said we couldn't be in an elevator together."

She looked at the floor indicator – 4, 3, 2, 2 – what the—?

The car squealed and stopped suddenly. She almost lost her balance and might have fallen had Clark not taken her arm.

His touch still thrilled her.

She took a shuddering breath and said, "I'm – I'm sorry. Thanks for catching me."

He gently released her and stepped back. "It's part of what I do."

Right. Clark Kent clothes, Superman rescue. A little one, anyway. He would've done the same thing no matter who might have been in the elevator with him.

She looked at the emergency phone panel and reached for it, then stopped. "Uh – do you know why we're not moving?"

She looked at him, expecting anger or irritation. Instead he'd lowered his glasses and was apparently checking the machinery. After a few seconds, he replaced his glasses. "I don't see a mechanical problem. It might be that the computer has a glitch somewhere. At least we're not in imminent danger of falling."

"That's good." Lois pushed the "open" button, but the inner doors didn't move. "Should I call in an emergency?"

"I think so. We're not in danger at the moment, but we're stuck, and I'm supposed to meet Jimmy for basketball."

She let one corner of her mouth drift up. "So, no heroic rescue of trapped elevator survivors?"

He didn't smile, but his voice was soft and even. "I'd rather not. I didn't set this up, of course, but if Clark Kent is seen being rescued from a stalled elevator by firefighters or elevator repair people, that's one more layer of insulation between me and – you know."

She nodded. "Got it. I'll make the call."

She opened the panel and pulled out the handset. A phone at the other end of the dedicated line rang, and in a moment the head of building maintenance, Randall Conners, answered. "Building Maintenance, Conners."

"Mr. Conners, this is Lois Lane in elevator – uh, three. Clark Kent and I are stuck somewhere around floor two. The doors won't open and none of the control buttons work. We still have internal lights."

"Huh. I'll have to check it out. Might just need to reboot the controller. I'll call the car back as soon as I know something."

He hung up before Lois could say anything else. She put the phone back on its cradle and said, "I guess we won't be here long." She blew out a long breath. "How do you want to pass the time until we get out?"

He didn't answer, so she looked at him. He seemed to be checking out the inside of the elevator car, so she let him be.

After a few seconds, he turned to her with a deadpan expression and said, "Do you want to play 'I Spy With My Little Eye'?"

She couldn't help it. She snort-laughed.

He gave her a small smile in return. Just then the elevator jerked, then lowered several feet. "Are we headed for the first floor?"

He pulled his glasses down and looked at the doors, then nodded. "Looks like it. Rain check on the game?"

She smiled and turned to face the door. "Sure. Next time we're stuck in an elevator after work on Monday."

The phone rang and she picked it up. "Yes?"

"This is Conners again. You should be at the first floor now."

The doors slid open as he spoke the last word. "Thanks. We're there."

"Okay. You folks have a better Monday evening than it started out."

\*\*\*

It was Wednesday morning, and Perry watched his two star reporters dance around each other at the coffee cart, each trying to defer to the other and not make any personal contact. It was an incremental improvement in their relationship over the first week when neither of them willingly entered the same room as the other, much less spoke more than three words to each other.

Five weeks later and there wasn't much progress, but there was some.

Jimmy had stopped snarling at Lois, although he wasn't joking with her yet. Lois hadn't yelled at him since Clark's return, and it didn't look like she would. Most of the other reporters and staff had stopped avoiding her at all costs, but she still ate lunch alone.

Maybe this next assignment would change that.

He picked up his phone and punched an inside number.

"Lois? Bring Clark to my office. I have something for the two of you."

After a moment, Lois entered and moved to the far end of the couch. Clark stepped in and closed the door without moving away from it.

Was it still too soon?

Didn't matter. He'd jumped off the diving board and was approaching the water.

"Kent, did you read Lois' piece on that shyster who was selling babies? We published it while you were in Kansas."

"I read it."

"What did you think of it?"

Clark looked at Lois, who returned his expressionless glance. "I thought it was very well done, Chief."

"Good. Seems the guy's appeal hearing is tomorrow morning, and I need you two to cover it."

Clark frowned. "Both of us? Wouldn't Lois be the logical choice?"

"If it was just the appeal, yes, but I got a tip that three of the mothers and one of the adopting couples want to make victims' impact statements. I want Lois to handle the straight facts about the hearing and how much weight the judge gives those stories. And I want Clark to profile at least two of those victims. Anonymously, if they prefer, but I want to give them the chance to tell their stories in the news. Might stop someone else from becoming a victim in the first place."

Lois nodded. "I assume you'll want both article for tomorrow's evening edition?"

"No, the next day's morning edition. I don't think you'll have the time to make tomorrow night's noon deadline, although we'll have a teaser box on the bottom of the front page with the bare facts. You two work together as much as you're comfortable, okay? Just bring back something that'll make our readers let their breakfasts get cold."

She smiled a little. "I'm game. Clark?"

He looked at her for a long moment, then looked at Perry and said, "The hearing reconvenes at ten-thirty tomorrow morning, doesn't it?"

"I think so, but have Jimmy verify the time. Now you two finish up those assignments I gave you this morning."

Clark opened the door and stepped back so Lois could exit first. "On it, Chief."

Perry watched Lois walk out without looking at him and go to her desk. Clark followed and returned to his. He said something to her that made her frown, then she nodded and pulled her chair close to his desk.

He watched for another minute and nodded. They were discussing the assignment. Clark was taking notes and asking questions. Twice, Lois lifted her hand and pointed in his general direction to emphasize something. Both times he nodded and made more notes.

First hurdle. If they got through this story without fighting, they'd be okay. Might never be like it was before. Maybe Lois had hurt him too badly. Maybe Clark was really in love with that girl sheriff in Smallville.

Perry didn't know. But he did know that having a cooperative and calm Lois Lane and Clark Kent working team in his newsroom was the best thing for the Daily Planet. And the paper was his baby, his property, his to cherish and shepherd through all her trials and tribulations.

Of course, having those two back together as a couple wouldn't be a bad thing either.

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At her desk the day after the appeal hearing, Lois picked up the morning edition and read her story on the sentencing, then read Clark's sidebar. The husband and wife who'd spoken in court had moved her to tears as they'd described the heartache and pain at the loss of their adopted child. The birth mother had cried with them and promised to let them stay in her son's life, then she'd described exactly how the defendant had lied to her, promised financial support that never materialized, and cheated her.

Every man and woman in the jury box had responded. The lawyer's sentence of the maximum possible time of forty-two years was reaffirmed, his estate was attached to repay all parties involved, and as the judge dropped his gavel on his ruling he added that he wished that he had the power to inflict the same level of pain and grief on the defendant that the man had dumped on his victims. Clark had captured all of the emotional agony and put it in print.

Lois didn't think the slime bucket would survive to be released.

She glanced up as Clark passed by. "Good work on that sidebar. You caught their situations without being maudlin and pitched it just right."

He stopped and looked at her. "Thanks. Your article is very good, too. You described that guy's nastiness without making it an editorial. I don't know that I could've done as well."

She put the paper down. "You would've written it differently, that's all. We're not like each other."

He tilted his head at her. "You say that as if it might be a bad thing."

She grinned. "No, not at all. We each have different gifts. You do the touchy-feely stuff way better than I can."

"And your stuff hits like a falling building. I don't do the hard news as well as you do."

She leaned back. "That's what makes a good team, each one doing his or her own job. Every player on the Metro Cubs can't be the starting pitcher. Someone has to catch and others have to play the field."

He gave her what looked like a mock frown. "Is everything a sports metaphor with you?"

Her smile widened. "I have to communicate with the Neandertal side of humanity, so I have a passing acquaintance with sports."

Before he could answer, Jimmy walked up and said, "Sorry, don't mean to interrupt, but there's a call for Lois on line three. Something about a mob accountant."

"Thanks, Jim. I need to take this, Clark. I'll see you later."

He nodded and walked to the coffee cart.

She picked up the phone and paused before hitting the button for line three. Clark had been nice to her during that assignment, even accommodating at times, and they'd avoided any stupid arguments or disagreements so far. Things were slowly getting better between them, although he had yet to offer to get her coffee in the morning. But that little bit of banter felt – comfortable.

They hadn't shared a meal yet, either. There was progress – painfully slow, but real.

She hoped it wouldn't hurt too much if – or when – he went

back to Smallville. And back to Rachel Harris.

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### Chapter Twenty-Two

Rachel sat back in her office chair and tossed her pen down on the desk. Another Saturday morning spent catching up on paperwork. It was drudgery even when she wore civvies, like today. Daddy was right – filling out forms was the one thing that could drive a law enforcement officer to some other line of work. The problem was that anything else she could do with her life would require a similar amount of paperwork.

Nobody ever won a war fighting against a bureaucracy.

She pushed her hair back over her shoulder and smiled. It was really longer than she thought a sheriff's hair should be, but she also hoped that Clark would like it longer when he came back. She knew she was more tomboy than princess, but even a tomboy likes to be pretty at times.

Maybe she'd get her hair styled, maybe have some highlights put in. And if it was shoulder-length or longer when Clark got back, she could put it in a fancy up-do and take him out for dinner at a really nice restaurant. Oh, he knew she was a woman and she knew that he knew that she loved him, but it wouldn't hurt to remind him how feminine she could be if she put her mind to it.

She glanced out the window and saw Jonathan Kent's truck across the street at the Kramer building. She smiled and decided to drop in on Martha. Clark's mom had taken it upon herself to keep Clark's office clean while he was gone. Of course, there wasn't much cleaning to do, and Rachel occasionally went there herself to think about Clark. Twice she'd dropped in on Martha while she pattered around the room, and they'd had some long talks about Rachel's possible future.

Martha had always encouraged Rachel, had always told her to trust Clark, but had never given up one single hint about what Clark had told his folks about the Rachel-Clark-Lois love triangle. Sometimes Rachel felt bad about disliking Lois so much, but then she remembered how deeply the woman had cut Clark's heart and she stopped feeling bad about the disliking part.

She stood and made a decision. She'd go see Martha and invite her to lunch. They could swap stories, talk about how well her dad felt nowadays and how glad he and Mom were that Rachel had to work on Saturday mornings so they could be alone together and how good her reelection prospects were. Rachel could even catch Martha up on Lana and her new job in Tulsa.

And she wouldn't ask about Clark at all.

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Clark sat in his office chair in the Kramer building and cursed himself for being a coward of the worst sort.

He'd made the decision to stay in Metropolis. Despite his desire to come back to Smallville and to Rachel, this wasn't his home. He needed to go home to Metropolis.

Not home to Lois, though. That avenue wasn't open. Not yet. Maybe not ever. Things were far better between them than they had been for months, but when it came to his heart he still didn't know how much he could trust her.

He would let his folks close out his office lease with Sam Kramer – he'd pay any rent or fees remaining, of course – and he'd drive his truck to Kansas in a week or so to pick up his stuff and take it back to Metropolis. He'd already put down a deposit for a new apartment not far from the Planet. Perry had congratulated him on finding a place he liked, then had thanked him for making his return permanent.

Then he'd told Lois he was staying in Metropolis.

She'd taken a deep breath, let it out slowly, then said, "Thank you for telling me in person. I have some idea how hard that decision has been. I hope I haven't gone down in the 'Go back to Smallville' column on your pros-and-cons worksheet."

He'd smiled a little at her attempt at humor and shaken his head. "You've kept your word. I can't find any fault in the way

you've behaved toward me. I want to thank you for that."

"You're welcome." Her mouth had moved as if she'd been about to say something else, but whatever it was didn't come out.

He'd nodded once and walked away from her. And that was where he'd left it with Lois.

Now he had to tell Rachel about his decision. The only problem was that he was scared to face her.

She'd be disappointed, maybe devastated, maybe hysterical, although that last wasn't very likely. Rachel was level-headed and self-controlled and not at all given to emotional explosions. He just hated to tell her that he wasn't coming back. He'd thought about putting his goodbye in a letter, but that would be even worse and neither Rachel nor Lois would respect him for being a total chicken. Besides, she'd specifically asked him to come back and let her know what he'd decided. He had to tell her face to face—

His office door opened and Rachel walked in. "Hey, Martha, thought I'd come—"

He saw her eyes widen when she realized it wasn't Martha in the office.

She stumbled and held herself up with the doorknob.

He stood and stepped around his desk. "Rach, I'm sorry I didn't call first. I need to talk with you but I don't know how to begin."

"I – you – it ain't been six months! Just three!"

"I know. You told me to come back and tell you my decision in person. That's why I'm here."

Her face paled as she slowly straightened, turned, shut the door, and leaned her forehead against the jamb. "You ain't comin' back, are you?"

"Wha – how did – did Lois call you?"

"I ain't heard one word from that – from Lois. Nobody called me about you. I come over cause I thought your mom was here tidying up."

"I'm sorry. I flew in early this morning and borrowed my dad's truck. I came here because I – I wasn't sure what to say to you. Or how to say it." He stopped and shifted his feet. "How did you know that – what I planned to say?"

She turned and faced him. "If you was here to tell me you were coming back, you'd'a found me wherever I was cause you know I'd'a been real happy. You don't want to tell me that you're stayin' in Metropolis cause you know I won't be happy."

He took a step toward her. "Only partly. I really thought – nuts. I care about you, Rachel, and I don't want to hurt you. I know you want me to stay here with you."

"Yeah. I do."

"This doesn't mean we have to stop seeing each other. Long distance relationships aren't a problem for Superman."

She shook her head. "And how we gonna explain you poppin' up her all the time without you livin' close by? Or do you want me to disappear with you for hours at a time? I cain't do that, Clark, I have a job to do and I have to be here to do it. And you can't just fly here when you decide you want to see me. You can't make that – that difference in the world you have to make if you're holed up here with me. It's why you do all those super things you can do."

She closed her eyes for a second, then opened them again. "I cain't have no affair with Superman, neither, and that's what it'd be. Lana's a good gal overall, but she made a real bad mistake beddin' a man who couldn't be her husband. I ain't Lana."

He frowned a little, then deflated. "You're right. It would be stupid for me to fly here every few days. Dangerous for both of us, actually."

"It's – I understand. You have to leave and I have to stay. Same thing if I'd went to Metropolis with you. I'd have to leave and come back to Smallville and you'd have to stay there."

"I'm sorry. I really am."

She closed her eyes once more and pressed her lips together, then said, "I'm gonna miss you worse'n Miss Piggy misses

Kermit.”

The comparison startled a brief smile from him and he took two more steps in her direction. “You’re a much better person than Piggy is a pig.”

She ducked her head and almost smiled. “Ain’t I prettier, too?”

He finished the journey to her side and took her hands in his. “Next to you, she looks like the hog that came in last in the Miss Universal Swine pageant.”

Rachel’s head came up and she lunged at him. Her arms went under his and around his torso and she buried her face in his chest. She tried to speak without sobbing and succeeded only partially. “Last time I – I get to hold you like this. Gotta – gotta make it last the rest o’ my life.”

He returned the embrace and held her close. “I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry. I’m really going to miss you too.” He stroked her hair and noticed it was longer, but thought that this would be a bad time to mention it. “A big part of me wishes things were different.” She didn’t say anything – she just burrowed deeper. “Or that I had that twin brother you mentioned who could go to Metropolis in my place.”

She spluttered what sounded like a forced chuckle and tightened her grip again. That big part of him wanted to stay, to tell Rachel that he loved her, to ask her to marry him, to buy a house here and set up housekeeping with her and live and work in Smallville for the foreseeable future and hold her close to his heart for the rest of his life. That part of him hated him for hurting her like this, for leading her on and then crushing her heart.

The rest of him wasn’t all that pleased with himself either.

But just like Rachel had said, he wanted to make a difference in the world, and the opportunities to do that were limited in the middle of Kansas. If he asked her – if he asked her the right way – he thought she’d marry him and go back to Metropolis with him. She’d insist that she’d be happy wherever they were as long as they were together. And she’d mean every syllable.

But she wouldn’t be happy in a huge city. She needed to be close to the people she served, and even if she joined the MPD, she wouldn’t receive the interactive feedback from the people she protected that she truly needed. If anyone were born to be a rural sheriff, it was Rachel Harris. The people here knew her and trusted her. They needed her as much as she needed them. It would be a criminal disservice to Smallville – and to Rachel – to ask her to leave.

So he bound up his heart with duct tape and safety pins and didn’t ask.

It was several long minutes before she wound down and slipped back from his arms. He dug in his pants pocket and came up with a clean handkerchief. She took it and gently head-butted him in the chest.

“Me, Lana, then me. Again with the hankie for the weepy woman. Must be standard equipment for you.”

He answered with a soft forehead kiss. She moved back a half-step and turned to one side, then wiped her face and blew her nose. She pulled it down and crushed it in her hands. “Can I keep this? I wanna remember how much you live to help people.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Thanks.” She stuffed the kerchief into her pocket. “You mind if we say goodbye here? I don’t – I don’t think I could keep my dignity in front of other folks.”

He shook his head and felt the prickle of tears in his eyes. “Rachel, I – I’m so sorry. I wish I could—”

“No, Clark, it’s okay. Really.”

“But I – I feel like a heel and I don’t—”

She reached up and put her arms around his neck and kissed him and he shut up.

He put his arms around her and pulled her close and almost changed his mind. He almost pulled her even closer so he could

deepen the kiss and tell her he loved her. He very nearly said that Metropolis would have to get along without him.

He almost did all those things and more. But not quite.

Clark let Rachel end the kiss. As soon as she drifted back, he said, “Leaving Smallville – leaving you – is the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Harder than breaking up the Nightfall asteroid. I’d do almost anything to keep from hurting you.”

She put her hands on either side of his face. “You got to do what’s right, Clark, and it’s the right thing for you to go back. Much as I wish you’d stay with me, you can’t live your life to please me. You do the right thing and I’ll love you for it even if it takes you away from me.”

Boy, she wasn’t making this any easier.

“I’m not sure Lois would be as noble as you.”

She shook her head. “Don’t matter. And I ain’t bein’ noble, just sensible. I can’t live my life according to Lois Lane’s standards any more than she can live her life by mine. I can’t be a reporter and she sure ain’t sheriff material.” She stopped and drew a ragged breath, then said, “I don’t wanna say goodbye to you, Clark, but I have to. You have to go back to Metropolis and be the best Clark Kent you can possibly be.”

He nodded slowly. “I can do that. I think.”

“You can and you will. And don’t take my hurt out on Lois, y’hear? And if you – if you get back with her – like, romantically – I want to know about it from you. Okay?”

He tried for a smile. “You’re the best, you know? You’re – you’re incredible.”

She gave him a teary smirk. “I know.”

This time he did smile. “Now who’s doing sci-fi tropes? You stole that from Han Solo.”

She shrugged. “I ain’t about to be froze in carbonite, though. That wouldn’t hurt this bad.” She pulled away. “You go on back now. And – and if you decide you love me and wanna come back to me, call me. You won’t never know if I’m available if you don’t.”

He held her hands, then lifted them and kissed them. “Any man you decide to love will be so very blessed.”

She blinked and snatched her hands back, then turned and threw the office door open.

He watched her run down the stairs and stop at the first floor to gather herself. After a moment, she calmly opened the door and walked across the street to her office.

She might prefer to be frozen in carbonite to watching him leave.

He already missed her. He thought he’d always miss her.

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Lois walked into the office on Monday morning with some trepidation. She knew that Clark had gone to Smallville to tell Rachel Harris that he planned to stay in Metropolis. She also knew that an honest and sincere woman’s love could sometimes persuade a demon to turn saint.

Her motto these days was “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch.” Even though Clark had told her he was staying, she refused to consider it a done deal until he came back and told Perry he was back to stay – not just planning to stay.

She hung her jacket on the back of her chair and put her purse in the bottom drawer, then walked to Perry’s office and knocked on the door.

“Come in!”

She stuck her head in and looked around, then said, “Just wanted to see if Clark was in here waiting to startle me again.”

Perry chortled for a moment. “Nope, not in here. You checked the men’s room yet?”

She slipped all the way in and closed the door. “Funny man. I just wanted to see how his weekend went.”

Perry fixed her with a sympathetic gaze. “You know what he planned to do, don’t you?”

She nodded. “Yes. I just – I wanted to – to see if he’d hit any roadblocks.”

“You mean you wanted to know if that lady sheriff made him change his mind.”

She knew her eyes shifted because Perry’s expression softened. “Yes,” she said. “I’m sure Rachel Harris is a wonderful person and an amazing sheriff for Smallville and if anyone could make Clark change his mind about staying in Metropolis she could do it.”

Perry shook his head. “Not this time. Clark’s moving into his new apartment this morning. He’ll be back in the office after lunch.”

Relief flooded her mind and loosened her knees. She grabbed the door jamb for support. “Oh.” She forced herself to stand unaided. “That – that’s good. I mean it’s good that he won’t be living next to the tap-dancer with toe amplifiers now.”

He smiled a little. “That’s how Clark described her to you?”

Lois nodded. “He said it was a little like being in his Smallville office with the typist down the hall using a jackhammer instead of her fingers.”

Perry chuckled and Lois smiled back. “Okay, Lois, you’d better get to work. Those stories won’t write themselves.”

She shut her boss’ door and turned toward her desk. *You’ll write better because you feel better about Clark now, Snarky whispered. Just don’t turn into some old lady lonely hearts columnist.*

*No chance of that,* Lois thought back. Mad Dog Lane was back – albeit a little kinder and gentler than before. Maybe a little less apt to bite, but no less tenacious when she did.

And Clark was back. Maybe he’d have the time to finish that novel he was writing.

Lois wondered what his novel was about, then decided she’d wait and find out like the rest of the public. No more pushing into Clark’s life. It wasn’t worth the heartache.

Being invited into his life? Priceless.

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Lunch the Monday after he’d told Rachel he wasn’t going back to Smallville had been – surprisingly okay. Clark had gone to Mike’s Deli in the middle of the midday rush, almost hoping that Mike would recognize him and also kind of hoping he wouldn’t. He didn’t yet know how he felt about Lois, much less how he’d react to reminders of their wrecked relationship. He counted himself lucky that Mike apparently didn’t notice him.

He also counted it lucky that eating there didn’t upset his stomach. The meal was surprisingly tasty and filling. Any ghosts that might be hanging around the place decided not to appear in his beverage glass or in the opposite chair today.

Clark had yet to drive to Smallville for the bulk of his clothes, but he’d retrieved his belongings from the Metropolis storage facility and moved his furniture into his new apartment, had successfully dodged the woman clerk’s attempt to flirt with him, and had put all his boxes in the appropriate rooms. He still had to arrange all of his things to his satisfaction, especially in the kitchen, but he could take his time doing that. His new apartment wasn’t laid out like his old place with an open floor plan. This one was a two-bedroom space on the top floor of a four-story building with a balcony that overlooked Centennial Park. The building was under new management, had just been through a major remodel, and he’d gotten a break on the first year’s rent for being one of the first new tenants.

Clark could step onto his balcony and see the big Superman statue. He’d almost passed on the apartment for that reason, but after due consideration he decided that he would let his past inform and guide his present but not rule it. And that included his choice of restaurants or recreation or residence.

He hadn’t gone back to the park since the disastrous date with Lois. Maybe he’d take a walk through it now and then just to get

away from the city noise. He’d gotten used to the country quiet of Smallville, and getting used to the sound pressure level in Metropolis again was more difficult than he’d thought it would be.

He’d always planned, way in the back of his mind, to take a walk in that park with Rachel and show her the Superman statue. He’d been certain that she’d pretend to be impressed as she tried to suppress her giggles. He’d even thought, again way in the back of the back of his mind, that they’d come to Metropolis on their honeymoon to see the park.

None of that would happen now.

And he still wasn’t sure if he was disappointed or relieved.

He walked through the stairwell door across from the newsroom and told himself that personal feelings were to be left out of the workplace, that he should take his first employer’s advice and hang his mood and emotional state on an imaginary coat rack outside the office door and pick it all up when he left. He needed to ignore his mixed feelings and focus on the job, focus on getting the story, focus on being the best reporter he could be.

That was hard to do with Lois sitting one desk over from him. She was a constant reminder of the pain he’d experienced when she’d forced him out of Metropolis. She was also a constant reminder of the pain she’d caused when he’d come back. Both Clark and Rachel had gone – and were still going through – intense heart agony because of her actions. He didn’t like his own reactions to seeing Lois, his gritted teeth and narrowed eyes and shortened breath. Maybe he needed to talk to Dr. Friskin about it. Maybe she could help him figure out if he still loved Lois or if he’d come to hate her or if it was something in between.

He sat in his chair and glanced at Lois’ desk. She wasn’t there, so he started his computer with the intention of opening his email. Maybe Rachel had sent him something at work.

They hadn’t spoken at length since he’d told her of his decision to stay in Metropolis. Rachel hadn’t answered his few emails or his even fewer letters, except for one brief missive last week saying that she still cared deeply for him but that his repeated efforts to stay in contact were hurting her and not helping. She’d wished him all the happiness in the world and reminded him that they weren’t together, that he was the one who’d left even though she was the one who’d sent him away, and that it wasn’t his fault but hers and she hoped he’d do the right thing and stay gone.

He realized now that if he’d reacted to Lois’ surprise arrival in his office in Smallville with indifference, or even mere mild irritation, he’d still be back there making a living as a freelance travel writer. It would have meant that his emotional entanglement with Lois had not only dissipated, it hadn’t transmuted into antipathy or dissolved into bitterness. Rachel would not have deduced that he had unresolved issues between himself and Lois.

And if he didn’t stop thinking of his emotions in such high-minded terms, he’d forget how to care about people entirely.

He clicked on his email client and scanned his inbox. There were no messages from Rachel, which was a little disappointing but not surprising.

He opened a message from Human Resources about his remaining vacation time. Huh. He still had nineteen days of paid time off, even with his morning out of the office. Perry must have twisted a few arms for him.

Someone reached past him and put a small box wrapped with ribbon on his desk. He looked up to see who his benefactor was and saw Lois. Her small smile and nod both pleased and perturbed him.

“This is for you,” she said quietly. “A housewarming gift for your new place.”

As mildly as he could, he answered, “Thank you. Should I open it now or wait until I get home?”

She shrugged. “Up to you. It’s nothing embarrassing or too personal.”

He put it in his jacket pocket. “Then I’ll wait.”

Her smile didn’t flicker. “Okay. You can let me know what you think about it tomorrow.”

She turned to her desk without waiting for a reply. She didn’t look at him as she unlocked her workstation and began scanning something on the screen he couldn’t quite see.

He needed to talk to Lois, to settle things between them, to define the parameters of their new relationship. The problem was that he wasn’t sure what their “new relationship” actually was. Were they friends? Were they simply co-workers? Were they prospective lovers? Were they – he detested the portmanteau but it fit – frenemies?

He didn’t know. And they couldn’t discuss it until he did.

Wait. Yes they could. He could ask Lois how she felt and what she expected out of their relationship.

It was a novel idea. And it just might help them both.

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Lois sighed and leaned back in her chair. Another Monday was done. Another mundane column was finished and submitted for editorial approval. Two more columns were in progress and moving forward pending further information.

And Clark had been nice to her for a number of weeks.

Well – not “nice,” really, just non-confrontational. He’d deferred to her at the coffee cart and let her take the last chocolate donut. According to Jimmy, who was coming around to being cautiously friendly with her, he’d passed up two separate opportunities in the past week to talk trash about her with some of his co-workers. He’d even given Pam Wilson from the rewrite desk a mild rebuke about a catty comment the girl had made concerning Lois. Overall, she was pleased with the day.

She stood to leave and found Clark in her way. Sort of. He wasn’t crowding her or forcing her to go around him. He just stood there and looked at her with some intensity.

“Do you have a few minutes to talk?” he asked.

“Uh – yeah, sure. Is this about work?”

He shook his head. “It’s personal. Can we grab the conference room?”

“Sure. Lead the way.”

A talk.

A personal talk.

In the conference room.

With no one to eavesdrop.

About subjects which she’d prefer to leave alone for the time being.

She didn’t know if this was promising or threatening.

Maybe this wasn’t such a good Monday after all. It could turn into yet another federal disaster in her life.

Or, she mused, maybe it could be a very good Monday.

Maybe life could still give her a positive surprise.

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Clark opened the conference room door for Lois and let her enter, then followed her and shut the door behind them. The blinds were already drawn, so neither the evening shift early arrivers nor the day shift stragglers would witness this unless it got loud and dramatic.

He didn’t want excessive noise or drama. There was already plenty of both in all corners of his life.

He turned and faced her. “I don’t think this will take long.”

She nodded. “So I should stay on my feet then?”

“Your choice. I’m going to.” He stopped, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. When he opened them, he said, “Lois, I don’t know just how you feel about me, so I’m going to tell you how I feel and we can take it from there.”

Her face paled a little but she stood straight. “Okay.”

“I don’t – look, I may be completely off-base on this, but I feel like you’re treating me in some special way because you don’t want me to get mad at you and run off somewhere. I’m not mad at

you, not really, although I’m still learning to trust you again, and I don’t know that we’ll ever get beyond the point of being just coworkers.” He paused, and when she didn’t respond, he said, “For the record, I don’t plan to leave again any time soon.”

He waited. She nodded but didn’t speak. “Is that how you feel too? Or is it something different?”

She put her left hand on her right elbow and leaned a little to her left. “If I’m treating you in some special way, I’m not doing it deliberately. I know that my anger and my insecurities ran you out of town once, and they alienated me from my other coworkers. I’ve made a concerted effort to rein in my temper because it’s destructive, both to me and to those around me. What I’m doing is for my own good, and it’s not directed primarily at you.”

Ah. That made sense. And it lined up with the way the other reporters had thawed a bit in their attitude toward her in the weeks since his return.

He nodded. “I see.”

Her face changed and implied that she was a bit exasperated, but her voice remained level. “You’re special, Clark, but you’re not *that* special. I’m not living my life to please you.”

“Good. And thank you for clarifying that. I was concerned that you were walking on eggshells around me on purpose.”

She lowered her hand and almost smiled. “Nope. Just the new Lois Lane. I’m now the kinder, gentler version, one that snarls a little less and listens a little more but still doesn’t let go when she clamps on.”

“Good to know. Well – that’s all I wanted to talk about. Thank you again.”

He turned to the door but she stopped him. “Wait. We’re not done yet.”

He recoiled in surprise. “We’re not?”

“No. You got to tell me how you feel, so I should be able to tell you how I feel.”

He tilted his head and considered that for a moment, then nodded. “That’s fair. Please, go ahead.”

“Okay.” Now she took a deep breath before speaking. “I ruined a perfectly good date with you last spring and it’s still preying on my mind. I want to make it up to you.”

“What? You – a date? Me and you?”

“Actually, my thought is that we’d pick up where we left off.”

He blinked. “Where we left off?”

“Yes.”

“At the Superman statue?”

“Yes, Clark, at the Superman statue.”

“And do what?”

“I want a do-over.”

He blinked twice. “A do-over of what?”

“You telling me your secret. I want to react the right way.”

He bit his lower lip and turned to one side. “I had just told you I loved you. You had just told me you loved me. I don’t know if either of those two things is true anymore.”

Still calm, she said, “Neither do I. That’s why I want the do-over. I want to react to you telling me the secret the way I should have reacted.” Now she bit her lip. “However we move forward from there is up to you.”

His first thought was that she was nuts. Totally, completely, somewhere-over-the-rainbow nuts. Did she really expect him to go to Centennial Park with her and reenact the end of that horrible date? Did she believe he was that stupid?

Then he looked into her eyes, something he’d avoided doing for any length of time since he’d returned. Her eyes were hopeful. They almost begged him to agree. And what could it hurt? She was trying to heal a rift – no, an asteroid crater – in their relationship. In fact, that might be a good idea for both of them.

He wondered if she’d come up with the idea herself or if someone had suggested it to her. Dana Friskin was a very good candidate for that role, since she knew both of them professionally

and personally.

He shook his head. Didn't matter. If he didn't want to be around her socially after the — the do-over — then he wouldn't and she'd just have to accept it. And maybe, just maybe, they could be cautious friends again. He missed her love, he missed her kisses, he missed holding her hands, he missed their embraces, but most of all he missed their friendship.

As he thought more, he realized that the worst thing that had come from that terrible night had been the loss of Lois' friendship. If he could get that back with little or no risk to his own heart, it would be worth the gamble.

He finally nodded. "Okay. When do you want to perform this arcane ritual?"

Her mouth quirked on his last words. "How about tonight? I know it's early December, but it's not too cold out. And I have it on good authority that the bench we — that I desecrated with my attitude is still in place."

Tonight. Might as well get this over with.

"Okay. Do we eat first?"

She shook her head. "We go right to 'Lois, I have a secret you need to know.' We'll play it by ear after that."

He nodded again. "Meet you there in twenty minutes?"

"That's fine. See you soon."

He turned, opened the conference room door, and followed her out into the bullpen. Then he wondered what Rachel might think of Lois' plan.

For that matter, he wondered what he thought of it.

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### Chapter Twenty-Three

Lois arrived first. She glanced at her watch and shook her head.

*You're four minutes early. He'll be right on time. As always. That's enough, Snarky Inner Lois.*

She'd let him set the boundaries of their new relationship long enough. It was time to push back just a little and see what happens.

She paced back and forth in front of the bench, thinking again of how she should've handled Learning The Secret. She already knew it, of course, but she told herself once more that Clark had offered to take her into his heart of hearts with that confession. He'd offered to show her every important thing in his life. He'd opened his soul and his heart to her.

She'd all but thrown acid in his face. It made perfect sense that he didn't trust her.

Maybe this "do-over" was a bad idea after all. Maybe she should just leave and put a note on his desk saying that she'd decided to leave the city and make room—

"Lois?"

He was early after all.

She spun and spotted him. He hadn't tried to sneak up on her but he had. She'd been distracted and unobservant, and that wasn't her. She needed her A-game tonight.

The lights around the park clicked on, making the scene brighter than it had been. Clark stopped about five feet from her and stood there with a neutral expression on his face. "Tell me again how this is supposed to go."

*You have to go through with it now,* Snarky Inner Lois said. *You back out this time and you'll blow any chance to reconcile with him.*

*No pressure, huh?* she replied.

She squared her shoulders and said, "Okay. We sit down together on opposite ends of the bench and you tell me you have a secret you need to tell me and then you tell me what it is."

He sighed. "I'm not real sure about this."

She turned and sat, then patted the bench beside her. "Come on, Clark. Don't chicken out now. You don't know how this will turn out."

He shook his head and sat. "Do you know how it will turn out?"

"No. But I'm eager to find out."

*Are you really? Or do you just want to tell yourself that you made the effort?*

*That's enough! Shut up and go away!*

Snarky stomped behind a nearby tree and pouted.

Lois looked at Clark and tilted her head toward him. "Are you ready? I'm ready."

He shifted to face her without touching her and pressed his lips together, then said, "Okay, here we go. Lois, I have a really big secret to tell you."

Lois called on her college theater experience and reacted with overly enthusiastic curiosity. "Really? Is this a secret a no one else in the world knows? Am I the only one in the dark?" She tilted her head and leaned forward at an angle toward him. "Or is it something in between that?"

He shot her a glare but she stood up under it. He shrugged and said, "It's a secret only my parents know. And me, of course."

Still over-acting, she replied. "Oh, of course *you* know what it is. You couldn't *possibly* share a secret you didn't already know."

He gave her a look she couldn't interpret. "It's actually a dangerous secret. Knowing this could put you in danger if anyone found out you had this information."

"Ooh!" she cooed. "Kinda like a big military secret, right? If the spies find out I know about it, they might kidnap me and torture me until I told it and then they'd tie me to a cement block and drop me in the middle of the bay! Like that kind of secret?"

She couldn't tell if he was slightly amused or put off by her theatrics. "Uh — yeah, actually, that's pretty close. This is something you can't reveal to anyone else. Not ever. You can't even tell anyone that you know this secret."

She mimed zipping her mouth shut, turned an imaginary key at the corner of her mouth, and pressed the key into Clark's hand. Then she slowly closed his fingers and held them shut in both of her hands.

Just as she had the last time they'd been there.

He tilted his head and said, "I take it that you still want to know."

She pressed her lips together and nodded.

He looked at their joined hands and blinked a couple of times, then said, "Lois, I have to tell you that — that I'm Superman."

She blinked back, then opened his hand, took the imaginary key back, unlocked her lips, and unzipped her mouth. "You're who?"

"Superman."

She pointed at the statue without looking away from him. "You're him?"

"Not the statue, just the guy it represents."

She tilted her head to one side. "You're kidding, right? I mean, how can you be Superman? He's a superhero!"

His eyebrow rose. "You're saying I'm not heroic?"

"No. But Superman wouldn't lie to me about who he really is. And he wouldn't let me think he was just jealous of Lex when he knew stuff that he knew I'd believe if Superman told me! And he wouldn't let me think he was *shot dead in a casino!*"

*Easy, Lois, don't yell. Nobody else is here, but let's stay calm. I told you to shut up and go away!*

His eyebrows lowered and he looked straight at her for several seconds, then said, "I see we still have issues between us."

"Yes," she said calmly, "we do. And one of them is the length of time it took you to tell me this secret."

He bit the inside of his mouth and said, "Was this your plan all along, to clobber me with something I did months ago?"

She looked away for a moment, then back again. "No. It was — that just slipped out. I didn't — this wasn't supposed to be an ambush. I'm sorry."

He turned to face the statue and leaned forward, then clasped his hands and put his elbows on his knees. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then said, "I can see this statue from my balcony. It's actually a little intimidating. I sometimes wonder if people really think of me this way, all Hercules muscles and superpowers and bigger than life. I wonder if they think I can solve all their problems, prevent all accidents and disasters, and save everyone."

He ducked his head and sighed. "I can't. I can't do any of that. And I don't always make the best choices when I'm in the Suit. There are times when I have no idea what the best choice is, so I just try to muddle through and do the best I know how. Just like everyone else on the planet."

She waited for a moment, then quietly said, "Go on. Please."

He leaned back and folded his hands across his stomach. "When you first saw me in the Suit that time I stopped the bomb in the shuttle, I was terrified that you'd recognize me and put my real name on the front page. So I worked to separate myself from Superman around everyone, not just you. By the time I got to know you well enough to trust you more, you were mixed up with Luthor, and I couldn't risk him finding out."

"Yes," she whispered. "That would've been a disaster."

He glanced at her, then turned his head to the statue again. "After Luthor – after I backed away from telling you that I loved you, that I'd said that because I wanted to stop that wedding any way I could and – and that was a big mistake and after that I didn't know how to approach you. We started getting closer, and the closer we got the more I trusted you and wanted you to know, but every time I thought about telling you, my father popped up in my head and insisted that if the government found out what I could do they'd dissect me like a frog in junior high science class."

She snorted quietly and he glanced over. "Sorry," she said. "That's quite a mental picture."

"Yeah, well, my parents don't think it's funny. They understand that I have to be Superman so I can help people with my powers and still have a personal life, but they're not very understanding about me telling anyone what I can do."

He turned away and stared at the statue again. When he spoke again after a long moment, his voice was so soft she almost didn't hear him. "When Clyde Barrow shot me, I knew a normal human would have died almost instantly. I – I loved you back then and I thought you might love me or at least care a lot for me and I knew you couldn't have a public relationship with Superman because you'd be a target every day and every moment of your life and there was no way you'd let me hide you to keep you safe and out of the line of fire."

She smiled. "That's quite a run-on sentence. But I understand what you mean." Her smile melted. "You know I – uh – I thought about finding Clyde on my own so I could kill him."

His head snapped around. "What!"

"And I thought about killing myself, too, but I didn't do that either. I went after him like I knew I could, as a reporter, but I didn't care if I lived as long as I brought him down. I got myself in trouble again and he tried to kill me." She brushed a fleck of dust from one eye. "But you saved me." She paused and her smile snuck back. "Again."

Clark's expression softened. "There's another reason I didn't tell you sooner. I was trying to spare you the pressure of the secret and the danger of knowing without telling anyone. It's a huge burden, one I didn't want you to have to carry unless I was sure you wanted to walk through life with me. Besides my parents, Perry, and you, only one other person knows." He hesitated, then added, "As far as I know."

Lois' heart chilled and contracted. She'd forgotten. "You told Rachel," she whispered.

"No. She already knew. When I took her to my high school prom, three idiots tried to beat me up in the parking lot and she

saw me take them down with just a little bit of my powers. I took a pistol away from one of them, crushed it, and threw it out of town in the reservoir. I'm pretty sure it's still there."

"You mean you left and took it to the reservoir?"

"No. I threw it about four miles to the reservoir from the lot where I stood."

The penny dropped. "And she saw you do that."

He nodded. "Yes."

"Ah." Lois nodded back. "That would just about cinch it."

"I wasn't Superman then, of course, but she figured it out when I made the papers with the shuttle rescue."

Lois' heart relaxed a bit. "She's a sharp cookie. And she's never told anyone."

He looked at her and frowned slightly. "I know why I'd come to that conclusion, but you don't know her that well. Why would you decide she hadn't told anyone?"

"Oh, like anyone else in Tinyville could keep a secret like that! If she'd spilled the beans it'd be national news whether people believed it or not! She's the sheriff! She probably knows a hundred secrets she could blackmail people with and I'll bet she's never even considered the idea!"

A grin teased the corners of his mouth. "Tinyville?"

She shrugged. "It'll never be as big as Wichita or Oklahoma City."

"True. Um – have we finished this do-over? I haven't had dinner yet, and there's a sea bass at The Catch Of the Day that has my name on it."

"Yes. Unless you have something else you want to say. Or something you want to ask me."

He turned to face her again. "Actually, I have two things, and the second is dependent on the answer to the first. First – Lois, do you think you're still in love with me?"

She took a deep breath and bit the inside of her cheek. "You do ask hard questions, bub."

"I'm a reporter. I learned to ask hard questions from the best."

She blinked. Was that a compliment?

She decided she'd take it as such even if it wasn't meant that way. "To answer your question as honestly as I can, Clark, I really don't know. I still – there have been nights in the past few weeks when I've cried myself to sleep over what I did to you. And I won't deny that I cherish a hope that one day you'll tell me you forgive me for being such a total and complete ass with you and mean it. And I really, *really* don't want to lose you as a friend."

He looked at the ground and sighed. "I don't want to be mad at you. I'd rather be your friend than your – I don't know, frenemy?" She chuckled and he added, "I hate that word but I don't have a better one."

"I get it. I really do. And I'd much rather us be friends than anything else."

He turned and looked her in the eye. "More than anything else? Anything?"

Here it was, the big question. They both needed an honest answer.

He looked like he was holding his breath.

She really was holding hers.

The words finally slid out. "Yes. More than anything. If we ever make it back to where we were before – and I mean 'we' as in the two of us together – I'll welcome it. But even if we don't, I still want to be your friend and I want you to be mine." She paused, then repeated, "More than anything else."

His face relaxed and he nodded. "I agree. I think we can be friends."

She felt her smile grow. Her hand reached out to him. "To friendship."

He took her hand, shook it, and nodded. "To good friendship."

She let go and stood. "It's getting late and I don't want to

stand between you and that sea bass, so I'll say goodnight and let you get home and open your gift."

She started to turn but he said, "Wait."

She stopped and frowned slightly. "Wait for what?"

"The second question." He stood and fumbled around with his hands going every which way like a hayseed from a small farm outside one of the smallest towns in the lightly populated state of Kansas. "Um – can friends go to dinner together? To celebrate the friendship, I mean."

She smiled softly and nodded. "As long as there are separate checks at the end of the meal. There's a rule somewhere that says you can't go on another date right after you finish a date, and we just finished that interrupted date from back in the spring, so dinner tonight can't be an actual date."

He smiled back. "I wouldn't presume that it was, friend. Do you want to ride to the restaurant or shall we walk?"

She tilted her head. "It's what, eighteen blocks there and back and me in heels? No way. We're driving."

With that, she stuck her purse under her arm and began striding back to the Planet's parking garage. "Hey!" he called behind her. "Can you give me a ride?"

"I figured you'd take your new-to-you truck and let me see all the fancy geegaws and doodads on the dashboard that Lucy told me about. And you've ridden in my Jeep before."

She heard him chortle and trot to catch up to her. "Fine," he grumbled good-naturedly. "The pickup truck it is. But you can open your own door."

Her smile grew and she picked up the pace a little. "No problem. My arms aren't broken and I know how to work a toilet seat and even open a car door."

He caught up to her and said, "Just remember that you'll have to climb up into the cab. You're lucky I have a step on that side."

"What?" she purred. "You put a step on yoah little ol' truck for little ol' me?"

He ignored her horrible country accent. "Not for you. I put it on for my mom. She told me she didn't like climbing Mount McKinley every time I drove her somewhere."

"Fine. I'll use it if I have to. What level are you on?"

"I got a slot down on level three. It was the only one with any spaces left."

"I'll meet you there. You go on ahead and warm up the inside for me."

He shook his head and trotted away.

The do-over had worked. They'd both said things that needed saying. And they had each heard those things the other had said. Now she had a friend she hoped to keep for the rest of her life.

It had been a good day after all.

She took a moment to feel a little sorry for Rachel. Lois had no doubt that the girl loved Clark deeply and wanted to marry him. She'd taken a huge risk in sending Clark back to Metropolis, and a part of Lois was sorry he'd stayed in the city. Not because of anything Lois felt, but because Clark had seemed so natural and at peace in Smallville. He could've made a permanent home there with Rachel and forgotten about Lois. Surely Rachel would've done her dead level best to make him happy.

Maybe – just maybe – Lois would have the chance to be the one to make him happy for life. She'd been honest when she'd said she didn't know if she still loved him. Her feelings were still all jumbled up between the time she'd thought he was just Clark and the horrible time since she'd found out who else he was. It would take even more time to reveal that truth to her heart. But now that all the dead wood had been pruned away, she'd be able to see him clearly.

And he'd be able to see her clearly.

If all he ever offered was friendship she'd take it and be thankful. If he ever again offered her his heart – she'd have to think about it long and hard and be totally honest with him.

As soon as she could be honest with herself.

She entered the garage from the street entrance and danced down the stairs to level three. They'd start with dinner and go from there. If Clark Kent were her friend, her true and faithful friend, she wouldn't need much else.

And maybe she'd get all of him anyway. Time would tell.

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## Chapter Twenty-Four

*Saturday, December 23<sup>rd</sup>*

Lois didn't particularly like Christmas. Unfortunately, the calendar once again ignored her preferences and rolled around to late December one more time, and she found herself caught up in the paper's annual celebration.

The Planet's Children's Charity Christmas party was in full swing. Perry wore his Santa suit to give presents to the Angel Tree kids in the middle of the cleared-out newsroom. Jimmy, wearing a huge smile above what appeared to be an oversized elf outfit, trudged behind Santa Perry while pulling a large wagon filled with wrapped gifts. The Angel Tree charity's organizers had given Jimmy a list of the kids' names along with gift suggestions for each one. The Human Resources staff had made the purchases and wrapped the gifts.

Lois smiled as she watched the children's eyes light up. Each one thanked Santa. More than half of them hugged him. Two little girls at the end of the line thanked Santa, then put their presents down and wrapped themselves around his legs. They didn't let go until Mrs. Emerson, the chaperone from the charity, persuaded them that Santa had other kids he needed to visit.

Lois thought about Christmas at home with Mom and Lucy after her father left. Doctor Samuel Lane hadn't been in prison like one or both of the parents of these kids. He'd been absent by his own choice, and the gifts and money he sent them didn't make up for his absence. She understood how hard it was for these kids not to be with family during the holidays.

Maybe her heartache was worse.

She felt the tear coming on, so she turned to move away from the happy kids and ran straight into Clark's chest and bounced off. "Oops! I'm sorry, Clark. Once again, I didn't look before I leaped."

He steadied her with his hands on her elbows until she found her balance. "No problem. It's pretty crowded in here." He pointed to the brilliantly illuminated Christmas tree. "And that thing is so big it almost didn't make it up in the freight elevator. I hope our electric bill this month doesn't cost us our annual raises."

She chuckled. "I doubt it will. Oh, I wanted to ask you if you were spending the holidays at home this year."

He shook his head. "No. I have the vacation time, but I put in my request too late. I'll be here over the holiday week, slaving away like a dwarf under the mountain."

"A what?"

He tilted his head. "Lord of the Rings? J. R. R. Tolkien? The dwarves under the mountain? Mining and hoarding gold?"

She got the reference, but decided on the spur of the moment to tease him a little. So she played dumb, put on what she hoped was an expression of angelic innocence, and shrugged like a blonde. "Sorry, doesn't ring a bell."

"Oh. Never mind, it was a bit of a reach anyway." They shared shy grins. "What about you? Are you spending time with Lucy and your mom?"

"Mom rented a cabin up north in one of the state parks. We'll be roughing it for three or four days."

"Roughing it? The New Troy State Parks all have clean running water and indoor plumbing and electricity and propane heating. How rough do you want it to be?"

She shrugged again. "There are no pizza delivery places anywhere near the park. And I mean zero, zilch, zip, nada, none whatsoever."

He fought off a laugh and hid it behind a small smile. “I see. I suppose you’ll have to make up for it after the first of the year.”

“I’m afraid so.” She sighed dramatically. “Oh, the hardships we must endure for family.”

He pressed his lips together for a moment, then said, “Excuse me, but I need to go see about one of those kids. He’s having a little trouble putting his toy together.”

She stepped back and gestured with her head. “By all means, go rescue him.”

He gave her a searching look for a moment, then apparently decided – accurately – that her comment held no hidden meaning or subtle insult. He relaxed and nodded to her. “Will do. You have fun in the cabin with your mom and Lucy.”

She smiled and nodded back as he stepped past, then turned to watch him kneel down beside a little boy. The youngster looked to be no older than six, and apparently he couldn’t quite figure out how to assemble his plastic airplane. Clark gently coached him on how the pieces fit together, then helped him snap them in place. When the plane was complete, he held up his hand for a high-five with the boy and said, “Great job!”

The little boy beamed and thanked him, then beamed again when Clark told the boy that he’d done the important part and Clark had just helped a very little bit. The child jumped up and ran toward Mrs. Emerson to show her his transatlantic airliner, the one he’d put together almost all by himself.

Clark’s smile was immense. He looked so very much like a proud dad at that moment.

Lois turned away before he could catch her watching him. If she ever did have children, she prayed that their father would be half the man that Clark Kent was.

She didn’t dare hope that their father would be Clark. Not now. Not yet.

And probably not ever.

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*Sunday evening, December 31<sup>st</sup>*

Clark shucked his coat as he walked through Perry’s front door. “Here,” Alice said, “I’ll take that.”

“Thanks. Wow, this is a crowded house. I didn’t know you’d invited so many people.”

She smiled. “My husband likes to have lots of people around him at the start of the new year. I know you’ve been to one of my New Year’s Eve parties before, and we had most of the same people then.”

He shrugged. “I guess I got more used to Smallville’s thinner population density than I thought. It just feels crowded to me.”

“You’re back in the big city now, Clark. But if you start to feel claustrophobic, you can always step outside in the back yard for a few minutes.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll be okay. I’m going to circulate now.”

“You do that. I’m sure we’ll meet up later. It’s only five hours until 1996 starts.”

Alice left him with another smile and left to hang up his coat. Clark looked around and saw people he’d greeted on his return to the newsroom, others he knew well, and still others he didn’t recognize.

Then he spotted Jimmy. The young man was leaning against the wall and speaking with a woman Clark couldn’t see well through the press of bodies. He started swimming in Jimmy’s direction through the thick current of humanity.

As he got closer, he realized that Jimmy seemed slightly inebriated. His eyes were bright but a little unfocused, and his hand movements were sloppier than usual. Jimmy took a big drink from his glass as Clark maneuvered around Steve Lombard and was startled to see that the woman next to Jimmy was Lois.

He was even more surprised to see that she was standing under a sprig of plastic mistletoe.

Jimmy’s voice snapped into slurred focus in Clark’s ears as

he said, “So, Lois, are you waiting for anyone special?”

She took a sip of her drink – ginger ale, from the look of it – and shook her head. “No. I’m just here because Alice throws great parties with good food and good company.”

Jimmy, seemingly oblivious to Clark’s presence, leered at Lois and said, “You sure you’re not waiting for someone to kiss you?”

Clark watched as Lois’ body tensed and her face hardened. In a dangerous tone, she asked, “Why would you ask me that, Olsen?”

Jimmy’s eyes flicked to Clark for a second, then he pointed over Lois’ head. “You’re under the mistletoe and Clark’s right behind you.”

Five things happened so quickly they were almost simultaneous. Lois’s head snapped around to look at Clark with huge eyes. She turned and stepped away from him. She glanced up to look at the mistletoe. She bumped into Jimmy and all but knocked him down. Then she blurted “Hi Clark sorry Jimmy hey I see Pam Wilson and I need to ask her something about something bye.”

Clark blinked at Lois’ blurted utterance, then watched as the partygoers closed in behind her high-speed wake. He reached out to help the still wobbly Jimmy steady himself. “You okay, Jim?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I’m fine. Hey, you want somethin’ to drink? Perry’s got some really good stuff here.”

“I’ll get a soda later.”

“Cool.” Jimmy sipped his drink, then sighed contentedly. “Smooth. ‘Cept there aren’t enough ‘o’s in ‘smooth’ to describe this properly.”

Clark smiled. It sounded to him as if Jimmy had worked on that comment for some time before delivering it. “Glad you like it, Jim. I hope you still think it’s that smooth in the morning.”

Jimmy gave back a smile, albeit a lopsided one. “No worries, mate, as our Aussie friends say. Not working tomorrow. Well, if you don’t want any, I’m going back for seconds. Or is it thirds?” He shrugged. “Anywho. No worries, mate. I need to find Kim, too. She’s my ride.”

As Jimmy toddled unevenly toward the drink station, Clark considered Lois’ reaction to Jimmy’s suggestion of a kiss from him. His first thought was that it was a bit over the top. But maybe she just didn’t want anyone to kiss her. She probably hadn’t realized what was overhead when she’d perched there.

Or – maybe—

Maybe she did want to be kissed and was afraid Clark didn’t want to kiss her.

If that were true—

No. That didn’t bear thinking about now. Maybe later. Right now he had a party to enjoy.

Although – he had to admit to himself that the thought of kissing Lois, even if it made her angry, didn’t make him want to throw up. Might even be fun, in a poke-the-bear-with-a-stick way.

She didn’t know that, of course. He hadn’t realized it himself until now. She was probably trying to ward off embarrassment over a kiss that didn’t happen and wouldn’t have happened.

Surely couldn’t have happened.

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*Tuesday, January 2<sup>nd</sup>*

Clark smiled as Perry called the weekly staff meeting to order with a slap on the table. Pam Wilson and Steve Lombard each groaned at the sharp noise and grabbed their heads. “Hey, people, it’s the first Tuesday of the new year and we need to hit the ground running! We’ve had good sales over the holiday weekend, but that content was mostly pre-planned articles and we need some fresh ink!” Perry glared at Pam, then Steve, then said, “I don’t care if you’re hung over. You knew today was coming and you should’ve taken precautions.”

Pam began massaging her temples. “I thought I did, Chief.”

She let out a painful “Uhhh. I need some more aspirin and something alcoholic to wash it down.”

“No you don’t,” chirped Clark. “Drink water or something like Sprite or 7-Up. Water’s best, though, and lots of it. You need to stay hydrated no matter how many bathroom trips you have to make.”

Several sober people chuckled. Pam did not. “Flush out my system? Is that the idea?”

“Partly. Also because alcohol dehydrates you. And because a woman usually can’t match a man drink for drink. Booze generally hits women harder than men.”

Steve groaned. “You saying it’s my fault she’s got a hangover?”

Perry slapped the table again. Steve grabbed his head again and Pam sucked air past her teeth. “Awright, people, listen up! You folks be drunks anonymous on your own time. Before we get to assignments, I have some other news for you.”

He pulled a mobile phone out of his pocket. “The Daily Planet has agreed to pay half your base monthly charges for one of these babies. I recommend that every reporter get one. You won’t have to hunt for a pay phone to call the office, and we can contact you whenever we need you. Got that?”

Jimmy lifted his hand. “Is getting one of these phones mandatory?”

“No. If you do get one, though, the paper will help you pay for it because you’ll be using it for business at least part of the time. Anyone who already has one just needs to contact Audra Hamilton in Human Resources so she can set up your reimbursement. For those of you who don’t have one, the reimbursement will start as soon as you buy one.” He wiggled the phone. “This one is mine, and each of you will have the number for it in an email when you get back to your desk.”

“I already have one,” Lois said. “Can I get help with the last few months?”

Perry shook his head. “Fraid not. The program started on the first of the year for everyone. Sorry, honey.”

“No problem, Chief.” She turned to the rest of the group. “Mine has helped me a lot already. It’s worth it.”

Clark nodded. “I plan to get one now. This is a great move, Perry.”

Totally deadpan, Perry replied, “I’ll pass that on to the executive committee, son. I just know they’ll be thrilled to hear that you approve of them spending money on you.”

Pam didn’t laugh with the rest, but she did give Clark a weak grin.

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### Saturday, February 10<sup>th</sup>

Lois had an early lunch date with her sister that Saturday, and she was looking forward to it. Since Lucy had her own place now, Lois didn’t get to harass her that often.

She got out of the Jeep at exactly eleven-twenty-five and walked into Mike’s diner. Lucy was, of course, waiting for her right inside the door. “Come on, Sis!” Lucy urged. “I’m hungry!”

“Of course you are. You’re no longer enjoying the fruits of my fine culinary abilities.”

Lucy stopped and stared at her, then said, “Your culinary – no, I’m not even. Come on, let’s find a table. It’s busy and there aren’t many open ones.”

Lois began scanning as they walked into the dining area. “Yeah, it’s pretty full, even for this early on Saturday. I don’t see any – wait, is that one empty?”

Lucy followed Lois’ pointing finger. “No, there’s a guy sitting there. Looks familiar, too. No food in front of him, so he looks like he just got here.”

With a start, Lois realized that the man they were looking at was Clark. “Come on, Lucy, let’s go somewhere else. He’s probably waiting for someone.”

“What? No! I don’t have time! I have to go back to the office after lunch. My boss is working up a couple of briefs for a trial starting on Tuesday and I’m doing research on precedents for him. I’ll go ask this guy if he minds if we join him.”

“No! Lucy, wait! Don’t—”

It was too late. She was already headed in Clark’s direction at full speed.

Lois stayed out of Clark’s line of sight but still followed closely enough to hear Lucy speak to him. “Excuse me, sir, but do you – Clark! Hey! Are you here by yourself?”

His face brightened when he saw Lucy. “I am. It’s pretty crowded today. Would you care to join me?”

She grabbed one of the chairs and pulled it out. “We sure would! Boy, I’m glad we ran into you!”

His face morphed into puzzlement. “We? Who is we?”

“Lois and me! Oh, come on, Sis, he’s not going to bite you, not with me here!”

Lois decided to make the best of the situation. “Yes, Punky, I can always depend on you to protect me from strange men and rampaging dogs.”

Lucy plopped down in the chair directly across the table from him. “I always do, don’t I? And don’t call Clark a ‘strange’ man. He’s no weirder now that he was a year ago.”

Lois ignored Lucy’s comment and moved in front of Clark, then she softly asked, “Do you mind, Clark? You don’t have to give up your table if you don’t want to.”

He made a show of looking around the room, then said, “I don’t see any other men sitting alone whom you might accost, so the two of you might as well stick with me.”

Lucy laughed loud enough to draw a couple of irritated looks from nearby diners. Lois looked into Clark’s face and saw a tiny smile trying to bloom, so she sat between Lucy and Clark.

The smile meant that she was safe with him, at least today. “Thank you, kind sir. Just to be clear, we’re paying for our own lunches.”

He nodded. “I’m paying for mine, too. I wouldn’t expect Mike to like dine-and-dash customers. He has a relationship with a certain part-time police officer.” He looked at Lucy. “I think Darren is working today. Are you ready for him to flirt with you quite subtly?”

Lucy’s eyebrows drew together. “I have it on pretty good authority that Darren isn’t all that fond of women in general.”

“Really? That’s not what my sources tell me. In fact, here he comes, so get ready.”

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As she drove home in her Jeep, Lois smiled to herself. Darren had indeed tried to flirt with Lucy, who’d griped so much about her new landlord while they ate that Darren had presented her a small cup of shredded cheese “to go with her whine.” Lois and Clark had both laughed like parents over Lucy’s shocked amazement and embarrassment. And it barely bothered Lois that Darren had called her “ma’am” again.

The best part was that she and Clark had gently teased each other without any hint of rancor. It seemed to her that he’d actually put her recent bout of insanity behind him and was letting their relationship re-develop naturally. It was many orders of magnitude better than she could’ve hoped in her fondest dreams when she’d flown back from Smallville that day last summer.

Lots of things were far better now. He might never love her as he once had, but at least Clark was still her friend.

Then she considered her feelings toward him. Was it just friendship? Or was it something more? Even if he had gotten past her horrible behavior and forgiven her, had she managed to forgive herself? If so, was that enough to build a closer relationship with him?

Did she dare to – to love him?

Did she dare to risk being betrayed by him again?

The thrill of daring to love him battled with the terror of being betrayed yet again and left her heart torn in two. She was walking between the warring factions in a scarred and desolate no-woman's land. She wanted to move toward the dare-to-love line, but the terror-of-betrayal line mocked her desire and pulled her back with a leash of fear.

This situation had to be fixed.

She needed to talk to someone. Dana Friskin came to mind. The therapist was a good listener and had always given Lois good advice, so a session or two with her was certainly in order. Her issues with Clark needed to be resolved, no matter what the outcome might be.

Lois decided to call her first thing Monday morning.

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## Tuesday, February 20<sup>th</sup>

Clark was concerned about Lois. She'd sat through the regular staff meeting without saying very much. She hadn't reacted even when Steve Lombard had made a slightly off-color remark about his current girlfriend, something for which she normally would've roasted Steve over hot coals. Something was bothering her.

Her only unusual reaction had come when Perry had mentioned – rather casually, Clark had thought – that Lois would be out of the office for part of the afternoon, specifically after the lunch hour. She'd glued her gaze at the table and hadn't looked up until Perry had moved on with the meeting agenda.

Clark hadn't spoken to her since then, and since it was almost lunchtime, he thought she might need a sympathetic ear to bend. So he stopped at her desk on his way back from the coffee cart and said, "Hi, Lois. Say, do you have any plans for lunch?"

She glanced up at him and looked back at her desk. "I do, actually. I – I'm meeting someone." She straightened a small stack of paper and put it down. "My father."

"Oh. Is – um – is anything wrong?"

She shook her head without looking at him. "No. I just – I'm sorry, Clark. I don't want to push you away, but I'm not ready to talk about it right now."

He leaned against her desk and spoke softly. "I understand. If you do want to talk about it later, I'll be around."

Now she looked directly at him. "That's what you said after – what Superman said after he saved the shuttle. And he – you have been around." Her eyes seemed to moisten. "Thank you. I may take you up on that soon."

He smiled. "Whenever you're ready."

Then he slipped back to his desk and sat. He still had to organize his notes on his current story, review the questions he planned to ask a city council candidate in a Thursday interview, and give his latest completed article one last review for grammar and punctuation. So while Lois' agitation didn't vanish from his consciousness, it did slip to the back of his mind. He knew she'd talk to him when she was ready.

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Lunch with Lois' father had gone better than she'd expected. Now it was time for another visit with Dr. Friskin. Just like the previous visit, she had a lot to talk about.

Lois opened the door and hesitantly stepped into the doctor's inner office. Dana lifted her eyes, smiled, and said, "Hello, Lois. Come in, please."

"Thank you, Dr. Friskin. Where shall I sit?"

"Wherever you're comfortable, just like always."

"Right. I guess I'm – a little nervous."

"About meeting with me again so soon after our last time?"

Lois squirmed against the chair back as if hunting a comfortable position. "No, no, about telling you about – what I need to tell you."

"Where do you want to start?"

"Huh. I guess – no, I should start with my father."

Dana nodded slowly. "That's fine. Can you review the pertinent facts for me? I want to be up to date on your current situation and make sure I remember everything you told me last week."

"All right. Um – you know that I've had unresolved issues with my father for a long time. Since I was a teen, actually. I know I told you about that, how he abandoned us and chased other women and caught a lot of them."

"Yes, you did."

"Anyway, I – I had lunch with him today because I realized something."

Lois' voice failed her. How could she talk about this? It was good – great, actually, but also very private and personal and—

"You realized you were hungry?"

Lois' head jerked up. "What? No! Why would you—"

"Easy, Lois. You said you realized something and stopped talking."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess I did. Anyway, I – I've realized that I have an extremely difficult time trusting people. Men especially. And whenever I think about all the men who've treated me badly in my life, I always start with my father. I felt – my dad left us for another woman and I've never been able to forgive him."

"I see. But you had lunch with him today."

Lois lowered her gaze to the floor. "Yes. I wanted to find out if he was sorry he'd bailed on us all those years before."

"A meal is a good time and place to have a discussion like that. The sharing of food is a significant level of intimacy that some wounded people can't achieve."

She waved as if shooing a fly away. "Well, we achieved it. I told him that my anger at him was hurting me and I needed to get rid of it. I told him that – I said that I needed to forgive him."

"That's good, Lois. What did he say to that?"

"That I couldn't forgive him unless he asked me to forgive him first."

"Ah. And then?"

Lois looked up. The doctor's tone sounded almost amused, so she grinned back. "You've got that Sylvester-ate-Tweety-Bird smile on your face. I think you know what happened."

"I don't know, but I do hope. Please tell me."

"He – he took my hand and – and he said he was sorry and he had been wrong for all that time and he knew my anger at him was justified but he wanted to change things and – and he asked me to – to forgive him."

"The tissue box is to your right, Lois. Now. Can you tell what happened next?"

Yeah. This was the good-but-hard-to-say part. "I – I made a scene and jumped out of my chair and grabbed him around the neck and started crying and I think he cried too and we're going to Centennial Park on Saturday for a picnic and a long father-daughter talk and I'm so happy!"

"There, there, Lois, you just cry all you want. I'm glad you and your father were able to reconnect."

She blew her nose and wiped her eyes. "Oh, so am I! So am I!"

"Good. Now, this was a major step for you and I don't want to minimize it in the least, but I think there's more to this than you've said so far."

"Yes. I – I think I can trust Clark again. Or, at least, learn to trust him again."

"Oh. Does this have something to do with his assignment last summer?"

*Be careful, Lois. Be honest without saying too much. The Secret is still important.*

"Yes. He told me a big secret that he'd kept from me for almost two years and I exploded and accused him of betraying me and I ran him out of the city. He's back now and I'm – I think he's forgiven me. In fact I'm sure he has. And that's a big part of why I

wanted to reconnect with my dad. I knew I was right when I forced Clark out of town even though I wasn't right, just like my dad knew he was right when he left our family even though he wasn't right. Neither of us knew how destructive those decisions were, both to ourselves and to others. And we're both still dealing with the fallout."

"I'm glad you both understand that all of our actions have consequences. And they're usually unintended ones."

"Yeah, well, I'm trying to recover from my actions. I'm glad the people I hurt don't seem to hold it against me these days."

Dana smiled. "That's wonderful. Do you have anything else you want to tell me? Or ask me?"

"Not today, Doctor, but I might be back before too long. There's a possibility that I'll have another set of relationship questions to ask you."

The doctor nodded and leaned forward with her hands clasped before her. "All right. This has been a productive time for you, don't you think? And, surprisingly, we appear to be done for the day. Do you feel that way too?"

"Yes. If you don't mind, I'm going to give you back about half of this session so you can decompress a little. I'm sure you get stressed from constantly listening to other people's problems."

Dana shook her head. "Only if I can't help them find solutions. And I think you've found some very important solutions, largely without my help."

Lois stood and reached out to grasp Dana's hands. "Oh, you helped. I just remembered all those past sessions when you gave me advice I didn't want to hear."

Dana returned the gentle grip. "But you did hear it, Lois, else you wouldn't have put it into practice with your father. I wish you well with your father and with Clark."

"Thank you. Bye for now."

"For now, yes. And remember that I'll be here if you need me."

Lois dropped her hands and smiled. "Thank you so much." Then she turned and walked through the door with a steady and firm gait.

*See? That wasn't so hard, was it?*

*Shut up, Snarky.*

It was a friendly order, though.

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Dana Friskin sat back in her chair and smiled. Lois had come a long way without Dana's direct guidance, and she'd accomplished a great deal in the past few weeks. Dana's goal had always been to give Lois the tools she needed to live her own life, and even though there had been a number of rough spots, the young woman appeared to have turned a corner in her life. Lois' life wouldn't be strawberries and cream or triple-chocolate fudge from now on, but she'd be able to handle the gruel and thin oatmeal for now.

Dana wished she could trumpet Lois' victory over herself to all of her patients. If they knew her various traumas and how far she'd traveled to overcome them, they'd stand up and cheer. Then they'd take heart from her progress and believe that they each could defeat their problems – or at least learn to deal with them and not collapse beneath their weight.

Dana stood and turned to the wall behind her desk. She smiled at her therapist's certificate and her psychology degree. They were worth the time, the drudgery, the panic, the cost, and the lost sleep.

She'd actually helped someone. It was wonderful.

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## Chapter Twenty-Five

*Wednesday, March 13th*

Lois banged out of Perry's office and all but sprinted to her desk. Clark watched as she grabbed her notebook, purse, two pencils, light jacket, and pocket recorder. Her urgency made him

smile. "Spying on Lucy this afternoon?"

"What? Oh, no. Just got a hot tip. City building commissioner tied up with some low-level mobsters." She grinned and winked. "Gonna get the goods on these creeps."

Lois and mobsters. Her haste wasn't the least bit humorous any more. "You need any help?"

She kept shoving things into her jacket. "Naw. These guys can't get out of their own way. You remember that book from the sixties and the movie from it? 'The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight?' I saw it on the late movie a couple of weeks ago. They kept knocking off themselves and each other instead of their intended targets, and these clowns are even dumber. I'll be fine."

He nodded. "Okay. Just remember that even clowns get lucky at times."

She shook her head and hurried to the elevator bank. "I don't need luck, Clark. I'm the best at what I do."

She stepped into an elevator car and didn't look at him again. He hoped she'd be careful. As vain a hope as that might be.

He turned back to his desk computer and put his hands on the keyboard, but before he could type anything Perry dropped a meaty hand on his shoulder. "Clark, would you do me a favor and keep an eye on Lois today? I have a bad feeling about this tip. She might get into trouble."

"*Might get into trouble?* Chief, have you worked with her for more than a week?"

"Ha-ha. I'm serious. Please." The editor's eyes were narrowed and Clark could sense his blood pressure go up with each pulse beat. "I'd take it as a personal favor."

"You know she wouldn't want me to hover over her, Perry."

Perry shrugged. "So don't hover. Just stay in the background and be there if she does need some help."

Clark nodded slowly. "I can do that."

Perry exhaled in obvious relief. "Thanks. I won't worry quite so much now."

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On his way down the stairs, Clark decided not to change into The Suit for this task. He could track Lois' Jeep by watching the specific tire tread patterns and the heat signature each vehicle left in the air and on the pavement. He'd have to hurry, though – those traces faded within minutes under ideal circumstances, and they'd dissipate on a busy city street even more quickly.

He exited the stairwell in the basement and saw that Lois was just pulling out of the lot. He ducked down behind the nearest vehicle to let Lois and the Jeep pass him. Then he stepped out and followed at a brisk but human pace using his special vision and sense of smell.

Lois drove toward the waterfront for about ten minutes. He didn't think she'd spotted him or surely she'd have stopped and yelled at him for babysitting her. He stopped, pulled off his tie and stuffed it in a jacket pocket, then removed his glasses and ruffled his hair. It would break up his outline and make it harder for Lois to spot him.

He stayed about a block behind her for almost another mile. Then she pulled into an alley and parked. After a long minute, a strange and obviously nervous man sidled up to the driver's window and spoke with her. There was too much ambient noise from the buildings' heating systems and general city background noise for Clark to eavesdrop on them from that distance, but apparently the man had planned to show her where the commissioner was meeting the bad guys.

The nervous man pointed and gestured. Lois must have demanded that he guide her, because he suddenly broke away and speed-walked along the sidewalk across the street from Clark. Lois jumped out of the Jeep and took a step toward the retreating man, then put her hands on her hips and blew air out. Then she tossed her head and turned toward a decrepit three-story building one block further down.

Clark watched Lois until she entered the building, then he x-rayed the lower floor and saw a well-dressed man with a metal briefcase walk into a room to meet four other men. Clark assumed this was the meeting Lois had mentioned. The well-dressed man fidgeted with the briefcase as he spoke with the one of the other four. That man wore a well-worn dark suit that looked to be at least ten years out of date. The three remaining men could've played button men in any TV or Hollywood mob story from the fifties or sixties.

This did not look good to Clark. And with the building itself adding to the sonic buffering, he couldn't hear a word they said.

Clark watched Lois scoot through an inside door and close it gently behind her. On the other side of the wall from her, Dark Suit shook his head and sighed, then turned to his right and waved his hand. The stereotypical gangster straightened and pulled a small semiauto pistol from a shoulder holster under his suit jacket and pointed it at the well-dressed man. The other two thug lookalikes didn't move at all.

He focused on the five men and saw the well-dressed one – who now appeared quite frightened – place the metal briefcase on the floor with the latches facing Dark Suit. Another hand gesture sent a second thug forward to open the case.

The contents of the case appeared to be manila file folders. Clark couldn't see any titles on the folders from his position, so he trotted down the street to be directly across from this meeting of obviously criminal minds. Lois knelt by the thin sheetrock between the two rooms and directly behind the well-dressed man. It appeared that she could hear them, since she was scribbling in her notebook and kept glancing at the recorder on a box beside her.

It was time to contact the police. He stepped back against the building behind him and pulled out his cell, then dialed 9-1-1. The operator quickly told him that police had been dispatched to the building where Lois was, and she relayed his admonition not to use their sirens. There was no reason to spook these guys. And since Lois was already in some danger, there was no reason to add to it.

Then the situation got really dangerous.

Dark Suit said something to the thug looking through the folders. That man looked back and shook his head. Dark Suit's expression turned angry and he pointed at the well-dressed man. That man waved his hands in apparent protest and stumbled back against the wall behind which Lois was hiding and listening. Dark Suit glanced at the thug with the pistol and nodded.

Before Clark could react, the pistol fired once.

It was a warning shot. The bullet missed the well-dressed man, penetrated the sheetrock through to the adjoining room, and shattered against the outside brick wall. But its path had taken it directly past Lois' face.

Dust and debris showered her hair and blouse and she fell back in stunned surprise. The men in the next room didn't react to the noise she made, probably because the well-dressed man had also fallen even though he hadn't been shot. Dark Suit said something else.

Clark couldn't stay back now.

He sprinted across the street and banged into the large rolling metal barn door of the building at human strength. It held, so he kicked it and shouted, "Hey! They're coming! They're coming!"

He peeked into the room with the five men and saw their panicked reactions. Dark Suit pointed to the second thug to take the briefcase, then waved to the first man to put away his pistol. The third man opened the room's exit door and led the four bad guys into the open area behind the metal door Clark had kicked, so he kicked it again and yelled, "Come on! You're out of time!"

He could both see and hear them now. One man called out, "Who's that?"

Another answered, "The lookout?"

Dark Suit growled, "We didn't set a lookout, idiot! Where's the back exit?"

The man with the pistol said, "There ain't one, boss!"

Dark Suit pointed. "Then go through the door and take care of whoever's out there!"

Thug One pulled his pistol again and charged the door. Clark looked more closely at the pistol and saw that it was a .25 caliber, a light round that wouldn't penetrate the metal of the door. So he leaned into it to keep it from rolling open.

Thug One pulled for a moment, then yelled, "It won't open!"

Dark Suit waved to the other two and barked, "Help him!"

The three of them made no real progress against Clark, but by then three police cars – all running silent and dark – rolled up to the building's entrance one by one. "Four men, I think," Clark stage-whispered to the nearest officer, "armed and willing to shoot. They're trying to get out now."

Six officers exited the cars, drew their weapons, and formed a semi-circle behind the cars. One said, "Let go and get out of the way!"

Clark released the door and fell away from the line of fire. The door abruptly slid open and the three thugs tugging it fell to the concrete. Dark Suit jumped over them and heard, "Hands up! On the ground! Face down on the ground! Now!"

Dark Suit slowly complied. The three thugs behind him were already down, so they simply stretched out their hands as the officers searched them and slapped on cuffs.

While that went on, Clark hustled around the building to the entrance Lois had used. He found her curled up on the floor of the room where she'd fallen, shaking and crying and hiccupping.

He knelt beside her and pulled her up into his arms. "Lois! Are you hurt? Are you okay?"

She looked up and made eye contact with him, then grabbed him around the neck and held on tightly. He held her until she calmed down, then brushed the wallboard dust away from her eyes. "Are you all right?"

She nodded and pulled back. "Y-yes. The bullet – it went right past my face."

"I know. I'd already called the police."

"Oh. So – so that's who banged on the door?"

"No, that was me. It looked like they might keep shooting, and I didn't want the Planet to lose its second-best reporter, so I distracted them."

The jibe penetrated her fear and her eyes focused on him. "Second-best, huh? I got the story. Councilman Bennett was selling personal files on city and county employees to the Bonacci family to be used as blackmail material." She pulled out of his arms and sat up by herself. "Doug Bonacci thought they were getting dirt on the mayor's family, but Bennett said there wasn't any, so Doug had his guy fire a warning shot and – and that's when you interrupted the meet."

He thought it was best to keep it on a friend-to-friend basis. "I take it that you're disappointed you didn't get the exclusive on a murder."

She shot him a medium-strength glare. "No, of course not!" She gathered herself and stood. "I got what I came for!"

He stood next to her and said, "The police rescued the councilman, too. In fact, he's in one of the police cars now. They're giving him a free ride to the precinct to get his statement. Do you want to follow them?"

She hesitated, then shook her head. "No. I have enough for now. But as soon as I type up what I already have, I'll head down to the precinct and get the follow-up. You need a ride back to the office?"

He nodded as nonchalantly as he could. "I suppose I could ride with you."

She glared harder. "Then come on. I'll try to squeeze you in."

"I appreciate the generosity."

She strode past him toward the door she'd used, but stopped just short of it. Without turning, she said, "Clark?"

"Yes?"

"Why didn't Superman show up?"

He sighed. "Bonacci had his buddy shoot the wall after I called 9-1-1. If Superman had burst in then, things might have gotten really crazy and those idiots might have turned the room into a shooting gallery. I didn't want that to happen, for their sake as well as for yours."

"I see." She turned and faced him. "Was it your idea to follow me?"

"No, it was Perry's. But I didn't argue with him."

She nodded. "Thank you for saving me." Then she put her hand on his arm. "I'm glad Clark Kent was the hero today."

Then she turned and walked out the door.

There was nothing else to do but follow her to the Jeep.

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*Friday, March 22<sup>nd</sup>*

Clark had just saved his final travel column – a story about the Rocky Mountains and the Continental Divide that would be printed the second weekend of April – when Lois tapped on his shoulder. He turned and looked up at her. "Yes?"

Her face was a mix of hesitancy and happiness. "Are – are you free tonight?"

He tilted his head as if in thought. "Hmm. Yes, I believe so. May I inquire as to your reason for asking this question?"

Her mouth bent up on one side. "You may inquire."

He waited a moment, then realized that she'd answered his question – he was permitted to ask for her reason. How droll on her part. He nodded and said, "Very well. May I assume that you require an escort to another dangerous semi-undercover assignment?"

Her smile took over and banished the hesitance. "No, there is no imminent danger in the offing. But I realized earlier today that I haven't thanked you properly for saving me last week. I want to do that tonight."

"Ah. And how will you accomplish that Herculean feat?"

Her eyebrow rose. "Aren't we full of ourselves now, implying that I'm not strong enough to thank you properly?" Before could respond, she added, "I want to take you out to dinner. My treat. And we'll go somewhere nice but not formal."

"I see." He leaned back and crossed his arms. "Is this like – a date?"

Her impish grin told him that she remembered the Orchid Ball invitation as well as he did. "Yes. Very much like a date, in fact. Minus the necking behind the Tastee Freeze. I can pick you up at the entrance to Centennial Park at six unless you want to leave straight from here."

"I'd prefer to park my truck at home first. I'll meet you at the park entrance at six. It's right across from my building."

"See you then."

Lois smiled and saluted, then ambled toward the coffee cart. He watched her, thinking about going on a date with Lois, something he hadn't done for almost a year, not counting dinner after the do-over of The Confession. He surprised himself by looking forward to it.

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Lois unlocked the passenger door from the inside and gestured at Clark. "Come on! This place doesn't do reservations and it fills up pretty quickly on Friday."

She watched him stride to the Jeep and slide in. "Can you tell me where we're going now or is it still a secret?"

She put the Jeep in gear as he buckled his seat belt. "No secrets. I assume you still eat steak?"

"Just like a Kansas farmer, especially with all the fixings."

"I assume that means yes. We're headed for the new Steak and Ale on the east side. It has a nice view of the ocean from the

east windows."

"Isn't that in the old Seaside LexCorp offices?"

She nodded and turned a corner. "It's about halfway up the building, right at the top of the first bank of elevators. It's called Metropolis Shopper's Delight Tower now. I thought it an appropriate place for dinner, since it was once Lex' private dojo."

"Really? I didn't know that."

"There are things about that time in my life I usually don't tell anyone."

He paused for a moment, then said, "But you're telling me this now."

"Yes. I don't want any secrets between us, Clark, whether yours or mine. If I demand that you be totally honest with me, it's only right and just that I be totally honest with you. From now on, if you ask me any question at all, I will answer it fully and openly." This time she paused. "As long as Jimmy's not listening."

He laughed. "Don't worry. And I promise I won't tell anyone what style of underwear you have on."

She snorted as she made another turn. "That wasn't what I had in mind, but okay, if that's what you want to know."

He shook his head. "No. I was just trying to make you laugh."

She chuckled. "Mission accomplished."

"My day is complete."

"Not unless you plan to watch me eat and not get something for yourself."

"Oh, I suppose I'll have something. I wouldn't want you to feel like the odd woman out."

She slipped the Jeep into the valet parking lane at the Shopper's Delight and turned off the engine. A very young woman wearing a huge artificial smile trotted over and took her keys and wrote her name on a clipboard. "Please keep this tag, ma'am. We'll match it to your keys and your car when you're ready to leave."

Someone else had called her "ma'am," some kid barely out of high school who'd implied that she was so old she either didn't know or had forgotten how valet parking worked. Maybe she should embrace the title. After all, she wasn't getting any younger.

Clark waited for her at the passenger door, then offered his arm. She placed her hand in the crook of his elbow and they walked into the building.

She hoped he was still so gallant after she revealed her deepest secret to him.

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Clark sat back and put one hand on his stomach. "Oh, that meal was wonderful. Thank you for inviting me."

Lois quirked one eyebrow at him. "And for paying the tab?"

He nodded with what he hoped she'd perceive as magnanimity. "Of course. Do you plan on having dessert?"

"No, I'm full." She looked around their table and sighed as if she'd reached a decision. "You remember that I said that I don't want any secrets between us? Not ever?"

"Uh, yeah, since you said it just this afternoon."

"I meant it. I have a secret I want to tell you."

This sounded serious. He didn't know what this secret was. And he thought that maybe he didn't want to hear it. But he'd trusted Lois with his biggest secret and except for telling Perry she'd kept it, so it was completely in order for her to trust him with secret.

He leaned forward and lowered his volume. "Are you sure you want to tell me here? Maybe it's a little public for whatever this is."

She looked at her empty plate, then took another sip of wine. "No, this is fine. I'm not going to have hysterics, and I trust you to control your reactions."

This didn't sound promising at all. "You're concerned that I'll get angry?"

She sighed again. "I don't know how you'll react. I just know

that I need to tell you.”

He rested his forearms on the table and tried to look open and supportive. “Please believe that I won’t be angry no matter what you tell me.”

She looked into his eyes and nodded. “Okay. Deep breath, let it out slow, and talk.” She suited her actions to her words, then said, “Clark, I’ve discovered that I’m in love with someone.”

He felt himself blink. This was not the secret he’d feared he’d learn, and he was surprised to realize he was a little sad. “I see. I assume this is a man?”

Her eyebrows drew down for a moment. “Yes, of course it’s a man.”

He lifted one hand in a “peace” gesture. “Sorry. I didn’t want to make any assumptions. Does he reciprocate your – your affection?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t told him yet.”

“I see. When do you plan to tell him?”

“Immediately.”

“Okay. Uh – don’t be offended, but is he by any chance already married?”

She tilted her head. “A valid question, but no. Not married.”

So, Lois was in some kind of unrequited love situation, apparently one without undue complications. It was vaguely disappointing to him, because if she moved forward with this relationship with this unnamed guy she’d have less time to spend with Clark. And it surprised him to realize that he’d miss her if that happened.

It also surprised him to realize just how *much* he’d miss her.

He decided to be honest. “I hope it works out for you. You have to know, though, that I’ll be jealous of him for spending so much time with you.”

A weird grin tried to crawl onto her face. “Oh, I don’t think that will be a problem.”

“Oh. Is he a foreign correspondent? Or is he out of the country a lot?”

“Neither. He does travel a good bit, but his headquarters is Metropolis.”

Headquarters? Why did that sound so familiar?

“O-kay. Do you plan to tell him how you feel in the next couple of days?”

“I’m telling him now.”

“You’re tell—” The penny dropped. “Ah.”

She nodded and reached out to take his hand in hers. “Yes. You’re the mystery man with whom I am in love. Again.”

It was too soon. He wasn’t ready. He wasn’t over Lois the first time and he wasn’t over Rachel. She hadn’t told him this to cause problems for him, but he couldn’t love her back. Not yet. It was too soon.

His inner self softly asked, *Is it really? If not now, when?*

That was not a question he could handle at the moment. All he could manage to say to Lois was a breathy “I see.”

Her face twisted into a combination smile and frown. It would’ve been unattractive on anyone else. “Clark, I needed to tell you. I need to be open and honest and aboveboard with you because that’s what I want from you. And I’m not asking you to respond right now. I can tell you had no idea I was going to say this to you. And I know how badly I wounded you and that you’re still healing. So can we just go on as friends until you figure out how you want to deal with this new piece of information?”

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze and released it. “Yeah, I guess so. Lois, I – nuts.”

She sighed yet again. “If I’ve messed things up between us by sharing this with you, I’m sorry. I promise I won’t put any pressure on you for an answer.”

He pressed his lips together and thought. He needed to tell her more about Rachel.

“Look, Lois, this isn’t my first time sitting across from a

woman who’s told me she loves me. Rachel said it to me. She and I stopped communicating when I made the decision to stay in Metropolis – actually she cut off the communication because she said it was painful to hear from me and know I wasn’t coming back to Smallville. To her.”

Lois slowly nodded once, so he continued. “At the time she told me, I was still knocked off my feet by – uh – when we – uh —”

“I assume you’re alluding very indirectly to our recent little misunderstanding?”

He almost controlled his quick snort of laughter. “Yeah. Our little misunderstanding. Anyway, Rachel told me she’d loved me since high school and she already knew about Superman and it didn’t seem to impress her. I wanted to tell her honestly that I loved her, but I – I just couldn’t. And now you – now I—”

“You can’t honestly tell me that you love me.”

This time he sighed. “No. I can’t. I’m sorry.”

She nodded. “Okay. Can you tell me that you never will? Or – or that you just can’t?”

Ah. She was asking if she’d destroyed any chance of a romantic reconciliation between them. She wanted – no, she needed to know if he still held her past actions against her.

He pondered the question and the answer came to him.

“I can tell you right now that I don’t know. I can also tell you that – that I’m not dead-set against the idea.”

One corner of her mouth bent upward. “I see. That’s certainly a ringing endorsement.”

She was trying not to be too serious, so he went along.

“Thank you. Why don’t we just go forward from here and see what develops?”

She bit the other corner of her mouth for a moment, then released it and smiled. “That’s as positive a response as I could hope for right now. Thank you, Clark. Thank you for not shutting me out of your life.”

He smiled back. “I wouldn’t do that no matter what my eventual answer will be. But I do have a question for you.”

“A follow-up one?”

“Sort of. Do you still take your morning coffee like you used to or have you changed your beverage preferences?”

She tipped her head a little to one side as if testing for a double meaning into his question. Then she said, “Just like before. If my tastes change, I’ll let you know.”

He nodded. “Then look for a cup on your desk around nine-thirty Monday morning.”

She lifted her hand to signal for the check. “I look forward to it. And thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Lois.”

The waiter brought the check and Lois took it from him before he could put it down in front of Clark. She picked up her purse and stood, then put her hand through his arm when he offered it. They walked to the register without speaking, and as soon as Lois signed the credit slip she pulled out the valet receipt.

Clark reached for his wallet. “At least let me tip the valet.”

She made as if she was thinking it over, then nodded. “Oh, all right. Just be generous.”

He lifted his hand and pointed upward as if to make an important point. “Only if the Jeep isn’t scratched.”

She laughed openly and freely. It sounded wonderful to him.

He hoped he could make her laugh often.

Maybe he could ask her out on an actual date soon.

He knew there were no guarantees in any relationship, and especially none with regard to Lois. She would bring her background, her emotional volatility, her unpredictability, her fire and passion for the truth, and her sheer brilliance with her. Any of those qualities could be positive or negative, depending on the circumstances, and the sole thing he could be sure about was that a romance with Lois would be interesting.

The memory of Rachel raised its hand in his mind and asked if Rachel had her own good points. He mentally nodded back and said yes, she certainly did, but the one thing Lois could do that Rachel would not do would be to challenge Clark to be the very best he could be, both personally and professionally. Rachel appeared to believe that Clark didn't need to make major improvements. Clark knew that wasn't true, that there were still holes in his writing and his knowledge and his personality and his life in general, and that Rachel would just smile and nod and love him and tell him she understood and that he was wonderful enough for her.

Lois would flare up and stomp and yell and dare him to be better and love him even when he wasn't perfect.

Life with Lois would be an adventure every day. Life with Rachel would be calm and quiet and peaceful and pleasant – and eventually a little boring.

Was it really a contest?

Maybe – just maybe – it wasn't too soon after all. Time would tell.

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### Epilogue

It was a rare Saturday evening that a small-town sheriff could take the night off, but Rachel had decided that nine straight weekends was enough and her deputies needed to take up the slack this week. This sheriff needed some "me" time. And since the high schools and colleges would be on fall break for the next week, and since soon they'd all be very busy breaking up fights and arresting drunks and processing traffic accidents from all the parties that were sure to pop up all over the place, she wanted to go into that time well-rested.

Rachel sat back in the recliner in her living room after supper and put the latest letter from Lana back in its envelope. Then she sighed. The girl had latched onto Rachel as her best long-distance friend in Smallville, and Rachel was glad of it. Lana had been in Tulsa for almost a year, and it appeared that she'd not only settled in professionally but personally. She was cautiously dating a man who managed an appliance and hardware outlet, one of the big chain ones, and the guy was beginning to hint about making their relationship permanent. It appeared that Lana was open to such a step, too.

And Rachel had mixed feelings about the news.

She was thrilled for Lana. She'd bounced back from the potential disaster in her affair the year before with Smallville's mayor and righted herself, with an assist from Rachel and Clark. And if Lana and this guy whose name Lana had not yet revealed to Rachel got happily married and had a dozen kids, Rachel would send a gift for each birth.

On the other hand—

Losing Clark still stung just as much as it had when he'd come back and told her he was staying in Metropolis. They hadn't spoken to each other for many months, and even though she'd asked him not to contact her, she still felt the void in her heart. She still held out a slender hope that he'd call or write or just show up at her door and declare his undying love for her, even after almost a year.

A slender hope was better than none.

He'd need her new address, of course. She'd finally moved out of her parents' home and rented a wood-frame house on the west side of town. The neat two-bedroom structure on the lonely gravel street suited her just fine as long as she lived alone.

Sheriffs don't have many roommates, largely because of the unpredictability of their schedules. And retired sheriffs needed alone time with their significant others. Now Dad – or Mom – wouldn't have to put a sock on their bedroom doorknob when they were getting up close and personal with each other. And since they'd announced plans to travel in their new RV, they wouldn't be home much anyway. As long as Rachel checked the house a

couple of times a week, it would be there when Mom and Dad came home.

She stood and gathered her sweater around her. It was chilly for mid-fall in Kansas and she thought about turning up the thermostat, then decided not to. Utilities weren't free and her name was on those bills too.

She picked up the latest Spenser mystery she'd checked out from the library. It was interesting, from a how-will-he-solve-it-this-time point of view, but there was no way Rachel would let a private investigator behave like that in her town. The guy would end up locked away until Mrs. Howard got tired of his wisecracks and slipped him the key to his cell.

Then someone knocked at her front door.

An encyclopedia salesman, she thought sourly. Or someone from one of the churches in the area. Her preferred method of dealing with the occasional door-to-door drop-in was to invite the person to attend services with her and put on pressure for a decision to come with her This Sunday Morning! Invariably she'd be left alone. Kinda late in the evening for any of those folks, though.

She put the book on the coffee table, then opened the door as she mentally framed her response—

Then her mind went blank.

Clark stood in her doorway in jeans, tennis shoes, light green golf shirt, and a dark blue windbreaker.

He smiled cautiously. "Hi. I'm sorry to drop in like this, but do you have some time to talk? I didn't want to surprise you at your office, so here I am. Maybe not my best plan ever, but it's the best one I could come up with on short notice."

She blinked at him and licked her lips.

"Rachel? Are you okay? Did I – is this a bad time?"

She shook herself and stepped back. "No. I don't – it's not a bad time. Come on in."

"Thank you."

He soft-footed past her and stood in her living room. "Nice," he murmured. "Very homey. I can see your mom's accents."

"Thanks. Where – how did you find me?"

"My mom gave me the address. I called her earlier to find out where you'd probably be, and when I checked your office you weren't there. Your sheriff's car is parked in the driveway, so here I am."

"I see. Uh, can I get you a soda or something?"

He turned to face her as she closed the door. "No, I'm good. I'm really here because you asked me to come."

"What?" What was that supposed to mean? She hadn't asked him to do anything lately! Why was he here standing in her living room and torturing her this way? "When did I do that?"

"Last year when I came back to tell you I was staying in Metropolis, you told me to come and tell you in person if – if Lois and I were about to do something – something permanent."

She took a sharp breath. The amorphous, free-floating anxiety in her chest coalesced into a jagged lump of lead in the middle of her heart.

Stupid Spenser novels. She didn't used to talk to herself in terms like that.

She must've stood there too long. Clark said, "I'm sorry. Should I not have come?"

She shook herself again. "No, no, I – I did ask you." She tried for a small joke. "It's just – if I'd known you was comin', I'd a baked you a cake."

He returned a small smile. "With fresh strawberries, no doubt."

Her smile grew slightly. "Biggest ones I could find."

He smiled wider but didn't say anything. He stood there for a few seconds, then started fidgeting and shuffling his feet as if he didn't know what to do or say.

She had to rescue him. "So – when's the big day?"

He frowned a little. “Big day?”

She gestured toward his left hand. “The wedding, doofus. When are you and Lois tyin’ the knot?”

He grinned a little and looked away. “I haven’t asked her yet.”

“Oh? Ain’t you jumpin’ the gun a little bit, then?”

He shook his head and looked back at her. “I don’t have any more deep dark secrets to reveal, so I’m pretty confident she’ll say yes.”

“How confident?”

He shook his head. “We went to dinner last night in San Antonio, Texas, at a Mexican place on the Riverwalk. On the flight back to Metropolis, she asked me when I was planning to propose. I asked her what she planned to answer. She said I’d have to wait to hear the answer to the actual proposal.” He paused and smiled. “To evaluate it for quality and sincerity, she said.”

“Ah.” Rachel swallowed and controlled her voice. “Sounds promising.”

“Does.” Then he gestured at the book on the coffee table and grinned wider. “Those Spenser novels are instructive in terse interpersonal communication.”

She took a moment to untangle his sentence, then said, “You mean the guys grunt at each other a lot and say deep things with very few words.”

He nodded. “Exactly.” Then he paused and took a deep breath. “I know you – I know this isn’t what you were hoping for, that I’d come home to be with you. And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry. But you were right when you told me I can’t live my life to please anyone else. I have to be true to myself while taking others into consideration.” He paused and took a breath, then said, “And I’ve discovered – well, rediscovered, really – that my home is with Lois wherever we are.”

She looked away and closed her rebellious eyes for a moment, then nodded and turned back to him. “Yes. I understand. And I have to live my own life myself.”

He lifted his hands as if he planned to take hers, then stopped. “I’ll never forget you, Rachel. The time I spent here in Smallville with you is precious to me, and I’ll always keep you in my heart.”

Her gaze fell to the middle of his chest. “I hope there’s enough room in there so me and Lois don’t start fightin’.”

He sighed. “I guess I didn’t say that very well. But I meant it. I hope you hear my intent better than my actual words.”

She sniffed once. “You said it just fine. And I do hear what you meant. And thank you for coming to tell me in person. I might’a got mad if I’d heard it over the grapevine.”

“That’s what I thought.” He shuffled uncertainly again, then said, “Well, I guess I better be on my way. Thank you for letting me see your new house.”

“New to me, that’s all. But it suits me.”

“Does.” He stepped to the side as if to go around her. “Good night.”

She put out her hand and touched his arm. “Wait. Uh – I’m glad you came.”

He smiled softly. “I am too. It’s good to see you again.”

She stepped closer. “I’m gonna guess I won’t get a invite to the wedding, so there’s something I need to do.”

“Okay. What is it?”

She reached up and put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

He kissed her back, too. Just not as intently as she kissed him. She felt it when he was done so she slipped away. She let her hands slide down his chest as she took a step back. “Best wishes, Clark. And give Lois my congratulations. Or is that backwards?”

He grinned. “Doesn’t matter. Thank you. I’ll tell her.”

“Good. Wait – she knows you’re here, right?”

He chuckled. “Yes. I asked her if she minded if I came to see you.”

She waited for him to finish but ran out of patience. “So? What’d she say?”

He smiled wider. “That she didn’t mind if I came as long as I didn’t stay.”

Rachel smiled a little and nodded. “Sounds like her. You – you have a good life, okay? Keep up the good work in both your jobs – I mean, all three of ‘em.”

“Three?”

“Being a reporter, being Superman, and being a good husband. And not necessarily in that order. I seen most all my life how hard my daddy works at it. I expect you’ll put in the same kind o’ effort. And I know you’ll succeed, too.”

“Thank you. For everything. Well – goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Clark. And goodbye.”

His mouth shifted as if he had something else to say, but nothing came out. He opened the door, stepped through, then pulled it shut behind him.

She listened but didn’t hear anything. She peeked out her front window and saw him walking further west toward the corn fields. She watched until she couldn’t see him in the failing evening light.

He was gone. For good this time. And it was time for her to get on with her life.

She had some vacation time saved up. Maybe she’d go visit Lana in Tulsa for a few days after the first of the year. It’d be good to catch up with her in person, and Rachel still wanted to be friends with Lana. And just because she enjoyed being the sheriff of Smallville, it didn’t mean she had to stay there for the rest of her life.

She wouldn’t ever have Clark. She’d miss him – she already missed him, would always miss him – but she wouldn’t quit living because he didn’t love her enough to stay with her. Life was both too short and too long to live it always looking back at what might have been. She could make a good life with some other good man – assuming she could find a really good one.

She’d told Clark that she couldn’t just switch off her feelings. And that was true. But it was also true that she was in control of the direction of her feelings, that she could gradually stop loving him and stop hurting because he wasn’t there. And even though her heart protested that the thought was blasphemy, she knew she could aim those feelings at some other man.

As long as he was in Clark Kent’s class. Or at least very close.

Maybe Lana’s special fella had a friend who was a really good guy. He didn’t have to be a superhero, just a really good man whose heart wasn’t shredded wheat or welded to another woman’s heart, who needed a good woman to walk beside him through life.

You never know what you’ll find in a new place.

THE END

Music and poetry used in this story:

Chapter Fifteen:

“Down At the Twist And Shout”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SuapCENFM2U>

“Jambalaya” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-BQpRqmwM0>

“Two Of a Kind Workin’ On a Full House”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buY4zqaSr5k>

“Chattahoochee” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JW5UEW2kYvc>

“Center Field” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xq3hEMUeBGQ>

“Boot Scoot Boogie” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d05tQrhNMkA>

Chapter Seventeen:

“The Walrus And The Carpenter”

<https://poets.org/poem/walrus-and-carpenter>