

Borrowed Happiness

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Rated: PG-13

Submitted: January 2022

Summary: Nothing ever seems to last the way it should.

Story Size: 5,505 words (31Kb as text)

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Author's Note: This is in response to Kerth Challenge #2, which asked to have a character start off happy and end up sad.

Jimmy Olsen was feeling on top of the world. In fact, he nearly felt like he was floating in his ecstasy as he made his way through the bullpen. Three Kerth nominations! Three! One for his stunning photograph of Superman as the hero diverted the flow of lava from an erupting volcano away from the quaint, unsuspecting little Hawaiian town where he, Lois, and Clark had been sent on a conference. Man, talk about being in the right place at the right time!

Another nomination for his coverage of the continued devastation that the long-defunct LexLabs was causing – one of the first news stories he'd covered as a budding reporter. As it turned out, the Metamide concoction that Luthor's scientists had pumped into those poor orphaned kids several years ago had lingered in their young systems longer than anyone had thought, causing damage no one had foreseen. That toxic sludge had altered their brains to make the kids smarter, yes...but only at first. Now, ten years later, all but one of them – the oldest of them all - had developed Alzheimer's and required round-the-clock care. Not one of them was expected to live much past their twenties, if that. Lois had been particularly helpful as he'd worked on that story; she was *still* burning with righteous fury after seeing how Aimee, the "smart kid" who'd once sheltered in her apartment, was now completely incapacitated.

And finally, the final nomination had been bestowed upon him for his controversial Op-Ed piece calling for tighter restrictions on Bruce Wayne's vast empire. While, yes, the billionaire appeared to be a genuine philanthropist, so had Lex Luthor, and just look at what vile acts *he'd* managed to accomplish as LexCorp had swelled to the immense size it had been just before the criminal mastermind had died...the first time. Jimmy didn't expect much to come of that nomination. Too many people were too enamored of Bruce Wayne to agree with his viewpoint.

But still!

Three Kerth nominations!

Sure, Jimmy had been nominated before. He'd even won a few of the coveted awards throughout his tenure with

the Daily Planet. But three nominations in a single year was nearly unheard of.

And yet, the nominations – which he had to admit to himself, were only just *nominations*, not guaranteed wins – were just the icing on top of the cake.

For the past fourteen months, he'd been dating Caitlin, a neonatal nurse at Metropolis General. He'd met her after visiting Lois and Clark after the birth of their daughter. Jimmy had arrived while Lois had been occupied with feeding the baby, so he'd had wandered down to the cafeteria for a quick bite to eat. With so many of the tables occupied, he'd somewhat shyly asked the attractive young nurse if he could use the empty chair at her table. She'd agreed and before Jimmy knew it, they were deep in discussion and laughing like they'd known each other for years.

Caitlin!

Just the thought of her sent Jimmy's heartrate skyrocketing.

She was simply amazing. Tall, blonde, athletic, gorgeous, smart as a whip, incredible in the bedroom, and, to top it all off, a gamer, just like Jimmy. She was absolute perfection as far as Jimmy was concerned. She made him feel complete in ways he'd never felt before. Wherever they went, Jimmy felt like he was home, simply because she was with him. He felt safe and comfortable in ways he'd never known were possible before he met her. When she looked at him, Jimmy felt utter peace in his heart.

For the first time in his life, he had what Lois and Clark had – a soulmate. Someone he could easily spend the rest of his life with. Someone he *wanted*, even *needed*, to spend his life with. Because a life without her by his side was too bleak to contemplate. He *knew* that was the way Lois and Clark felt about each other. After all, he'd been right there, by their sides, as they'd navigated their early relationship. He'd seen every crest onto the highest of highs and every crash into the lowest of lows. Jimmy was just glad that whatever Lois and Clark had gone through – and it seemed like they'd gone through too many periods where their relationship had nearly crumbled into mummified remains – he and Caitlin had been fortunate enough to avoid.

He'd made up his mind. Seeing how Clark had almost lost Lois too many times to count, Jimmy wasn't going to take any chances. Besides, he knew he was ready to take the next step.

Tonight, after the Kerths, he was going to ask Caitlin to marry him.

He had it all planned out. While Caitlin couldn't attend the ceremony with him – she was on call until midnight – Jimmy was going to pick her up on his motorcycle once her shift was over. He'd arranged for a late dinner reservation at Tavern In The Park, only the most exclusive restaurant in the city. Situated right in the heart of Centennial Park, the place was said to offer not only a stunning view but some of the best food in the city. Jimmy certainly hoped so after sneaking a peak at the exorbitantly priced menu. And while he certainly couldn't afford the place on the regular – not on a newsman's salary at any rate – this was a special occasion.

His life was about to change, and he could hardly stand

the slow ticking of time leading up to it.

He just wasn't sure if he was going to ask during dessert or if he should wait until after the meal during a walk in the park. The idea of proposing under the moonlight seemed the more attractive option, but would it be too late? Would Caitlin be too exhausted from her long day in the hospital to do more than eat and ask for a ride home? But was a dessert proposal too cliché? Caitlin deserved so much better than some tired old Hollywood trope.

The only thing he was certain of was that he physically could not hold off until another time. It *had* to be done tonight.

Jimmy decided that the best way to handle the decision of when to ask was not to make it until he saw Caitlin that night. Then he could gage her energy level and figure out which option was the best.

Win or lose at the Kerths, this was going to be the best night of his life.

"Hey, Jimmy! Ready for tonight?" Clark Kent called out as Jimmy neared his friend's desk.

"You have no idea!" Jimmy replied with the biggest grin of his life.

"I'll bet you take all three Kerths," Clark continued, smiling, and misreading Jimmy's enthusiasm. "Your work on them was impeccable. Even if I don't necessarily think you're right about Bruce Wayne," he added lightly.

Clark had been the first to respectfully disagree with Jimmy's Op-Ed. But for Jimmy's part, he couldn't figure it out. Wayne Industries was even bigger than LexCorp had ever been. Yet Clark seemed to believe that the power Bruce Wayne had over Gotham – over the *country* – *wasn't* a bad thing. But Clark had been gunning for Lex Luthor from the moment he'd arrived at the Planet, well before the disgraced billionaire's criminal misdeeds had come to light.

"I still don't get what you see in Bruce Wayne," Jimmy admitted, shaking his head. "He's more influential than Luthor ever was."

"I know," Clark admitted with a bob of his head. "But let's just say that I can see the differences between Luthor and him. Bruce Wayne doesn't make my skin crawl the way Luthor always did."

"And it helps that he never hit on your wife either," Jimmy teased with a smirk.

Clark chuckled. "That does help. A little," he admitted. "But it's more than that. I can't really explain it."

"If you say so," Jimmy replied in concession, wondering what Clark knew that he didn't. He decided to let the subject drop. If Clark wanted to be all mysterious about things, let him. Then, suddenly, he came to one firm, major decision. "Hey...CK? Can we talk for a minute? In private?"

His friend nodded seriously. "Yeah, sure. Everything okay?"

Jimmy nodded in turn. "Yeah, everything's fine. I just..." He gestured vaguely, unwilling to divulge the secret he was carrying out in the heart of the newsroom.

Clark seemed to immediately understand. "The conference room?" he suggested.

"That'll work, yeah," Jimmy agreed. "Um, Lois? You better come too," he added after a moment as she

approached, two steaming mugs of coffee in her hands.

"Okay, but...what's up?" she asked, setting the mugs down – one on her desk, one on her husband's.

"Beats me," Clark replied, shrugging. "We were talking about Bruce Wayne and then Jimmy got all cagey," he teased, sticking his hands into his pockets like an innocent schoolboy.

"It's too important to talk about out here, that's all," he assured them. "Nothing bad, I promise."

Clark nodded in understanding, then he and Lois followed quietly as Jimmy cut a quick pace through the bullpen. Jimmy stood alongside the door as his friends filed in; Lois first with Clark a step behind her. Jimmy closed the door behind them, took a deep breath, and turned to face them.

"So...um...tonight's a big night," he offered after a moment.

Understatement of the century, his mind chided him, rolling its figurative eyes.

"The Kerths, yeah," Lois responded. "Clark and I are really pulling for you, Jimmy. If you take all three..."

"It'll be a Daily Planet record," Clark finished for her.

"Well...yeah," Jimmy stammered, toeing the floor a little. "And don't get me wrong, I'd love to take that record. But, um...that's *not* what I'm most excited about. There's something else. Something...bigger. I, uh...after the ceremony and the after party and everything...I'm going to ask Caitlin to marry me."

As he spoke the words, he produced a small ring box from his pants pocket and popped open the lid.

"I just picked it up from the jeweler this morning on my way in," he continued, holding the box out so they could peer at the ring nestled in the black velvet within.

"Jimmy, that's fantastic!" Clark exclaimed enthusiastically. Happiness and even a little pride sparkled in his eyes. "Congratulations!" He gave Jimmy a friendly hug and a gentle slap on the back.

"Thanks, CK. I can hardly wait for tonight," he said, feeling a huge rush of adrenaline coursing through his body. Saying the words out loud for the first time made it feel so much realer in his mind. The feeling was intoxicating.

"I'm so happy for you," Lois added, giving him a tight hug. She kissed his cheek for good measure. "Caitlin is a wonderful woman. Clark and I are just thrilled. You're so good for each other."

"Thanks," Jimmy repeated, feeling the heat of a blush beginning to burn his cheeks. "You think she'll like it?" he asked, nodding at the ring he held.

He was proud of the ring he'd chosen. The half-carat diamond in the center was nearly flawless, and the tiny emeralds flanking it on either side perfectly matched Caitlin's eyes. He could scarcely wait to see her reaction to it tonight.

"It's *gorgeous*, Jimmy," Lois told him. "She's going to love it."

Clark nodded in agreement. "It's beautiful. Nice choice. Specially made?" he guessed.

Jimmy shook his head. "No. I just got lucky. As soon as I saw it, I knew this was the one."

"Well, she'll have a hard time saying no to it," Lois

gently teased with a smile.

“Thanks. Uh...CK? I might be jumping the gun a bit here but...once she says yes... *if* she says yes...I want you to be my best man.” Jimmy gave him a hopeful smile as he closed the ring box and placed in back into his pocket.

Clark’s grin exploded onto his face. “Absolutely!”

Jimmy sighed with relief. “Okay then. I guess that’s that. All I have to do now is just get through the rest of this day.”

The cool night air felt good on Jimmy’s face as he stepped out of the theater where the Kerths had been presented. He’d done well. As he’d hoped, his photos chronicling Superman diverting the lava as the volcano raged behind him had won him his first award of the night. And his depressing, yet eye-opening expose on the life-stealing effects of the Metamide drug had earned him his second award. His Op-Ed against Wayne Industries had lost to a passionate piece calling for baby changing stations in men’s restrooms, so that dads could be equally comfortable and involved in their parenting duties. Jimmy thought the author definitely had made good points, but still felt that his article brought up more pressing concerns. Apparently, few enough people had agreed with him though. He wasn’t surprised. Bruce Wayne was Gotham’s Golden Boy and respected by people around the globe for his donations to charities, including the Superman Foundation.

As much as he didn’t really trust *any* billionaires in the wake of what he’d seen Lex Luthor do, Jimmy understood people’s reluctance to believe that all rich guys were evil – or at the very least able to be corrupted by the power of their wealth. Besides, two Kerths was still an incredible feat and he was feeling extremely proud of himself.

He made his way to his bike and gently wrapped the crystalline awards in some bubble wrap he’d stashed in his saddlebags just in case. Then he put them into the bags, nestling them against the bottom, and securely closed the bags up. He zipped his leather jacket up all the way to fight the gentle, but bracing, breeze, which would bite mercilessly into his skin once he got the bike up to speed. Then he tugged on his helmet, carefully making sure it was on properly before he even swung his leg over the bike’s seat. Once he was seated comfortably, he started the engine, backed out of his parking spot, and exited the lot, leaving behind the after-party being held in restaurant attached to the theater.

He felt the weight of the ring box pressed against his heart as the snug leather jacket hugged his chest. His pulse sky rocketed as a fresh wave of adrenaline zipped like liquid lightning through his body, from the tips of his toes to every last hair follicle on his head. He began to push the speed limit just a little bit, eager to see his fiancée-to-be. Even at that late hour, the traffic in Metropolis was substantial. Taxis bustled bar-hoppers and clubbers from place to place. Delivery trucks rumbled down the streets or pulled over in front of stores to unload their cargo. People rushed to get home to their families. Weekend visitors to the city flooded in to check into their hotels or to get their mini-vacations started.

Jimmy took a deep breath, inhaling the addicting energy

of the city he so proudly called home. The city was alive – a living, breathing entity that Jimmy was both inside of and a part of, like a blood cell circulating through a creature much bigger than himself. He felt electrified, every sense heightened to almost superhuman levels. The lights of the city – the reds, greens, and yellows of traffic lights, the multitude of neon signs on store fronts, the head and tail lights of the vehicles on the road – all seemed brighter, more vibrant than usual. The sounds were sharper, crisper, more well defined. The city’s myriad smells were more pronounced – for both good and bad. Jimmy had never felt so alive in all his years.

When he arrived at Metropolis General, Caitlin was waiting outside for him. He apologized for making her wait, but she just laughed and assured him that she’d only been outside for a couple of minutes, and that the cool night air was a welcome change from the neonatal ward. Before he could say more, she kissed him and asked him how the awards ceremony had gone. He hopped off his bike and showed her the Kerths he’d earned. Caitlin looped her arms around his neck and kissed him again, congratulating him without words. Then she swung her leg over the bike and settled in as Jimmy remounted the vehicle. He felt her arms tighten around his chest as he put the bike in gear and merged into the city’s incessant traffic.

Ten minutes later, they were back in front of the theater where the Kerths had been held. Couples lingered outside with cigarettes or drinks in hand, taking in the beautiful night. He even saw Lois and Clark chatting with Linda King just to the side of the doors. No one seemed in a rush to get home just yet. Jimmy could understand. The after-parties were always filled with great food, free flowing drinks, and overwhelmingly friendly comradery between reporters and photographers who, on a daily basis, were rivals trying to snag the exclusive before anyone else could arrive on the scene. Jimmy typically hated leaving the after-parties, always wishing the night didn’t have to end.

This year, his wish was based in a different need to live forever in the moment.

The light Jimmy was stopped at turned green. Jimmy nudged the bike forward, picking up speed as he entered the intersection and began his left turn. What happened next remained forever fractured in his mind; just a series of still images and disjointed feelings like puzzle pieces that refused to come together to form a bigger picture.

The squealing crunch of metal.

The blaring of what might have been several car horns.

Screams from the witnesses on the sidewalk – Kerth attendees in all likelihood.

Weightlessness as Jimmy was pitched violently through the air.

The excruciating impact as the asphalt rushed up to meet his rag-doll body.

The tearing sound his leather jacket made as it scraped the pavement while his body continued to skid forward, despite the fact that he’d made contact with the ground.

And then...blackness. All-encompassing blackness where the world completely faded away, leaving him in an endless void.

When the world came back into view, it was unfocused.

Images were blurry and the sounds were muted, as if trying to make it through a thick layer of cotton wool before they reached him. For several long, terrifying seconds, he couldn't make sense of what was happening. Then, piece by piece, his awareness sharpened, almost painfully so.

Clark was kneeling at his side, calling his name. Jimmy groaned and tried to sit up. Clark's hand gently pressed against his chest, urging him to stay still.

"Don't move," Clark told him. In the distance, sirens wailed.

"What happened?" Jimmy asked, the words dry as ash in his suddenly parched throat.

"You were in an accident," Clark replied somewhat cagily. "A truck driver sped through the red light and hit your bike, as well as three other cars. For a moment there..." He shook his head. "I was terrified that you might..." He couldn't seem to finish his thought. "I'm just glad you're here and talking to me," he finally finished. "You were unconscious for about five minutes."

Five minutes? It felt like an eternity.

"And Caitlin? Is she okay?" Jimmy asked, defiantly pushing Clark's hand away. With a Herculean effort that made black spots appear before his eyes and his entire body scream with pain, Jimmy forced himself into a sitting position.

"Jimmy..." There was a subtle warning tone in Clark's voice. "You might be hurt. You shouldn't move until the paramedics arrive and check you over."

As he said this, he almost imperceptibly slid his glasses down his nose for a heartbeat or two, before he pushed them back into place. What seemed like a small sigh made Clark's chest heave slightly, and some of the worry lines in his face relaxed, almost as though he'd reassured himself of something.

"I don't care if I'm hurt!" Jimmy exclaimed, trying to find the strength to rise to his feet, but failing miserably. His left leg felt as though it was on fire even when perfectly still, let alone when he attempted to move it. He let out a hiss of pain through his clenched teeth.

"I think your leg might be broken," Clark murmured, gesturing to the leg in question. "I'm no doctor, but it doesn't look quite right to me. Just stay put, okay?"

The wail of sirens seemed much closer now. Reluctantly, Jimmy nodded his agreement.

"Just...tell me, CK. Is Caitlin okay? I don't care about me. I need to know if she's okay."

Clark's features fell as a somber, agonized look crossed his face. He shook his head so slightly that the movement would have been easy to miss if Jimmy hadn't been looking for it. "I'm sorry, Jimmy."

"She's..." Jimmy swallowed, hard, feeling the cactus-like prickles of his throat's dryness poking his esophagus. Tears stung his eyes and he blinked rapidly. "Dead?" he managed to squeak out.

"I tried, Jimmy. I was right there. I saw it all unfold. But I wasn't able to act quickly enough. There was nothing I could do." Clark's own tears were evident in his cracking voice, even if they didn't glisten in his eyes.

"I...I..." His brain was too sluggish to form coherent thoughts. He almost shook his head, but thought better of it.

If the crash has done anything to his skull...

"I need to see her," he finally managed.

Clark shook his head. "I don't think that's a good idea, Jimmy."

He realized Clark had deliberately placed himself to shield Caitlin's body from his view. He tried to crane his neck enough to see around Clark, but the effort made his vision swirl nauseatingly.

"Please?" he whispered.

For a moment, Clark looked indecisive. Then, after a lifetime, he nodded once and scooted sideways, just enough for Jimmy to see. Jimmy nearly vomited when he beheld the scene. Caitlin was trapped under the wheel of the box truck who'd hit them, her mouth open slack in unmoving surprise, her eyes staring up at the sky, glazed and lifeless. Blood glistened at the corners of her mouth and on the street underneath her. Somewhere in his molasses-like mind, Jimmy knew death had been instant for her, and some small speck of his brain was thankful that she hadn't suffered. At least, he hoped he was right.

"I'll kill the man who did this!" Jimmy swore, grinding his teeth against the primal scream that wanted to tear his throat apart.

"Jimmy." Clark's voice was soothing as he slid back into place to once again hide the carnage from his friend's sight. "It was an accident."

"Easy for *you* to say!" Jimmy spat, anger replacing the numbness that had suffused his bones only a moment before. "You get to go home to your wife and kids after this! I was supposed to be getting engaged tonight. Not...not... *this*. Not...losing her."

"I know." Sympathy rang in Clark's voice. "I know." He leaned forward to hug Jimmy.

Jimmy melted into the other man's embrace, soaking up the comfort offered. His tears finally began to fall. "What... what happened?"

"The driver said he was drowsy," Clark explained, as the first ambulance arrived on the scene. "He said he was behind schedule and that he started to nod off inadvertently. When he heard the horns honking at him, he snapped to and jammed on his brakes, but he wasn't quick enough." His spoke low and softly, as though every word hurt him to say.

"Is that supposed to excuse him?" Jimmy snarled, glaring in the direction of the very shaken looking truck driver.

"No," Clark replied solemnly.

"This was supposed to be the best night of my life!" Jimmy exploded, violence in his voice that slowly gave way to his grief. A sob welled up in his throat. "I was supposed to pledge my life to her. Now..." He couldn't finish as the sob forced its way out of his chest and into the open air.

"I know." It was a simple statement, but it spoke volumes to Jimmy. Clark couldn't make sense of the situation any more than Jimmy could.

The EMTs were swarming the scene now. A team made a beeline for Caitlin, but they appeared to already know she was dead. They checked her with care, but there was a distinct lack of urgency in the way they tended to her. Another team began checking over the truck driver. Still more directed their attention to the people in the cars who'd

also been hit by the truck. Two men approached Jimmy, and Clark silently moved out of the way, just enough to let them do their jobs. But he didn't stray far from Jimmy, and Jimmy was grateful for that mute show of support.

Time blurred. Everything felt like it was moving in slow motion, yet when he thought back on it later, the events of the night seemed speeded up somehow, like a movie being played at five or ten times its normal speed. As with the accident itself, certain images stayed sharp, but the rest of the night streaked together like paint smeared on a canvas by a toddler. He knew he was checked over by the paramedics right there in the street. He remembered being hoisted onto a gurney and whisked away to the hospital – to Metropolis General, the last place he wanted to be with its reminders of Caitlin stinging his brain. He was aware of a flurry of activity once he arrived in the ER. Then nothingness as he was sedated for surgery.

When he awoke the next morning, the mocking sun was bright and shining outside his room's windows, oblivious to the dark agony of his soul.

Clark was there, intently reading the Daily Planet in a visitor's chair opposite the foot of the bed. He must have heard Jimmy moving in the bed. He snapped to attention immediately, folding the newspaper with practiced grace and setting it down on the floor beside him.

"Hey," he said quietly. "How're you feeling?"

Jimmy considered this for a few seconds. His eyes settled on the IV lines in his arm and at the bags hanging from the nearby metal pole. He had no physical discomfort. There must have been a strong painkiller in one of those plastic bags.

"Like my heart's been ripped to shreds," he finally answered. He sighed heavily. Everything had happened so quickly the night before that he hadn't had a chance to fully process what had happened. He hadn't begun to sort through his emotions. "I just can't...it seems so unreal. I can't believe she's really gone."

Clark nodded thoughtfully, but said nothing, perhaps sensing that Jimmy didn't need him to say a word right now.

"I keep wondering...why? Why'd Caitlin have to die? Why didn't I? How did I get 'lucky' enough," he spat out the words with venom, "to live and not her?" He shook his head. "It should have been me, CK. If it had to be one of us, it should have been me. Caitlin was so smart and funny and wonderful and..." His voice hitched as his tears flowed. "She had so much to offer this world."

"So do you, Jimmy," Clark gently reminded him, his voice a soft whisper.

"What, because I won a couple of stupid glass trophies?" He had no energy to put fire into the words. He was hollow inside. Broken. A dark abyss.

"Jimmy, you are a great guy. A dedicated photographer. A budding reporter who, for one of his first assignments shed light on the Metamide travesty. Which, might I remind you, resulted in thousands of donations to the families dealing with the long-term care for those poor kids. You've *always* been instrumental in helping everyone at the paper find leads on their stories; not just Lois and me." Clark stood and crossed to the chair that was just to the side of the

bed, at Jimmy's left side. "You're my best friend."

"But Caitlin..." Jimmy started to protest, but the boulder of grief on his chest made it hard to breathe, hard to talk, hard to think. "Oh God, CK. I miss her so much."

"I know," Clark responded, taking Jimmy's hand in a show of support. "I know."

"How do I go on from here? I never wanted to live my life without her."

"I wish I had the right words to say," Clark said in a quiet tone. "I wish I could take away your pain. Or go back in time and fix things. But I can't. All I can promise is that I'm here for you. No matter what you need. Lois too. We're going to help you get through this, one day at a time."

"Thanks, CK." Jimmy managed a half-hearted smile. It was nice to know that he had such wonderful friends, but the idea of somehow surviving the devastation to his heart seemed too unattainable a thing.

And then, before he could stop it, the dam inside of Jimmy broke. A wail of loss, hopelessness, and agony tore out of his chest. He screamed as he felt his heart shatter anew, every last shard too microscopic to ever have hope of being reassembled someday. He howled and let the world know that his physical wounds meant nothing compared to the internal injuries he'd sustained. He didn't care who heard him, who knew that he was the broken, empty husk of the person he'd once been. He hurt so much that he had no name for the deep level of despair he felt. He had no words to describe how much he was suffering in his heartbreak.

He felt dead inside, if the dead could experience the anguish of loss.

Clark said nothing; didn't try to stop him from making a scene. He simply squeezed Jimmy's hand in silence, letting his friend cry out to the heavens for as long as he needed.

When Jimmy had no more breath, when he felt as though he'd stripped all the flesh off the back of his throat with his harsh cries, when he felt too exhausted to even shed another tear, he sank back into his pillows in a brooding silence. His outburst hadn't done anything to ease his pain, but at the same time it felt cathartic to get it out of his system.

He felt drained. Physically. Emotionally. Spiritually.

"It's not fair," he finally whimpered, every word an effort now that he felt so tired. "It's just not fair. All I've ever wanted is what you and Lois have. Someone to spend my life with that I love beyond measure. And I had that with Caitlin. I should be planning our wedding right now. Not preparing for her funeral. It feels like...like all the happiness I experienced with her was an illusion. Borrowed in a way. I never stopped to think about it...if it would ever end. I...I took it for granted, that I would always have her."

"You love her," Clark said delicately. "You gave her as much happiness as she gave you. It wasn't borrowed happiness, Jimmy. It was real and enduring and still there inside you. Because of that, she'll always be with you in spirit. And I know that, right now, that seems like a stupid platitude at the best or mockingly cruel at the worst. But it's the truth. The happiness you gave each other is a precious gift. People say that time heals all wounds."

He shook his head and shifted in his seat. "I don't think

that's true. Yes, the distance that time provides can help ease the pain we feel. But it's the love and the memories that truly make the ache recede."

Jimmy shook his head in turn. "It doesn't *feel* like the pain will ever subside."

Clark's head dipped in one single movement of agreement. "I know. But it will. I promise."

Maybe Clark was right. Maybe given enough time, the sadness and the emptiness inside would fade. But for now, Jimmy would let the despondency from his loss bathe him in its icy darkness. And when he passed through that trial by frozen fire, he vowed that he would come out stronger, and honor Caitlin's memory by living his life in such a way as to make her proud. He was just glad he had his friends to help him get there.

THE END