

Global Heartwarming

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: Sequel to the author's "She's." Clark doesn't know how to live in a world without Lois Lane until he meets a woman who has suffered her own devastating loss. Together, she and Clark grieve for their loved ones and grow closer along their journey to find healing.

Story Size: 92,700 words (505Kb as text)

Read the earlier story: "[She's](#)."

Author's Notes

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.

My sincere thanks to Brianna Edgeworth for her hard work in editing this monster.

From the author's *She's* :
He couldn't cry, either. His heart was locked in deep glacial ice. He'd not only frozen Lois that day, but he'd placed himself in a life-long deep freeze.

He'd never see Lois again.

In the midst of winter, I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer.

Albert Camus, "Return to Tipasa," © 1952

This is a story about recovering from the sudden death of a loved one. Some of the descriptions of grief and recovery are from my clinical research and some are from my own personal experience. No one dies in this story, but you will read about people who are dealing with that sudden death and moving on – or maybe not moving on – in life after that terrible loss. It's also about other people meddling in the lives of those riven from their loved ones with the finest of motives.

To get the full background, I strongly suggest reading my one-chapter story *She's* – the prequel, I suppose, although it wasn't intended to be that – either on the message boards or the archive. It would also be a good idea to read the feedback it generated. Some of it was *quite* opinionated and strongly-worded.

She's was a pushback of sorts on the ending of the season 2 finale "And The Answer Is..." (often abbreviated ATAI). I have always understood from a dramatic POV why the show went in that direction, plus the weight of the legacy of the comics where Superman regularly rescued Lois from certain death situations (and occasionally from

actual death) pushing the concept, but I really didn't like how they handled it so carelessly. I'm hardly the only one who believes it was both reckless and irresponsible for Superman to freeze Lois into a state of suspended animation.

There were, and still are, any number of different possible narrative courses to follow – some of which have been explained quite well by other authors – and the freezing idea was an exceptionally dangerous option, so the final resolution seemed to come too easily. To me, the ending lacked dramatic tension, although I know it was meant to be a romantic adventure show that happened to include a superhero. Still, I didn't think then (and don't think now) that it was the best path to take. So in my tale *She's*, I let Lois bite the dust.

If you're willing to do some archive or message board research, there were at least two follow-up stories by other authors which built on the ending to mine. If you find them, you may judge whether or not the direction of either tale was a logical continuation.

You might notice that *She's* was posted in 2006. Yes, that's a pretty long time to wait for a sequel, but I actually started making notes about this tale in early 2007, did some preliminary chapter drafts in 2014, and it's taken me this long to put it all together in a semi-coherent narrative. Because of the intensity of some of the feedback on *She's* and the general drift toward highly romanticized stories being posted on the boards, I was hesitant to continue *Heartwarming* until mid-2019. Recent reminders of my own pending mortality (pushed back a good bit, I believe, by a very successful liver transplant in April of 2019 – yay for my outstanding surgeons and after-care team!) provided some of the impetus.

This may be the most emotion-centered L&C story I've written to date. The convention among publishers of books written and printed to generate profit is that the A-plot is the central dramatic sequence of the narrative, while the B-plot is the sub-plot. In a romance novel, for example, that means that the love story is always – *always* – the A-plot: the hero (or heroine) gets together with his/her main love interest, and any action that takes place along the way is the B-plot. Among this fandom, though, the A-plot is the action plot (for alliteration, I guess) and the B-plot is the romantic story. Going by our site's conventions, this tale is just about all B-plot. Any A-plot the reader may find snuck in while I was looking the other way.

If you can stomach a tender story about Clark grieving for Lois, learning to live without her without forgetting her, and slowly building a relationship with another woman who has suffered her own devastating loss, please dive in. And bring tissues.

Prologue

Clark stuck his head in Perry's office. "Chief, I know it's just three o'clock, but—"

"I know, son," Perry answered gently. "You have an appointment you have to keep. Go keep it."

Clark nodded and withdrew without speaking again. Perry sighed and picked up the phone.

"Metro Police, Ninth Precinct, Sergeant Bale speaking.

How may I direct your call?"

"Inspector William Henderson, please."

"May I say who's calling, sir?"

"This is Perry White of the Daily Planet."

"Ah, yes, sir, Mr. White. If the Inspector is available, I'll connect you at once."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

"One moment, please."

Perry leaned back in his chair, then pulled the handset away and stared at it. The hold music was Kenny G's soprano clarinet playing his pretty but seriously over-exposed big pop hit "Songbird." They ought to use Elvis' stuff, Perry grumbled silently.

The line went silent for a brief moment, then he heard, "Bill Henderson. What can I do for you, Perry?"

Perry sighed. "I have a problem you may be able to help me with."

"A legal problem?"

"No, a people problem."

"Huh. I've never thought of myself as much of a people person."

"Maybe not, but I think you can help me with this situation."

"Okay, shoot. What's the problem?"

"Clark Kent."

Bill went silent for a long moment, then said, "Yeah, Perry, that is a problem. But I don't know what I can do about it."

"He's headed to the cemetery to visit Lois."

"That's not a surprise. You told me he goes at least once a week."

"He does, but rarely on Friday afternoon. And it's been right at a year."

"Oh." Bill paused. "I see what you mean." He paused again, then said, "I sympathize, Perry, but I still don't know how I can help."

"I have an idea that might work. I want someone to go out there and make sure he doesn't do anything – permanent to himself."

"Okay. You've got lots of people there. Why call me?"

"Because Clark already knows most of the folks in this building, and none of them have any legal authority to prevent him from being really stupid today. Or any day, for that matter."

"Ah, I understand now. Let me think – yes, I believe I have the ideal person to send on this little errand. Is he headed for the cemetery now?"

"Yes. He's probably on foot, so whoever you're thinking about has some time to get there."

"No promises, but I'll see what I can do. Thanks for calling, Perry. Kent's one of the good ones."

"No, thank you, Bill. I want to keep that young man around for a long time if I can. He's going to be a great reporter again if he can pull out of this funk he's in. Bye."

Perry put the handset back in the cradle before that sappy soprano clarinet, or something even sappier, filled his ear once more. Maybe he'd suggest to Bill that the department put their radio calls on the hold sound instead of boring music. He could get some good leads that way – but no, it'd just scare the daylight out of the public if they

heard what cops go through on a daily basis.

He picked up the story he was editing. Drat. If Clark were actually present and not just going through the motions, he'd get him to teach a quick course on how to structure a newspaper story. Some of these kids either had never learned how to do it or thought it really didn't matter.

Bill punched a button on his desk phone and dialed the front desk. "Bale? See if you can find Detective Tracey. I need a minute of her time. No, send her to me, and if you can't find her call me back. Right."

He hung up the phone and went back to the monthly overtime summary. Nuts. They were already pushing the monthly allotment, and it was just the twelfth of the month. His detectives wouldn't like it – for that matter, he didn't like it – but they'd have to do more in less time for a few weeks.

Someone knocked on his door. "Come in," he called.

Detective Tracey stepped in. "You wanted to see me, Inspector?"

He gestured to the chair in front of his desk and thought about his approach to this interview. After a moment, he decided to be blunt and direct.

"Detective, I have a special assignment for you. There's a man headed for the Metro Memorial Cemetery to visit a grave and maybe do something stupid and permanent to himself. I want you to make sure he doesn't."

The detective squinted at Bill and said, "Why? Maybe he's got the right idea. For himself, anyway."

"Doesn't matter. Your job is to keep him from knocking himself off. Do your best."

"Then what?"

"Use your own judgement."

The detective sighed deeply. "Do I get any background on this guy or do I just accost every man I see beside a grave?"

"Don't run your mouth at me, Detective. The subject's name is Clark Kent. He's a shade over six feet tall, dark hair and wears glasses, weighs about two hundred pounds, mid-to-late twenties. He's a reporter for the Daily Planet. He was half of the Lane and Kent team up until a year ago when his partner died. He's been ineffective since then, and everyone from his coworkers to his friends to his parents is worried about him. He's barely keeping his head above water at work. You'll probably find him at Lois Lane's grave. Keep him alive."

The detective's mouth fell open, then she leaned forward and glared at him. "That's the assignment? That's all of it? Don't let some idiot reporter kill himself? Boss, you've got to be kidding! I don't think this is a legit use of my time!"

Bill's voice sharpened. "That's the job, Detective! You don't want to do it, you can go back to uniformed foot patrol any time!"

"But—"

"Uniforms, patrol cars, lots of standing around doing crowd control. You'd love it."

The detective bit her lower lip, then licked both lips and swallowed. "Fine. I just hope this doofus appreciates the misallocation of the city's finances and the department's

manpower.”

Bill glared back at her and pointed to the door. She huffed, then stood and marched out. The door didn't quite slam when she yanked it shut.

Bill sighed. Sending a woman whose partner had been killed in front of her to rescue a man whose partner had all but died in his arms might have been his most brilliant idea ever.

And he might have just set up a double suicide. It was definitely a risk, one he wasn't sure he'd take for anyone besides Perry White. Meddling in the lives of others was a lot like watching a Time Lord regenerate.

You never really knew just what you were going to get.

Chapter One

Clark left work early that Friday afternoon in April with a definite destination in mind. He had an appointment he needed to keep.

He walked into the cemetery and slowed. The sun shone brightly, birds sang, a few fluffy clouds scudded through the sky, but he saw none of it.

A full year had passed with no Lois in his life.

The pain was part of him, assaulting him whether awake or asleep. It still tore at him, still ripped at him, still savaged him, still punished him in his dreams on the rare occasions he slept.

There was still an immense vacuum in his heart and in his soul, a Lois-shaped gap in his life that no one could ever fill except her.

Lois couldn't fill it because she was dead.

And she was dead because of him.

Because of Superman. Because Clark could never escape the hero.

The ice fortress around his heart remained intact, impenetrable, unyielding to the most heartfelt entreaty, with no gaps or weaknesses anywhere. The gate was drawn and barred, the drawbridge secured to the wall. There was no longer any key to permit entry to that fortress, not for his parents or his friends or any stranger. Lois had taken both that key and the path to his heart to her grave.

He knew no peace, either waking or sleeping. And sleep was now a stranger to him.

He put his right knee down beside the tombstone and stared at it as the mid-afternoon sunlight filtered through the trees. The peaceful setting belied the turmoil in his heart. The epitaph glared back at him silently, accusing him, condemning him.

And he had no defense, no excuse.

Despite his parents' insistence that he'd eventually heal enough to function on a day-to-day basis, despite Perry's counsel that the paper needed him, despite the ongoing efforts of both Lucy and Ellen Lane to include him in their family dynamic, despite Jimmy's continued assertions that his friends needed him, despite Dr. Lisa Friskin's months of therapy and friendship, despite the certain knowledge that as Superman he could make a difference in people's lives, Clark's agony overwhelmed all of that. He hadn't healed. He hadn't even begun to heal. And he'd just about decided that, since he couldn't go on without Lois, the best thing for him to do would be to end it all somehow.

The pain was simply too much.

But *how* to end it all? The surest plan he could come up with, to take some Kryptonite from Star Labs and land on the far side of the Moon and open the lead box, had the twin flaws that no one would know what had happened to him unless he left a note of some kind, nor would there be a body to bury and to mourn, either as Clark or as Superman. And he knew from experience that people dealt with the loss of a loved one marginally better if there was a body on which to focus everyone's grief. Above that, he still didn't want to subject his parents to any criminal's revenge against Superman's adopted parents. If he could leave a body for them to see and to mourn, it might make things slightly easier for everyone he left behind.

So maybe some other way would be better. Maybe Kryptonite and some kind of poison, or Kryptonite and a bullet, or Kryptonite and a jump off the tallest point on Hob's Bay Bridge, or Kryptonite by itself. But today should be the day. He'd focus his considerable ingenuity on the problem and—

“Hey, you!”

The abrupt shove to his right shoulder surprised him and knocked him off balance. He went to both knees, then stopped himself from falling with his left hand. He looked up at his attacker.

She was nearly as tall as he, slender but sufficiently muscular to ward off any unwanted advances, with shoulder-length honey-blonde hair pulled back in a rough ponytail, cut in a utilitarian style rather than something that would enhance her facial features. Those features, which in another situation might have been called attractive or even pretty, were twisted into an irritated frown. She stood in a ready stance, her right foot behind her left, with her hands away from her body to either side.

Clark stood and brushed the wet leaves off his knees, then wiped his damp hand on his windbreaker. “Do you make a habit of mugging people in cemeteries?”

The woman glared back. “Your name Clark Kent?”

“Not that it's any business of yours, but yes, it is. Who wants to know?”

“Bill Henderson sent me.”

He lifted a tired eyebrow. “Bill sent you out here to push me down on the grass?”

“No, you dumb-butt. I'm supposed to make sure you don't do anything stupid.”

“Like what?”

“Like try to kill yourself.”

Both of Clark's eyebrows rose. “What?”

She sighed wearily. “Look, Kent, my boss tells me you haven't been yourself since Lois Lane died. He also said I'd probably find you here, maybe planning to do something very stupid and very permanent to yourself, and he also said that he'd personally hang me up by my thumbs and skin me alive if I let you whack yourself today.”

“And just how do you intend to accomplish that feat?”

She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a wallet, then flipped it open for Clark to see the shield inside. “Roberta Tracey, Detective Second Class, MPD. The people I like call me Bobbie. You can call me Detective Tracey. And no, I don't have any relatives named Richard

or Dick or Spencer, so don't ask. It hasn't been funny for a lot of years. And my last name's spelled different, anyway, with an 'e.'"

Clark felt his face loosen despite his normal mood. "How do you know Bill?"

"Been working for him for about eight months now. Heard a lot of stories about Lane and Kent and how good you two were. I don't know why, but Bill don't wanna lose you." She flipped the wallet shut and returned it to her pocket. "Frankly, if you really wanna whack yourself, I don't much care, but Bill does, and he's my boss. So I'm out here in the middle of a nice Friday afternoon trying to make sure you don't get stupid and lucky at the same time and manage to take yourself out."

Clark blinked twice. He stared at the tall young woman, who wasn't intimidated in the least. He put his hands on his hips and demanded, "What gives you the right to interfere in my life?"

Her eyes flashed and she took one step closer. "You really want to know?"

"Yes!"

She looked him up and down as if measuring him for a new suit. "You strong enough to know?"

"Strong enough?" What difference did—

The detective suddenly spun on one heel and began marching away without looking back. He hesitated a moment, then decided to follow.

She strode halfway across the cemetery, then stopped abruptly before a headstone decorated with police department markings. She shoved her hands in her jacket pockets and froze in place.

Clark slowly moved beside her and read the stone. "Glen LeCour, born February of 1965, died – almost nine months ago." He turned to her and almost whispered, "How well did you know him?"

Her lips barely moved. "He was my – my partner."

Partner. The torment brought on by the death of a partner he could easily comprehend. Quietly, he asked, "What happened?"

Her iron control almost slipped as a shudder passed over her face. Then she steadied herself with an uneven sigh and told him.

"I was in my third year with the force, doing uniform car patrols. Glen and I made a routine traffic stop, nothing special, just some guy in an old beat-up station wagon who went through a light just after it turned red. Glen was driving. He got out and approached the vehicle. I got out to back him up, but my equipment belt got tangled up with the seat belt. I called out to him to tell him I was stuck, and when he turned to look at me some punk in the back seat of the station wagon leaned out the window and – and shot him in the back at point-blank range with a double-barreled sawed-off twelve-gauge shotgun."

She stopped and took a ragged breath, then regained control. "I don't really remember what happened next, I only know what the video camera in the car captured. The guy fired the second barrel at me but I dove to the side and he wiped out the windshield and grill of the patrol car instead. I drew my weapon and fired at the car as the driver floored it, and I must have hit a front tire or the steering

linkage or something, I never found out what, because the car suddenly veered off the road and slammed into the ditch. I cuffed the driver and the two passengers as I was calling for backup and relaying an 'officer down' message to the dispatcher." She closed her eyes and turned her head away from Clark's line of vision. "But it was too little, too late. Glen died at the scene."

Clark didn't know what else to say, so he fell back on the trite "I'm sorry."

Bobbie sniffed and wiped her nose on her sleeve. "Glen's parents moved to the US from France to make a better life for their kids. Glen was the youngest of seven, born right here in Metropolis. Graduated second in his class at the Academy, spent seven years on the force and never had a complaint from his supervisors or from the public. He spoke fluent French, a lot of German and some Spanish, had his pre-law degree and was a year away from graduating from law school. He was in line to move to the academy as an instructor. And he – he'd asked me to marry him the week before."

Clark hesitated, then touched her sleeve. "What did you say to him?"

She flinched at the contact, then locked herself still. "I said – I told him I needed to think about it. I wanted to say yes, I wanted to marry him, I wanted to be his wife, but he was just so – so very alive, and strong, and he said he loved me so much and he – he—"

"You didn't want to risk it."

"What?"

"You didn't want to risk losing yourself in him."

"How do you know that?" she snapped.

He sighed. "I know."

"Good for you." Her eyes flashed. "So. There it is."

"Huh? There what is?"

She jerked away from him and took a step back. "You wanted to know what gives me the right to interfere with your death? That's it."

"I said 'my life,' not my death."

"You meant your death! Glen gives me the right!" She stepped closer and poked him in the chest with a stiffened index finger. "I know you a lot better than you think I do, Kent! I know what's going on in your twisted little mind! You think you've suffered more than any other person on the planet ever has! I know you think you'll be better off dead, and that everyone around you will get over losing you before the next hard rain!"

She stopped for a moment and seemed to deflate a little, but she found a burst of energy from somewhere and started up again. "Maybe you're right, maybe you're just a waste of oxygen and hair gel. But you haven't suffered more than anyone else in the history of the world! You think that and you're a self-centered idiot! And I swear to you, buster, if you try to kill yourself today, I'll be there to stop it, and then I'll hang around and torture you and make you wish you really were dead! So don't you dare try anything stupid! You hear me?"

Momentarily overwhelmed by Detective Roberta Tracey's vehement avowal of purpose, Clark took a step back and lifted his hands in surrender. "Okay, you win. I won't kill myself today."

“Good.” She started to turn away, then stopped. “What about tomorrow?”

His mouth twitched. “You don’t give up easily, do you?”

She looked directly into his eyes. “No. I don’t. What about tomorrow?”

Clark shook his head. “I won’t kill myself tomorrow either, Detective.”

“Good.” She turned and took two steps, then stopped. “Then I’ll see you here tomorrow morning. Nine-thirty. Don’t be late.”

Then she stalked away. And he still had no idea whether or not she had a nice smile. Or any kind of a smile at all. She hadn’t lost her angry face the entire time she’d been there.

Despite his own pain, despite his proximity to the best reminders of his own mortality, he chuckled ruefully to himself.

Well, Lois, he thought, there’s always next weekend. The world’s supply of Kryptonite won’t evaporate before then.

At nine-twenty-eight the next morning, Clark stepped out of the cab and paid the driver. He looked towards Lois’ grave, paused for a moment, then glanced towards Glen LeCour’s grave and decided Detective Tracey had meant for him to meet her there.

As he approached LeCour’s marker, he saw the detective kneeling at the foot of the grassy mound with one hand resting against the neatly mowed lawn. He slowed his approach and didn’t call out.

She must have heard him coming. Her hand fell to her side and she rose effortlessly to her feet. “Hey, Kent.”

“Morning. Uh, do you still want me to call you Detective Tracey, or Roberta, or what?”

She shook her head slightly. “Bobbie is fine.”

He nodded. “Okay, Bobbie, what do we do now?”

She sighed deeply. “What, you and me?”

“Well, yes, since there’s no one else here.”

She pointed weakly towards the grave. “What about Glen?”

His voice softened. “He’s not here, Bobbie. He’s gone.”

She nodded back. “Yeah. Just like Lois is gone.”

Clark started. Anyone else who might have said that to him surely would have received either a sub-Arctic shoulder or a volcanic eruption. But Bobbie knew. She understood. She realized just what he was going through, because she was going through the same kind of thing.

So, after a long moment, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Yes. Just like Lois.”

She nodded again. “Yeah.”

He waited a long moment, then said, “I guess I’ll leave you alone so you can finish.”

Bobbie stepped back and turned to face him. “No need. I’m done.”

“Okay.” He hesitated, and then, for reasons he could never explain, even to himself, he asked her, “Why don’t we go get some coffee? You can tell me a little about Glen and I’ll tell you a little about Lois.”

She canted her head at him and frowned for a moment, and he was sure she was about to decline when she said,

“Okay. Coffee sounds good. It’s a little nippy this morning.”

They walked toward a Starways coffee shop around the corner from the cemetery. “So, Bobbie, how long have you wanted to be a police officer?”

She kept her eyes aimed forward. “Thought we were gonna talk about the ones who left us behind.”

“I don’t think they’re going anywhere.”

“I think they’d be a much safer subject.”

He shrugged. “We can talk about them, too, if you want.”

She gave him a sidelong glance accompanied by an Elvis sneer, but after a moment she answered his question. “I’ve wanted to be a police officer since the spring I was sixteen. My mom and I were on vacation in California and a cop stopped a bunch of us kids late one night while we were joyriding on the beach in Malibu. Instead of arresting us or giving us tickets, he took the time to call each of our parents and wait with us while they came to get us. While we were waiting, he lectured us about having goals in life, about not wasting our youth, about not ignoring our opportunities, stuff like that. I don’t know if any of the others listened, but I did.”

He nodded and opened the door for her. “Why the police? Why not social work or medicine or something like that?”

She stared at the open door and snapped, “Are you working on a merit badge or something, Kent?”

“What?”

“You’re holding the door open for me.”

He clamped down on his irritation and nodded. “Yes, I am. I also help old ladies across the street and rescue kittens from trees.”

She huffed and stepped through the door. “Why? Not the old ladies, the kittens. You ever see a cat skeleton in a tree?”

He frowned as he followed her to the bar. “No, I can’t say that I have.”

“See? They don’t need to be rescued. They’ll come down when they’re good and ready.” She leaned over the bar. “Cappuccino, regular.”

The perky little barista wearing a nametag that read “Kendra” nodded, then smiled brightly at Clark. “And for you, sir?”

“Large coffee, three sugars, one cream.”

“Right away!” she bubbled. In moments their cups sat on the counter before them. “That’ll be five-sixty-eight, please.”

Clark reached for his wallet, but Bobbie beat him to it. She threw down a five and a one. “Keep the change, sweetheart.”

The barista’s smile turned brittle for a moment before she recovered and nodded brightly. “Thank you, ma’am! Enjoy your beverages.”

Clark turned and spotted an empty booth at the end of a row. “That one okay?”

Bobbie shrugged. “Sure. Any port in a storm.”

As they slid into opposite sides of the booth, Clark said, “But they have to watch out for raptors.”

She turned a puzzled face to him. “*Non sequitur* much?”

“The kittens.” She shook her head and he continued. “We were talking about rescuing kittens from tress.”

“Oh. Yeah, right.”

Clark sipped his coffee. “If a kitten gets stuck in a tree, sometimes it falls while trying to get down, and sometimes a crow or a hawk will snatch it for dinner.”

Bobbie shook her head again and almost smiled. “They’re just kittens, Kent.”

“Yes, but someone will miss them. If not a human owner, then the mother will miss them. They leave a little kitten-shaped hole in the world if they die.”

Her face smoothed over. “Everything and everyone dies eventually. You can’t save everyone.”

He sighed. “I know. But maybe – just maybe – I can save enough so that it makes a difference.” He took another slurp. “At least, that’s what Lois used to tell me.”

Bobbie nodded. “Sounds like she was a smart lady.”

“Yes,” he breathed, “she was pretty smart.”

“Uh-huh. And how many kittens will you be able to save if you whack yourself?”

He stopped suddenly and stared at her. She didn’t flinch, didn’t break eye contact. Her effrontery stunned him to silence and made him think hard about his pending decision to end his own life.

How many kittens, indeed?

He pushed his indignation aside and managed to ask, “What about you? Do you save kittens, too?”

She blinked first. “Me? No. I just watch out for stupid people.”

He sat back and wondered if he should be offended. “You mean, like me?”

“No, Kent, not like you. Like people who walk around Suicide Slum with twenty-dollar bills hanging out of their pockets and who get angry at me when I take the report on how they got mugged. Or people who drive too fast and get into altercations with other drivers or the police officers who stop them and who blame me when I do the post-arrest interview. Or the angry parents of kids who get caught vandalizing storefronts and who blame everyone but the kids who did the graffiti, or shop owners who blame the police because someone robbed them in broad daylight, or the occasional homicide victim’s family and friends who just know deep down in their hearts that we’re covering up for the real killer.” She stopped and drank half her cappuccino in one guzzle. “That’s who I’m talking about.”

“I see. So, what do you do in your off time?”

She frowned at him. “Look, I’m here with you right now to keep you from killing yourself. Don’t think I’m going to take the place of your late lady fair.”

Late lady fair? That was a low blow, he rumbled to himself. He leaned closer and lowered the pitch of his voice but increased the intensity. “I’m not asking you to do anything. This meeting was your idea, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. I also remember where I found you yesterday, mooning over a marble marker and wishing you were under it.”

His eyes narrowed and his hackles rose. “I’d trade places with Lois if I could, yes. It’s the least I could do.”

“No it isn’t. The least you could do would be to do your job and live for her memory. From what I hear, you’re not exactly working yourself to death, which at least would be original in the suicide department.”

Now he was offended good and proper, as the Brits say. “Fine. You do your job and go arrest somebody. I’ll do mine and go find some news to report. You want to come along, then come, or stay here and mope in your coffee or jump in front of a fast bus or stick your head in the oven and turn on the gas. I don’t care.” He stood and snarled one last verbal spear. “And you couldn’t replace Lois Lane in my life if there were a thousand of you.”

He ignored the furtive stares from the other patrons and the staff as he banged out the door muttering incoherently to himself. He didn’t have a destination in mind, he just knew he wanted to get away from her quick anger and her casual dismissal of him and her snide references to Lois. How dare she speak of Lois in that way? How dare she dismiss his pain so easily? How dare she suggest that he might still have a life ahead of him?

“Kent! Hey, Kent, wait up!”

He ignored the shouts behind him and kept walking, but she ran to catch up. “Hey! Wait a minute!”

“Go away.”

“Come on, Kent, give me a break!”

“No. You’re not worth it.”

The barb had come out of his mouth before he’d realized what he was saying. She quit walking and almost froze to the concrete as Clark took two more hesitant steps. He stopped and turned to face her. “Bobbie, I – aw, nuts! I – I’m sorry. I didn’t mean what I said. I was just angry.”

She didn’t respond. He took a step towards her. “Please. I’m really sorry. I wasn’t thinking when I said that.”

Her chin quivered and a tear gathered in the corner of her eye, but she kept her voice level. “I know. I know because – because that’s why I said what I said to you. About Lois. And I – I’m sorry, too.”

He could feel her pain. He could almost see the waves of loneliness and loss radiating from her and intermingling with his own. The interference pattern was almost visible to his Kryptonian eyes, and he felt her hurt along with his.

He reached out and tugged gently at her sleeve. “Come on. Let’s see if we can both walk it off.”

She nodded without speaking and fell into step beside him.

“Oh, by the way, you can call me Clark if you want to.”

She snickered slightly and swiped at her eyes. He pretended not to notice. “Okay, Clark-if-you-want-to.”

“Oh, funny. Very funny.”

“Just remember, jokes are fine with me but stay away from puns. I’d have to arrest you.”

It wasn’t too hard for him to suppress the laugh that tried to push past his tongue. The smile, though, leaked out despite his best effort. He thought about asking her if she had a brother named Richard or a cousin called Spencer, even after she’d told him not to, but decided it was too easy a shot. Teasing her with both wit and intelligence would be a challenge.

By the time they’d circled the block and ended up outside the same Starways, they’d agreed to meet at Lois’s

grave the next Saturday morning at nine-thirty.

Bobbie drove home after stopping at a nearby Subway for an early lunch. She'd skipped breakfast because she'd been tense about meeting this big lug from the cemetery a second time, and she wasn't sure how to deal with him.

Not very well, apparently. But at least it wasn't all bad if he'd agreed to meet her again.

As she opened her front door, she considered what little she knew about Clark Kent, and decided he wasn't all that bad after all. At least he'd be good arm candy if she ever needed an escort to a police function.

He had a nice smile, too, once he let it out. Good sense of humor, too.

Most of all, he was safe for her. He'd lost a partner and almost lover, as had she, and he wouldn't put pressure on her to replace that woman in his life. And she knew she wouldn't pressure him to replace Glen in her life.

A pang of regret surfaced again as she recalled how she'd referred to Lois Lane as his late lady fair. She'd been trying to push him away from her own grief, afraid that he already knew too much about her, knew things she didn't dare tell anyone. Maybe Bill was right, maybe Kent had intended to commit suicide when she'd found him the day before. Maybe, if she hadn't been given this assignment, she might have – in cop slang – “eaten her gun” at Glen's grave before too much longer.

Her visits to the cemetery were agonizing, but she couldn't stay away. She couldn't keep herself from the path to his final resting place, nor could she fill the void he'd left in her life. She hated liquor, and drugs gave her no respite from the pain, so numbing herself didn't work. They just made everything worse, both during the experience and after.

Maybe Bill was even smarter than she thought. Maybe Kent could be a friend she could talk to, help her get through the days ahead. Maybe she could do the same for him.

Maybe this was the first of many corners her therapist had told her she'd eventually turn.

And maybe she was just putting off the inevitable end.

At least, she thought, *it might be worth hanging around to see which it would be.*

Chapter Two

Clark surprised himself by anticipating the next Saturday meeting with Bobbie Tracey – had to have that “e” in her last name – more than he'd thought he would. Maybe it was the idea that he was meeting a woman whose intent was not to offer him physical comfort. Maybe it was because she'd suffered a loss similar to his own.

Maybe grief shared was grief lessened, even just a little. He'd take that in a heartbeat.

He arrived about nine-twenty and stopped at Lois' grave. He squatted on his toes and reached out toward the low grassy mound. As always, his heart chilled and tightened as he thought about how much he missed Lois, how much he regretted letting her talk him into freezing her. It had been stupid and unimaginative and terrifying and dangerous and he could never say “no” to her. He mentally

berated himself yet again for listening to her, for going along with her suicidal plan, for not thinking of something else, for essentially choosing his parents over her—

No.

That wasn't what had happened.

As destroyed as he still felt, as shredded as his heart remained, the truth was that it had been Lois' idea for Superman to freeze her, not his. She had been willing to risk her life to help him – the Clark him. Lucy had insisted, over and over, that Lois had truly loved him, had been on the verge of telling him, would have accepted his proposal had he offered her one, but in the end his pain still remained. He'd learned to walk through the day doing what he needed to do, whether as Clark or as Superman, but he no longer had any joy in the doing of it.

The Lois-sized hole in his heart remained.

He feared it would never be mended.

With his eyes closed, he once again conjured up some of his favorite Lois memories. Funny, though, that so many of them seemed either to immediately follow some moment of danger for her or immediately precede some threat to her. Some of them, of course, were Superman rescues, but a fair number were just Lois and Clark moments, times when he'd saved her from trouble – whether or not she'd wanted to be rescued – and her soft smiles and gentle caresses and open affection following said rescue.

He'd loved her so much.

He still loved her.

He barely felt the soft touch on his shoulder or the breathy sound of someone calling his name. “Clark? You okay?”

He swallowed hard and turned his head. He'd fallen to his knees and leaned on the hand touching Lois' gravesite without realizing it. There was dampness in his eyes, dampness which distorted his view of the five-foot-ten-inch Bobbie Tracey looming over him with concern in her dark eyes.

He tried to speak but failed. He settled for lifting his hand from the grass.

“It's okay, Clark,” she almost whispered. “You take whatever time you need. I'll wait.”

He took a deep breath, pulled off his glasses, and wiped his eyes. “I'm done, Bobbie,” he said as he replaced the frames on his face. “Thank you. Have you seen Glen yet?”

“No. I – I wanted to make sure you were okay first.”

He nodded. “Thank you. I think I'm okay.”

She reached out her hand to help him stand. He took it in his and rose, then said, “My turn to watch over you now.”

Bobbie gave him an odd look for a moment, then nodded slowly. “My turn to thank you,” she said. “I guess we can keep each other from going off the deep end, huh?”

He almost smiled back. “That sounds like a passable mission statement to me.” He gestured for her to precede him.

He kept about three to four paces back from her and stopped about six feet from the foot of Glen's grave while she knelt there. He squatted silently as she touched the low mound of grass and bowed her head. Her lips moved, but he couldn't see them well enough to read them, and he

deliberately didn't listen in.

After about three minutes, she rocked back on her heels and put her face in her hands. Clark waited for several long breaths, then stood and slowly made his way to her side. He gently touched her shoulder with two fingers, much as she had touched him, and softly asked, "Coffee? It's on me today."

She lowered her hands and nodded, then lifted one finger as if asking for a bit more time. He stepped back and waited for her as she took a handkerchief from her jacket pocket and dried her eyes with it. Then she stood, looked into his eyes, and nodded.

"Thank you, Clark."

He smiled a little and said, "Starways is waiting for us."

She ducked her head and almost smiled back. "Yeah. Hope we get the same table." She fell into step beside him without touching him. Then she said, "Let's keep the conversation civil this time, okay, Clark-if-you-want-to?"

He chuckled and watched her smile grow ever so slightly. It was good to have a friend who understood his pain.

He hoped she felt the same way about him. He could use an understanding friend, and she seemed to need one too.

Bobbie was glad Clark knew about Glen and the reason for her weekly visit, visits which were occasionally interrupted by work but never by weather. She'd performed her regular homage to Glen for months, ever since the funeral, no matter the conditions. Twice she'd had to clear snow away from the foot of the grave so she could kneel and talk to him, three times she'd stood because of the standing water during or after a bad storm, and once she'd stood under her umbrella during a hailstorm. The poor umbrella hadn't been the same after that, but she hadn't had the heart to replace it yet.

Clark paid for their drinks this time, and Bobbie led him to the table they'd used the previous week. They sat across from each other, silent for several minutes, neither apparently wanting to be the first to speak, until Bobbie huffed and said, "This is nuts. I didn't come here to watch you blow on your coffee."

He sighed and seemed to relax. "Same here. Suggestions?"

"Let's talk about work. I caught a robbery-homicide in Suicide Slum this week. Some low-level coke dealer lost his stash to a pair of thieves. One of them knifed him in the abdomen and left him to bleed out. He survived long enough to identify the guy who stabbed him to the officers on the scene, but he died in the ambulance on the way to the emergency room."

Clark nodded. "That's too bad. Any leads on the perp the vic fingered?"

She lifted her head and stared at him. "Wow. Cop lingo from the reporter. I didn't know you were on the crime beat."

He straightened and preened a little. "My dear young lady, I am a man of many varied and hitherto undiscovered talents."

She chuckled at his use of vocabulary. "Good to know.

To respond to your interrogative, we—"

"'Interrogative?' Now who's flashing the fancy schoolin'?"

"I am, smart-aleck, so just listen. The perp's street name is Slick Rick. We got a hit from the gang enforcement guys, so this guy is a known actor, but we don't have an address or a complete description or any known associates. I don't know how we're going to track him down."

His mouth twisted in apparent thought for a moment. "Would you mind if I took a crack at helping you find this guy? The Planet may have a resource or two you folks haven't tapped yet."

Her first, immediate, instantaneous reaction was to raise her hackles and tell him to stay off her turf. Before she had a chance to be stupid again, though, her cognitive mind told her that the object of the game was to find the lawbreaker and bring him or her to justice, not to protect her back yard against all possible trespassers. Besides, Clark couldn't take the collar from her even if he wanted to.

It took her a few seconds to arrive at this conclusion. His face changed while she thought through all the angles, and his mouth opened. But before he could apologize and retract his offer, she blurted, "Sure! Yeah, any help we can get will be more than we had before. And I'll see if Inspector Manning will give you an interview if your info helps us close the case."

He seemed to relax. "No problem. And thank you. I'll make some calls this afternoon."

"No, thank you for trying. I've heard too many horror stories about reporters who 'helped' investigations into the gutter and down the drain just for a byline. I know you won't pull a stunt like that."

"No, I wouldn't. By the way, who is Inspector Manning?"

She sighed. "Senior Detective Inspector Wyatt Manning is Bill Henderson's nominal superior. He's very by-the-book, chews out subordinates for the tiniest of mistakes, and generally makes himself a pain in everyone's butt. Bill told him that he was slammed with work and asked to have another detective assigned to the unit temporarily. Instead, Manning decided Bill couldn't prioritize his subordinates' workload properly and took over almost half the cases and most of Bill's available manpower. I got handed a couple of cold cases and three open ones. I'm moving on the other two open cases, but I got stuck on the stabbing. If I can give the DA's office a solid case they can prosecute successfully, it'll help my career and help get Manning off Bill's back at the same time."

He nodded. "Sounds like that's important to you."

"It is. Bill's a tough boss, but he also understands that no one is perfect, unlike Senior Detective Inspector Wyatt Manning. The man has to have had his compassion gland removed."

He laughed softly. "I hope the source I'm thinking about can help you. If he's open to the idea, I'll introduce you to him, assuming you want to meet him."

"How expensive is he?"

Clark grinned. "He takes his fees in food. The better the meal, the harder he works for you."

Bobbie grinned back. "I take it that a meal from Burger

Whiz doesn't count?"

He reacted with obviously fake horror. "Don't even hint at something like that! He'd probably demand at least three four-star steak feasts just to make up for a Whizzer Special."

"I'll keep that in mind. Hey, I hate to cut this short, but I need to put in some paperwork time at the office. I'll be there until at least three-thirty, so if your source calls you back with anything solid you can give me a ring."

His eyes flickered for a moment but she didn't know why. Then he said, "Sounds good to me. I need to go in myself. Have to finish up my timesheet and work on a feature on Chuck Lee and his latest action movie. He claims he does all of his own stunts."

They stood together. "You sound like you don't quite believe him."

"I assume you've seen at least one of his flicks." She nodded and he continued as they made their way to the exit. "I can buy his doing the choreographed fighting scenes, since he really does have a couple of high-ranking black belts in different disciplines. But the jumping on or off moving vehicles and falling two or three stories through glass skylights? No, I don't believe he does stuff like that. We're not talking about Jackie Chan filming in Hong Kong here. The Hollywood studio wouldn't let him do those stunts. Too dangerous. Their insurance premiums would cost more than his already unbelievable salary, and they wouldn't put their most expensive talent through that kind of risk."

"Well, all I can say is, go get 'em, Clark! Get that Pulitzer!"

He laughed. "I'd be pleased just to get it printed in the Monday entertainment section."

"Okay, whatever." She reached out to shake his hand, and when he took it she clasped it gently. "See you next Saturday, same time or thereabouts?"

He smiled and nodded. "As long as no asteroids approach the earth, yes. I'm looking forward to it."

She returned the smile, then released his hand and turned to walk to her car. As she walked, she thought about why Clark had flinched when she'd told him he could call her if he got anything solid. Why would that make—

No. She hadn't told him to call her. She'd told him to give her a ring.

And he'd instantly flashed on "engagement ring."

She'd done it again. She'd reminded him of how close he and Lois had been to an engagement. And worse yet, she'd obliquely suggested that the two of them get engaged.

You're so stupid, Bobbie. You're clumsier than a drunk elephant. You'll never keep any friends if you keep stomping on their already broken hearts.

At the same time, she thought that Clark would forgive her. Probably already had. Surely he'd known she hadn't hurt him intentionally.

Bobby Bigmouth called Clark back at his work desk inside an hour. "I got a couple of maybe addresses for Slick Rick. Uh, you ain't going after him by yourself, are you?"

"No. This is a favor for — for a friend."

"Good. This guy is knife-happy, Kent. He always carries

at least two switchblades and he knows how to use them. This isn't the first dude he's cut."

"Is it the first one who died?"

"I think so but I can't be sure. I just know he's acting like he's invisible to the cops. He's sure they can't find him, and anyone who squeals on him is putting his head in a noose." Bobby paused, then said, "I mean it, Clark. Don't go after him alone. This guy's really dangerous."

"I won't, I promise. Give me the addresses, okay?"

The snitch did so, then asked, "Anything else?"

Clark smiled. "Yes, actually. I told my friend that I'd introduce the two of you if you were willing to meet."

"Hey, wait a minute! You can't be tellin' people what I do! I stay alive because I'm discreet! Some of my other so-called 'friends' would tie me to a concrete block and drop me in Hob's Bay for talkin' to you!"

"Easy, Bobby, easy. I haven't blown your cover and I won't tell her who you are if you don't want me to."

"Yeah, good. She's probably a cop, anyway, and if anybody sees me with a—" Bobby broke off, then hesitantly asked, "This friend — your friend is a woman?"

"Yes. She's a detective with the MPD. Bill Henderson is her immediate supervisor. But I won't mention you to her if you don't want me to."

"Uh — maybe. Lemme think about it, okay?"

"No problem. The usual for this tip, Chinese special?"

"With two extra egg rolls. And don't steal the fortune cookies!"

Clark chuckled. "That was Lois' trick, not mine. I'll call Mr. Fong and set it up for you anytime in the next three days."

Quietly, Bobby said, "Thanks, Clark. You're one of the good guys. I hope that info pans out for — for your friend."

"Later, Bobby."

Clark pressed the cradle button, then dialed Bobbie and gave her the addresses and Bobby Bigmouth's warning about Slick Rick and his knives. As he hung up, it hit him that he might soon introduce Bobbie to Bobby. Or Bobby to Bobbie. He could make a stand-up routine out of it if he wanted to.

He smiled at the thought as he shut down his computer and tidied up his desk before going home.

It didn't occur to him until that night when he had his toothbrush in his mouth that he'd mentioned Lois to Bobby Bigmouth without a twang.

Clark didn't notice that Perry watched him from the editor's office and nodded as Clark walked out that Saturday afternoon without carrying a virtual piano on his back for the first time in over a year. It was good to see a smile on the young man's face. Perry was glad he hadn't forgotten how to use those particular muscles.

He picked up the phone and dialed Bill Henderson's direct number. He wanted to see if that lady detective was smiling as much as Clark was.

He hoped neither Clark nor Bobbie ever found out that he and Bill were playing Cupid for them. Clark was a wordsmith and could eviscerate either of them in print, but Bobbie was a dead shot with her .40 caliber Glock. *Then again*, thought Perry, *reporting the news was dangerous*,

just like cop work was.

The risks for this gambit were fairly high. The potential reward was far greater.

Clark had never before worked Monday through Friday while eagerly waiting for the weekend, but as the weeks passed he started doing it. His time with Bobbie became important to him, almost as important as his time with Lois. Only now he had a real person to speak with, someone to share his pain, someone who needed his presence as much as he needed hers. Clark always felt lighter in spirit after Saturday morning coffee with Bobbie.

During the next ten weeks or so, they fell into a pattern of Saturday mid-morning meetings. Usually they'd connect at Glen's grave and then move to Lois', although there were three bad weather days when Bobbie picked up Clark at his apartment. Clark always stood back, silent and respectful, as Bobbie knelt beside her partner's final resting place, and she always returned the favor as he tried to recapture the unique flavor of life that was exclusively Lois Lane. Then they would walk to the coffee shop and talk. Sometimes they shared funny stories about Lois or Glen. Sometimes the sharing was painful, yet cathartic.

Some days they spoke of their years growing up. Clark told her about Smallville and his parents and how wonderful they were. He also told her he'd been adopted as an infant and she smiled and said that they'd been very unselfish. Bobbie revealed that her father Mark Tracey had died of sudden onset leukemia during the winter of the year she turned twelve and that her mother had raised her, helped her through college, encouraged her to enter the police academy, and had applauded her when she'd received her shield. Bobbie also smiled when she related that her mother seemed to be serious about one of the prosecutors in the DA's office. The man had told Bobbie that she could come to him any time for free legal advice, but he wouldn't so much as fix a parking ticket for her. They both laughed about that.

Kendra Powell, one of the Saturday baristas, became their unofficial personal server. Kendra always recognized them by name and greeted them with a big smile when they came in, whether separately or together, and she'd memorized both their main preferences and their first alternate choices.

The only time Clark saw Kendra flustered was the morning Bobbie apparently felt a bit whimsical and ordered a duckburger, armadillo fries, and a cactus shake. Kendra's face had worn a deadpan Mastercard-worthy priceless expression that morning, as had two other patrons waiting for their orders. The rest of the staff behind the counter thought it was the funniest thing they'd heard all week, which surely had been Bobbie's main goal.

Unless it was making Clark laugh. Which he did. And Bobbie smiled for the rest of their time together that day.

The weekdays passed slowly for him, but it wasn't so hard to take now. Someone listened to him, someone understood him, and that made a huge difference.

The only dark spot in his new Saturday routine was the shaded look of despair he sometimes glimpsed in Bobbie's eyes. Even when she smiled, sometimes the sadness

remained.

It worried him.

Bobbie's eyes didn't want to open. But it was Saturday. Too early to get up, actually, but she would sleep no more this morning. It was a very special Saturday.

It was the first time for her to visit Glen's grave since the anniversary of his death.

The dream that had stirred her was old and familiar and still drove a white-hot sword into her heart. More a memory of the car camera video than a dream, she'd relived Glen's murder once again. This time, though, there was a wrinkle at the end.

In real life, she'd knelt beside Glen's body and cried and screamed his name, but he hadn't moved, hadn't spoken. In last night's dream, he'd opened his eyes and rolled his head toward her and lifted one hand to touch her face and whisper with his last breath that he loved her.

She lay still, willing the pain from the dream to dissipate as it always did – slowly but surely, the old agony would melt away and she'd be able to face the morning. It always had before.

Not this time. This time the hole in the middle of her chest gaped wide and threatened to pull her in like a whirlpool in the middle of the ocean. She couldn't swim away, she couldn't climb on a boat, she couldn't call for a helicopter rescue. All she could do was drown. She suddenly realized that she didn't care if she did drown in her pain. This day had been coming for a long time – an entire year.

It was inevitable. This would be the end for her.

From the depths of her suffering, the thought that the most appropriate place to put an end to the anguish and heartache would be at Glen's grave floated to the surface of her mind.

The decision all but made itself. All she had to do was get dressed, bring her sidearm to the cemetery, kneel beside his marker, and all that pain would end.

Her mother would miss her. She'd grieve and wail and wonder what she could have done to save her daughter. This would stay with her for the rest of her life.

Bobbie was sorry for that, but the void in her heart couldn't abide comparing anyone else's pain to hers. The void demanded a human sacrifice to fill it.

Clark would miss her. Maybe. She hoped so, anyway. But he'd understand.

No one else might get it. Clark would.

She'd try not to make too much of a mess.

This Saturday was an important Saturday. It was three days after the anniversary of Glen's death. Clark thought he had a good idea how she'd feel today, and she wouldn't have a warm and fuzzy feeling.

So he deliberately arrived early.

He walked softly to Glen's grave, and he wasn't surprised to see that Bobbie had arrived first. Sometimes she'd be waiting for him near Lois' grave, sometimes he'd meet her near Glen's, but both of them had always waited for the other to finish before moving to whichever grave was the next one.

On this day, however, she wasn't standing or kneeling at the foot of the grave. She was kneeling beside Glen's headstone, hunched over beside the marker with her forehead leaning against the side and her left hand braced against the top. Clark looked closer and saw that her right hand was resting on her holstered service pistol.

This could be very bad.

She was breathing hard, gulping in air and letting it shudder out. A quick super-check revealed no injuries, but that might change in less than a second. He knew how fast a trained shooter could draw and fire, and he would be hard-pressed to react in time even with his powers. And while Superman might be able to stop her today, it wouldn't keep her from trying again later.

This rescue – if it did end up as a rescue – wouldn't be a Superman one.

He approached gingerly but not silently. "Bobbie?" he called softly. "Bobbie, can you hear me?"

She sniffed once. "Of course I can hear you, Kent. I don't – no! Stay back. Please – please stay right there."

"Okay." He knelt at the foot of Glen's grave where he'd seen her so many times before. "Can you tell me what's going on?"

She didn't look at him. "What do you think is going on?"

"I don't know, but I'd like to. Please talk to me."

Her eyes cut towards him for a moment and she took a deep breath. "I'm trying to make a decision."

He waited for her to continue, but when she didn't, he asked softly, "A decision to stay here or go to be with Glen?"

She lifted her head to look at Glen's headstone and wiped her eyes with her left hand. "No." She took another deep breath. "I'm trying to decide whether or not I – I can take the pain anymore."

He nodded and sat down on the dry grass. "I understand, Bobbie," he said softly. "And I'm not just saying that. You know that I really do understand."

She turned damp eyes towards him. "Yeah. You do. Anybody else—" She didn't continue.

He nodded and exhaled softly. "Anyone else," he continued, "would just be talking smack, saying stuff that didn't mean much. No one else really knows just how you feel. Not even me."

She wiped her face left-handed again. "You come pretty close."

"I guess I do. But that doesn't mean I know exactly what's going on in your head. Or what's going on in your heart."

A soft sob escaped her lips. "It – it's so hard! It hurts so much! Why is it so hard, Clark? Why?"

He took in another deep breath and let it out slowly before answering. "I've thought about that very question a lot. I think it's because when we love someone, we give a part of our heart to that person. If the person doesn't want it, the heart fragment is almost always bent somehow when you get it back so that it doesn't quite fit right and we have to figure out how to put it back together with the rest of the heart. That's why it feels broken. But when that someone you love accepts a part of your heart and loves you in

return, you get a part of that person's heart back, and then both of you have to figure out how to fit all the parts together. If both of you want the parts to fit, then there's almost always a way to do it.

"But when that someone you love dies, a part of your heart dies with that person, and a part of that other person's heart – the part that you got from that person you love – tries to die inside you. And it hurts. It really, really hurts. I think it's the worst pain anyone can feel."

He shifted closer to her without touching her. "And the cruelest irony is that the more you love and the more you were loved, the bigger the pain, because the bigger the part of your heart you gave away, and the bigger the part of the other person's heart you received. You can learn to live with part of your heart gone, but it's hard. It's so very hard. Some folks don't think it's worth the effort." He paused, then said, "But most people get through it. Life gets easier as time goes along, Bobbie. There's no shortcut. It takes a lot of time. You'll eventually heal. I promise you that. And you know I'm not lying to you."

Her tears began flowing more freely. "You – you do know. And I know you – you're not lying. You really believe what – what you're saying. That's how I – how I feel when I – when I talk to – to Glen and – that's what you felt – how you feel when – when you think of Lois and – what you – what she—"

Bobbie didn't finish her sentence. She shifted her weight toward Clark and moved her hand away from her weapon. In a flash, he was beside her, holding her against his broad chest and letting her sob and shudder against him. She clung to him as if grasping a life ring in the open ocean, her fists wrapping themselves up in his sleeves.

As he held Bobbie, as she clutched at his arms and wept out her pain and railed against the universe for being so unfair to her, he realized that even if he did nothing else for the rest of his life, he'd saved this one life today.

And for that moment, it was enough for him to keep going for one more day. Maybe even a whole week.

He never made it to Lois' grave that Saturday. Somehow he didn't think she'd mind.

Chapter Three

Bobbie stayed latched to Clark until her tears stopped. The part of her mind that catalogued such things assigned this current crying jag to the very top of the how-much-it-hurts list. The one the day Glen was killed was bad, but her weeping had been muffled by the impact of the events of the day, the shooting investigation, and all of the people around them. She had cried at his funeral, but the residual shock of his murder combined with the pomp and circumstance of an official MPD funeral had muted the emotional impact. She remembered feeling as though she'd been surrounded by bubble wrap and had cotton stuffed in her ears.

The weeping with her mother the evening after the shooting was bad, too, and she'd had to comfort her mother instead of being comforted. Mom had treated Glen like a son-in-law almost from the day she and Glen had met, so for her it was a double whammy. Bobbie hadn't had the time to break down and grieve then.

The department shrink, Dr. Penny Ocampo, had encouraged Bobbie to allow herself time to grieve for Glen. Bobbie had tried, but things had just kept interrupting her. She'd wanted to make detective, and when she got her exam results just a few days after Glen's death, she'd almost turned the job down. But Bill Henderson had told her to take whatever time she needed to make a decision.

So she'd become Detective Roberta Tracey.

No one had wanted to partner with her at first – not because she was a woman, but because she was brand new to the rank and because she had just suffered a horrible tragedy. Bill had her go out on calls with other two-person teams for a few weeks, along with keeping her in the precinct to do paperwork and other work in the office. After about a month, Bill assigned her to a crusty veteran with the unlikely name of Roger Murdock.

The first time they met, Murdock had nodded to Bobbie and said, "Look, we're not pals, we're not buddies, and I'm not babysitting you. I'm five months from retirement and you better not mess it up for me."

"No problem. I'm only about three hundred months from retirement myself."

Murdock had blinked at that, then growled, "You can be funny or caustic on your own time, Detective, no matter which way you meant that. We're on a last-name basis unless I tell you different. What I say goes. You got any brilliant deductions on any case we catch, you wait and tell me when we're back at the station. Or at least together in the car. And no 'Airplane' movie jokes. Got it?"

"Copy that. What's our first move?"

"Come with me. We got a case, liquor store armed robbery, no shots fired. You a good driver?"

"Three years on patrol. Shared driving, no accidents."

Murdock tossed her the keys. "You drive. I'll give you directions."

She'd been relieved there were no fatalities at the crime scene. She hadn't known then if she could have taken seeing someone else shot to death.

Fourteen minutes later, Bobbie pulled up in front of a liquor store where a uniformed patrolman was trying to calm an older couple. She recognized the second officer on the scene, the man trying to keep the rubberneckers at bay. She and Murdock got out. Murdock signaled for her to hang back, then walked to the officer with the excited couple.

Bobbie passed the second officer and said, "Hey, Delveccio, how are things?"

He blinked, then smiled for a moment. "Hey, Tracey, long time no see. You're a detective now?"

"Yep. The old guy's my new partner."

She saw the flicker in his eyes that told her he remembered Glen. After a moment, he half-smiled and said, "Plain-clothes detective, eh? So you're selling out to the dark side?"

She shrugged. "They have low-fat yogurt." She saw Murdock turn and beckon to her. "Gotta go, he's yanking my leash."

"Good luck with the new gig."

"Thanks. I think I'll need it."

She'd stayed with Murdock until his retirement. The

station party – all of ten minutes with a rudely-captioned cake and a card signed by all and sundry, followed by taking over the local cop bar that evening after work – had happened three weeks before the Friday when Bill had sent her to the cemetery. She'd been on her own until Bill had given her the Kent job, and now she was crying in the man's arms, shedding more tears than she had in the previous year.

She would have been embarrassed – no, she'd have been ashamed – had she broken down like this in anyone else's presence.

But Clark understood. He knew not only where she was coming from, he knew generally where she was and where she was going. His empathy didn't relieve her pain, but it did make it easier to share it with him.

If he could bear that agony, she could too. Anything he could do she could do, and better.

The thought made her chuckle slightly. Clark felt or heard it and pushed back far enough to look into her eyes. "You okay now, Bobbie?"

She averted her eyes from his deep, warm, caring chocolate orbs. "That's a relative term that doesn't quite fit. Better, though, I think." She snorted lightly. "Under the circumstances that's not too bad."

He smiled. "No, it's not bad at all. You want to head to Starways or call it a morning?"

She pulled out a handkerchief and cleaned her face. "I'm ready for a coffee, I think. I'm about wiped out for now."

He helped her stand with him. "Copy that, Detective. We'll walk slow so you don't trip on anything."

She managed a mildly piercing look that didn't penetrate far. "Oh, thank you, kind sir, you are so attentive to the emotionally disabled."

He flashed that high-powered smile at her and the dark cloud around her heart thinned a little more. But it was still there, still filtering the light that shone on everyone else in the world.

Clark was concerned. Bobbie hadn't said much as they'd walked to the coffee house, and she'd mumbled "The usual" when Kendra had asked her what she wanted. They sat at a table toward the back of the dining area, away from the rest of the patrons.

She sipped her coffee and stared listlessly out the window. Clark had to do something to get her mind on something other than her pain and loss, but what could he do? What might they talk about?

Then it came to him. He should tell her a Lois story. Preferably a funny one.

And he had the perfect one for her.

"Hey, Bobbie, do you have much experience on stakeouts?"

She barely shook her head. "A little. Enough to know how crushingly boring they usually are."

He nodded. "Lois and I were on one when she made up a word."

Bobbie frowned at the window, then turned her frown to him. "Connection, please."

"Huh?"

“What’s the connection between stakeouts and Lois’ new word? Or are we making up sentences based on free association?”

He half-smiled. At least he had her attention. “She and I were on an overnight stakeout in a hotel room, and we passed the time by playing Scrabble. She put down ‘chumpy’ and I challenged it. She picked up the dictionary and—”

“Chumpy?”

“Yes.”

Bobbie began to look interested. “She tried to use a non-existent word in a game of Scrabble? With you, the human dictionary slash thesaurus?”

“She did. She insisted that if someone were behaving as a chump, then that person was being chumpy. I challenged it and she decided to look it up. Of course she didn’t find it, so she challenged the dictionary.”

Bobbie’s mouth twitched. “She didn’t find her made-up word and blamed the dictionary?”

“Yes. I remember it well. She tossed it aside and said, ‘You call this a dictionary?’”

Bobbie’s smile broke through and she chuckled. “Lois must have been a real bottle rocket.”

“At times.”

She sat back and chuckled again. “Reminds me of the time Glen and I rolled up on a van in a mall parking lot, early one morning about dawn. The van was rocking back and forth, so we got out to investigate.

“We got closer and we heard noises from inside, sounded to both of us like people fighting. We drew our weapons and Glen grabbed the handle on the back door and yanked it open.”

“It wasn’t locked?”

“Nope. Surprised me that it wasn’t. But Glen was even more surprised when he leaned in and confronted a man and woman in – ah – the French call it *au naturel*.” She paused. “And they weren’t exactly fighting.”

His eyebrows rose. “You mean they were – um – engaged in – in amorous conduct?”

“Having sex, yeah. With a good deal of enthusiasm.”

Clark smiled. “The Italians call it ‘*en flagrante d’elceto*’.”

“They were both pretty flagrant, yeah.”

Clark bit his lip to keep his laugh from bursting out. “It was – um – mutually consensual, then?”

Bobbie kept pausing to control her own laughter. “Oh, yeah. The woman was – she was – sitting up and facing toward the back door and when Glen pulled the door open she – she moaned with her eyes closed, then smiled, exhaled, and relaxed. When her eyes drifted open a second later and she saw us, she started screaming at us for – for breaking up a moment with her husband that she’d dreamed about and – she told us about a couple more pretty explicit fantasies we’d messed up, too. Boy, was that chick mad. We’d interrupted a tender honeymoon moment, and Glen was bright red until after lunch.”

He bit both lips for a moment, then asked, “What did the guy do?”

Bobbie kept calm with visible effort. “He rolled his head back, looked at us upside down – while his wife was

sitting on his midsection going totally berserk at us, mind you – and when she stopped to breathe, he said something like, ‘Can you close the door, man? There’s a draft.’”

That did it. Clark laughed so loud he almost dropped his coffee. After a moment, Bobbie joined him. They laughed so hard that Mrs. Adams, an older retiree and another of the Starways Saturday regulars, got up from her table and walked over to them.

“My dears,” Mrs. Adams said quietly, “Are you both all right?”

Clark recovered first. “Yes, ma’am,” he drawled, “we’re fine. It’s just that Bobbie has been humor-deprived for quite a while now. She’s making up for lost time and she’s having a reaction.”

Bobbie grabbed her stomach and nearly fell out of her chair. Mrs. Adams nodded and said, “I see. You two just enjoy your lives. We’ll all listen in and try to enjoy your enjoyment.”

Clark managed a ragged “Thank you,” then started laughing again. Mrs. Adams tottered back to her table, then turned and lifted her cup of tea to them in a silent salute.

When Clark and Bobbie finally calmed down, he lifted his cup as in a toast and said, “To our crazy partners. May we ever remember how they made us laugh.”

After a moment, she met his eyes and lifted her cup. They tapped the edges together and each took a sip.

Bobbie’s smile warmed his heart. He was glad she was his friend.

Bobbie decided to grab lunch at Arby’s before she swung by the station. She and Clark had parted outside Starways, just as always, but this time she went to the precinct after lunch instead of home. The request she wanted to make was just a little out of bounds, but since it was really part of the assignment Bill Henderson had given her, and since no arrests could possibly come of it, she felt like it was sorta kinda okay.

She could still rationalize with the best of them.

Good, she thought. Sergeant Kowalski was at the front desk. He was a big marshmallow where Bobbie was concerned. “Hey, Ski,” she called, “I need to check some older files. Do you need to get them for me or can I just walk in and snag them myself?”

Kowalski shook his head. “You know the drill, Detective. You give me a name and a date and I go check to see if the file’s here. If it is and there aren’t any sensitive tags on it, you can take it to your desk and give it back to me when you’re done.” He stood and leaned on the desktop. “What’s the name?”

“Lois Lane. Used to be a reporter for the Daily Planet.”

His eyes narrowed a little. “What date?”

“Everything you have on her.”

She saw his mouth make that ‘Ah’ shape that meant he was hearing more than she’d said. Didn’t matter, though. She didn’t report to him. He looked at her quizzically for a few moments until she said, “Is it going to appear as if by magic or do you actually have to go get it?”

He sighed. “You’re sure that’s the one you want?”

“Positive.”

“Okay. Be right back.”

Sergeant Kowalski was as good as his word. Within a minute, he'd returned with a thick manila folder held in both hands. He dropped it on the desk in front of Bobbie and said, "Please don't lose any of the paper-clipped notes, Detective. They represent a lot of man-hours." He heaved a big sigh, then said, "Woman-hours, too."

She glared at him fiercely for a moment, but his face didn't smolder or smoke at all. That was disappointing. So she picked up the folder – which was quite heavy – and strode to her desk.

Lois' picture, a five-by-seven posed upper-body publicity shot, was clipped inside the cover. Bobbie saw it and immediately deflated. The woman had been beautiful. Beauty-contest beautiful. Stunning, even.

The best Bobbie had ever gotten from a date – any date, including from Glen – was "You look very nice tonight." Back-handed praise, indeed.

She looked at Lois' educational background – the woman had had a B. A. in Journalism, Dean's list all four years – and post-grad work toward a master's degree. Her family was impressive, too. Her father was a successful transplant surgeon who worked with amputees, and her mother was a surgical nurse. Her sister was enrolled in the paralegal certification at Empire State University. A sticky note indicated that she was working part-time as a paralegal for a criminal law firm in the city.

Bobbie shook her head and turned the page.

Lois' parents were divorced and her father was often out of the country. He'd had some legal trouble a few years back and had been censured by the New Troy state medical board. He'd kept his license, though, and he appeared to be in good standing at the moment.

She sighed. Doctor, nurse, paralegal, professional journalist. The family was impressive on paper. Hard to compete with a background like that.

Wait – no. Another sticky note at the bottom of the page told her that Dr. Lane had bought a beach bar and grill on some island she'd never heard of down in the Caribbean. Mother and daughter had only intermittent contact with him.

Poor guy. Lost his daughter and apparently gave up on life. Including his ex-wife and younger daughter.

She turned the page and was confronted with Lois' personal record.

Bobbie's eyes almost fell out as she skimmed all the citations and awards and peer accolades Lois Lane had accumulated over the last five years of her life. She also noted several arrests for various non-felonies, then scanned for convictions. She wondered how much time Lois had spent behind bars.

None, apparently. That surprised Bobbie.

Not one of the arrests stuck. All but a few minor citations were withdrawn or dismissed by a judge. And by different judges, too. She wasn't just some judicial figure's pet reporter.

She skimmed over the official summary of her non-wedding to Lex Luthor. It tallied with the bare bones of the tales she'd heard, as long as you discounted the nutty rumors you heard at the coffee machines and in the locker rooms or before roll call. Like the one where the police held

her back from jumping off the balcony after Luthor. Or the one where she tried to stab Luthor with a hairpin because he'd stepped on the train of her dress at the altar and he fell over the balcony rail trying to get away from her. Or the one where Luthor jumped because she'd threatened to hunt down and kill all of his old girlfriends.

Some of the other stories were even crazier.

A significant number of pages listed the cases on which she'd materially assisted the MPD. Most of those cases had resulted in several conspiracy indictments, in arrests and convictions, and a number of them had generated plea bargains for testimony against other bad guys. The woman had wrecked a lot of criminal careers in her short time.

Starting a little more than three years ago, Clark's name had started popping up alongside Lois', and they'd written a string of hard-hitting articles, broken only when the Daily Planet had been bombed. Bobbie remembered that day. She and Glen had worked traffic control on the east side of the building with several other uniforms. She remembered being angry, because whoever had set off the bomb had broken her morning routine of reading the Planet at breakfast for several weeks.

She hadn't been surprised when she'd learned that Lex Luthor was ultimately responsible.

She closed the folder, still impressed by its contents. Lois Lane had been a beautiful, talented, headstrong, overachieving dynamo. No wonder Clark missed her so much.

She'd have to walk softly around his memories of her. Bobbie would've had no chance to compete with her when the woman was alive. Competing with Lois' ghost – she would've lost before she started. It was a good thing that she and Clark weren't actually dating.

Bobbie sat up straight and gritted her teeth. She could still be Clark's friend.

And he could be hers.

Just then a finger tapped her on the shoulder. "You busy, Tracey?"

She controlled her surprise and looked up at Detective Mitchell Cameron. "Not at the moment, Mitch. Why, you got a case?"

"Armed robbery at a corner grocery down on Eleventh and Ponder. My regular partner's out sick today and Lieutenant Parnell told me to take you with me if you were available. Get your gear and let's go."

"Lemme give this file back to Ski and I'll be right behind you."

She grabbed her weapon and made sure her shield was looped around her neck. A robbery investigation was just the thing she needed to get her head on straight and forget about Lois Lane for a while.

Bobbie didn't want to feel chumpy next to Lois.

When Clark walked into the newsroom the following Monday, Perry stepped out of his desk and waved for Clark to come to the editor's office. Clark followed, thinking his boss had a new assignment for him.

"Close the door, son. Sit down, get comfy. And just so you can be comfy, you're not in trouble."

"Okay. What am I in?"

Perry almost smiled. “You’re in my office for a friendly chat. I wanted to ask you how you were doing.”

“Okay, I guess.”

“I hear you met a cop.”

Without question, Perry knew more than he was saying, but Clark decided to play along. “Yes. Detective Roberta Tracey, last name spelled with an ‘e’ and you’d better not forget it.”

This time Perry did smile. “How is she doing?”

Clark tilted his head. “That sounds like you already know.”

The editor shook his head. “I know she lost her partner in a shootout right at a year ago. I know those kinds of dates are significant. I know that you and she have been meeting at or near the cemetery just about weekly for about three months. That’s it.”

Clark sighed. “I don’t feel comfortable telling anyone else about her. The things we’ve shared with each other, about Lois and her late partner, they’re mostly private.”

“I don’t want you to violate any confidences. I’m just asking if you think she’s making progress, you know, dealing with her loss and coming to terms with it.”

Clark pressed his lips together and looked away for a moment, then turned back to Perry and said, “Yes, I think she is. She’s been through some tough times. And she’s due for some more. But I think she’s handling it as well as can be expected.”

“That’s good.” Perry paused, then asked, “Are you making progress too?”

Clark took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Yes. I can’t tell you I won’t regress, but I can say I think my nose is above water. At least for the moment.”

“Good enough.” Perry picked up a thin folder and handed it to Clark. “Got a story for you, a feature on a retired man who rebuilds and refurbishes classic and antique furniture in his garage. Good human interest piece, right in your wheelhouse. Shouldn’t be a tough assignment.”

Clark opened the folder and nodded. “Can I call him now or should I wait a bit?”

“Wait till about ten. He should be available by then.”

“Got it. Anything else?”

“No. Oh, wait, there is one other thing. Catharine Grant may be coming back to us.”

“Really? I thought she was doing well in California.”

“She is, but it turns out she misses Metropolis, so she sent me her resume just in case there was an opening. When I called her to set up an interview, she asked to work with you if you’re open to it.”

Clark felt his face frown. “Me? You want us to be partners?”

“No, not permanently. I just wanted to touch base with you about it. I think I’ll probably hire her back no matter how you feel, but Cat wants to get more into the investigative side of things. She could learn a lot from you.” Perry leaned back and laced his fingers together over his belly. “Be a nice change for you, being the old and grizzled veteran in the team instead of the eager young beaver.”

Clark blinked, thinking of himself as the eager beaver and Lois as the grizzled vet. The comparison between him

and Lois versus him and Cat stung.

A little.

More than a little.

But Perry was right. He could help Cat if she did come back. And it was time he started pulling his own weight at the paper.

After a long moment, he nodded and said, “Might be at that, Chief. If Cat comes back, I’ll help her all I can. I know she can write.”

“All she needs is someone to point her at the best things to write about.” Perry stood. “That’s all I got. Now shoo. We both have other work-type stuff to do.”

Martha’s phone rang the following Thursday afternoon and she answered with a brisk “Hello!”

“Martha? It’s Ellen. How are you?”

“Ellen! I’m glad you called. Jonathan and I are just fine. He’s out in the north field checking the harvester or I’d get him on the extension. We still have a winter wheat crop to get in before it gets too wet.”

“Well, I’m not a farmer, so I won’t tell you that I understand, but if congratulations are in order, you have mine.”

Martha laughed. “Thank you. To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?”

“I just wanted to touch base with you and find out how you and your fine husband were doing. I also wanted to ask you if you’d heard from Clark lately.”

Martha smiled as she quickly replayed her son’s last visit the previous evening. He’d told them about Cat Grant’s planned return to the Planet, about the article Perry had given him about the furniture repairman, and about the police detective he’d met. Martha had been quietly thrilled when he’d casually mentioned that the detective was a woman.

“Yes, we talked with him last night for quite a while. I think he’s doing as well as we can expect.”

Ellen’s sigh came through the line. “That’s what I thought, too. I just wanted to make sure he wasn’t just putting up a brave front for us. Oh, did he tell you that he took us out to dinner last week?”

“No, he didn’t. Wait – he wasn’t flirting with Lucy, was he?”

“What? No! Absolutely not!”

“Was he flirting with you?”

“Me? Martha, you – wait, you’re having me on, aren’t you?”

“Maybe just a little, yes.”

“You sly kitten! You just wanted to get a reaction out of me.”

“Again, yes. And it was a goodie.”

“I plead guilty. And that brings me to another piece of news. Lucy’s due to graduate with her Associate’s degree in Law in December and take the official paralegal license exam for New Troy. It’ll mean more hours at work, a big bump in pay, and real employment benefits.”

“That’s wonderful! She’ll be able to support you in your old age in the style to which you would like to become accustomed.”

Ellen laughed. “Absolutely. Oh, let me tell you about

Lucy's new boyfriend. I think this one's a keeper."

"Knowing your high standards, he must be. How close are he and Lucy to something more than just casual dating?"

"I'm not sure, but from the way he watches her walk into and out of the room, I'd say he's got it bad. I think she's got it, too, just not quite as bad as Ryan. Not yet, anyway."

"Well, I'm sure she'll make the right decision about him."

"She'd better. I told her last year I'm going to buy a shotgun if she brings home any more sketchy unemployed guys."

Martha chuckled. "I assume, since you're not calling to get me to send you bail money, you haven't been arrested for shooting him, so I'm sure he's walking around still in possession of all of his body parts."

"He is. Oh, I'm sorry, I have another call. Can you hold for a moment?"

"Why don't you call me back tomorrow? I've got some chores of my own to finish."

"Okay, Martha. You're so sweet. Bye for now!"

Martha clicked off the phone and smiled. Her friendship with Ellen Lane had been unexpected but welcome. She'd been able to provide some comfort to the woman who'd lost her older daughter, and Martha had received equal comfort back from her.

Martha still missed Lois fiercely, still wished Clark had chosen differently, still wished somebody had come up with a better plan to free them from those sociopaths. But Martha could remember Lois and smile now instead of bursting into tears. And Clark, at long last, seemed to be recovering from losing her. There were cracks in the walls around him now, little openings that let others in and leaked smiles and real interest back.

Her son was coming back to life. Even Superman was more active now, more relaxed, and it showed in the interviews he'd once again been giving. And Martha was no longer afraid of answering the phone. She'd picked up the line easily just now, never considering the possibility that someone was calling to tell them that Clark had taken his own life.

That wouldn't happen now. And maybe that lady detective was part of it. But Martha would wait and let Clark tell them if he cared for her as more than a friend.

The Saturday after Bobbie's near-breakdown, she and Clark met at Lois' grave at their regular time. He knelt at the foot of Lois' grave and thought whatever it was that he thought to her, then stood and walked with Bobbie to Glen's headstone. She knelt and put one hand on the stone, then repeated her silent litany – that she loved him, would always love him, was so very sorry that he'd died, was sorry that she hadn't backed him up like she should have, and that she'd see him again one day.

This time, though, she included a caveat to him, saying that she probably wasn't coming any time soon and she hoped he didn't mind too much.

She finished and stood, then walked beside Clark to "their" Starways.

Bobbie didn't remember when she'd started thinking of this Starways as theirs, but the identification lay easy on her heart. Clark was a good friend, a good listener, and he understood where she was and where she was probably going. These times were vital for her continued emotional balance and she knew it.

Bobbie hoped Clark got some benefit from them too, besides the satisfaction of helping her. She always tried to give him whatever help or counsel or support he seemed to need at the moment.

They sat down with their coffees. Clark finished his sip first and said, "I had dinner with Ellen and Lucy Lane on Tuesday evening."

She lowered her cup and nodded for him to continue.

"Ellen has been so sweet to me ever since – since Lois died. So has Lucy. I actually went to a party with her classmates last night. She's been bugging me about going out occasionally for months, and a lot of times she asks me to be her plus-one for things like that. They're a pretty funny bunch, too, for lawyers and paralegals. Lucy used to be flighty and a little shallow, but she's really grown up in the last couple of years."

Bobbie's throat closed up as Clark spoke of Lucy Lane so glowingly. Was he falling for Lois's sister? If so, was he thinking of her as a replacement for Lois? Or as a substitute? Would he try to push her into working at the Planet?

Bobbie didn't like this at all.

Clark must have seen something in her face. He stopped and asked, "Hey, are you okay?"

So much for her vaunted poker face. She looked down at her coffee cup and grumbled, "You seem to think a lot of Lucy."

He blinked once. "Well, yeah, I do. She was almost my sister-in-law, and I've come around to thinking of her as the baby sister I never had. She keeps telling me I'm the closest thing to a big brother she'll ever have. I just hope this guy she's seeing treats her right."

Sister-in-law.

Baby sister.

He thinks he's Lucy's big brother.

And Lucy's dating some other guy.

Bobbie felt herself relax. Clark wasn't falling for this younger version of Lois after all. Nor was she falling for him.

Bobbie made a mental bet that Lucy was just as stunning as Lois had been. With Bobbie and Lois and Lucy competing, Bobbie would come in fifth in a three-girl pageant.

She hadn't meant to show her relief, but she must have.

Clark smiled a little. "Bobbie, I think you were just a little jealous for a minute. Weren't you? I mean, just a teensy bit?"

"No!" She played with her cup before taking another sip. Then she sighed and said, "Well – maybe a little. But only because you were making her sound like another Lois for a minute!"

His smile vanished. "No. She's not Lois. You're not Lois. I'm not trying to replace Lois with anyone, especially not Lucy. She's cute and I like her and I'll defend her any

way I need to, but I'm not going to date her. She has her own life, and replacing her sister is not her life's goal."

He reached out and placed his hand on hers. "And I'm truly sorry that I made you think that, even for a moment. I'm your friend, and I never intended to hurt you. I was only trying to tell you about another part of my life."

She turned her hand in his and gave it a squeeze. "I'm sorry too. I guess for a second I was afraid of – that you wouldn't be available as often. As a friend, that is."

He nodded. "Not gonna happen. Not in this lifetime."

She refused to cry. She squeezed his powerful hand and denied her tears of relief access to her eye sockets. There was no reason for her to be jealous.

It bore repeating. There was no reason to be jealous. No excuse for jealousy. She and Clark weren't exactly dating anyway, were they?

Saturday came again, and with it an unseasonably cool breeze with a chilly drizzle. Clark arrived first, so he knelt beside Lois' grave and, as usual, tried to visualize her speaking to him. He didn't know what he thought he wanted her to say, but whatever it was, she didn't say it to him.

After several silent minutes, he stood and brushed his knee clean, then turned and looked toward Glen's grave. Bobbie was already there, but instead of kneeling, she was standing under a raggedy umbrella and watching him. He waved hesitantly, and she tipped the umbrella toward him.

He took that as an invitation to join her. As he stepped close, she gave him a muted smile, then knelt beside Glen's final resting place.

Clark watched silently as she performed whatever ritual she'd designed. Like his, hers was silent, even though her mouth was moving, so she had words to say. He still deliberately looked away to keep from reading her lips. She granted him his privacy with Lois. He would grant Bobbie her privacy with Glen.

After a brief time, she stood and smiled hesitantly at him again. "Ready for coffee?"

He gestured toward the exit. "Lead the way, my lady."

She inclined her head and fell in step beside him. After a few silent strides, he said, "I'm glad you weren't offended when I called you 'my lady.' It's an archaic English address of respect to a woman who is equal to or higher than the rank of the person speaking to the higher one. And it wasn't gender-specific. Both men and women used the syntax pretty freely. 'My lord' was the masculine address."

She gave him a Spockian single-brow raise and said, "Wow, Clark, I never would've figured that out by myself. Good thing I got you around to learn me all this fancy stuff, cuz I'm just a dumb old cop."

He looked at her, concerned for a moment, then saw the grin playing around her mouth. He smiled. "Yeah, well, I do what I can for the less educated of our society."

She chuckled shortly and stopped just out of reach of the Starways entrance. He looked at her, puzzled. "Is something wrong?"

She stared straight at the door, a grin still dancing around her cheeks. "You're not holding the door for me, Kent."

He sighed dramatically. "There goes that merit badge."

He pulled the door open and allowed his chortling companion to precede him.

Chapter Four

On the first Saturday of October, Clark and Bobbie met beside Lois' grave. "You mind if I go first?" he asked.

"Not at all. Take your time."

He knelt and thought about Lois, how much he missed her, how much he wished she were still around to challenge him, to smile at him, to partner with him, to break into buildings beside him, to need his help and his love. There was still a void in his heart, a Lois-shaped part of his life she couldn't fill.

But he wasn't alone anymore. He had good friends, like Perry and Jimmy and Ellen and Lucy, and he still had his parents.

And now Bobbie was his friend.

He silently told Lois good-bye for now, then stood. He let out a deep sigh and turned to Bobbie. "Thank you. Shall we visit Glen now?"

She almost smiled, then nodded. "Come on. And when we get through, it's my day to buy at Starways."

He watched her kneel and touch the foot of Glen's grave. She bowed her head, but unlike the first few times he'd watched over her, she didn't shudder or jerk in place or weep silently. Bobbie obviously still missed Glen, but she seemed to have reached the other side of her grief, the place where she'd started looking up and around again.

It was similar to the place he thought he'd reached.

After a moment, she stood and put her hands in her pockets, then turned and nodded to him. As they walked away from Glen's grave, they met Lucy as she laid a bouquet at Lois' headstone.

"Lucy!" Clark called out. "It's good to see you."

"You too, Clark. You're looking sharp today." She peered past his shoulder. "Aren't you going to introduce us?"

"Oh! I'm sorry. Bobbie, this is Lucy Lane, Lois' younger sister. Lucy, this is Detective Roberta Tracey."

The two women shook hands. "Hi, Lucy. Please call me Bobbie. Clark's told me a lot about you."

Lucy's eyebrow rose. "Really?" Bobbie nodded back. "Good stuff, I hope," added Lucy.

Bobbie smiled and release Lucy's hand. "Oh, sure, nothing but good stuff, at least so far. Congratulations on your good grades. We need more honest paralegals. Someone has to keep all those attorneys on the straight and narrow. Hey, how's your mom doing?"

"Mom?" Lucy eyed Clark for a moment. "She's, uh, she's okay. She changed jobs last month – now she's a nurse's training supervisor at Metro Medical. Seems to like it so far." She glanced at Clark. "Could I talk to you privately for a minute?"

Bobbie smiled easily. "No problem, Lucy. You two chat away, take all the time you need. It's really nice to finally meet you. I'll go wait for you at Starways, Clark."

Lucy watched her stride away. "A detective, Clark? Are you in some kind of legal trouble?"

"No, of course—"

“Because I know a couple of good lawyers. I mean, she seems nice and all that, but I bet she’s armed and can shoot the pips out of an ace at twenty—”

“Lucy! Cut that out!”

Lucy giggled and tapped him on the chest with her fist. “Sorry, Clark, but you’re the closest thing I have to a big brother, and I have to be able to tease you somehow.”

He sighed dramatically, then smiled. “Okay, I’ll give you the teasing thing. But you’ve just about used up your quota for the week.”

They chuckled together. “She seems nice, Clark. Really. How long have you known her?”

“Oh – about five, maybe six months.”

Lucy frowned slightly. “That’s a long time for her to know that much about Mom and me and us know nothing about her.”

He wanted to be irritated, but instead he felt chagrined. “I’m sorry. I haven’t been hiding her on purpose.”

“How did you two meet?”

He frowned at her. “What is this, the third degree? Or a cross-examination?”

She grinned and punched him in the shoulder. “Neither one, you big ninny! But I want to know what’s happening in your life, especially since you haven’t mentioned her to me or to Mom. What are you hiding?”

“Nothing! Honest, Lucy, we met right here.”

Lucy’s smile faded. “You – you mean you met right here at Lois’ grave? What on earth was she doing here?”

He sighed for real. “Bill Henderson sent her. It’s a toss-up as to whether he wanted her to keep me safe or me to keep her safe.”

“Keep *her* safe?”

“Yes.” He waved one hand toward Glen’s grave. “Her partner is buried over there. She thinks it was her fault that he’s dead, and it’s not true. She’s not responsible.”

“Ah, I see. So what you have in common is your excessive and unjustified guilt, your shared sense of loss, and your martyr complexes.”

“Lucy—”

“Come on, Clark! I know who to blame for Lois! It was —”

“Lucy, please, don’t start in on Superman again.”

She paused, and when she spoke again, her voice was much smaller. “I was kinda hoping you’d forgotten about that.”

“Let me see, you said you hated Superman with everything you had within you, you hoped he never slept peacefully again for the rest of his life, that if he’d been there at the attorney’s office that day you would’ve tried to kill him—”

“I know, I know!” She waved her hands. “I’m sorry I said all of that and more. My only defense is that I was in the anger stage of grief because my sister had just died.”

“At the hands of Superman.”

“No.” She looked at her feet for a long moment before continuing. “That Nigel guy, the British secret agent, Lex Luthor’s pet killer, was responsible. I’m not sorry he’s dead. And Jason Mazik was responsible, too. I’m glad he got life without parole. Superman just did what Lois asked him to do.” She lifted her eyes to him. “I still don’t think it was a

particularly smart thing to do, but I know how Lois was. If she had an idea about doing something, you couldn’t stop her with anything less than a tank.”

Clark grinned slightly. “That’s true.”

“And you shouldn’t blame yourself either, Clark. You didn’t kill her. Superman didn’t kill her. The bad guys did.” He ducked his head until she reached out and lifted his chin with two fingers. “Okay, big guy?”

“Okay, yeah.”

“You believe me?”

He looked into her eyes. “I’m trying to.”

“Good.” She stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. “That’s all any sister-type girl can ask for.” She stepped back and made shooing motions. “Now go and have coffee with your detective.”

He grinned and started walking. “She’s not my detective!”

“Sure, Clark, sure. Come by for dinner one night this week. I want you to meet my new boyfriend. Wednesday at seven would be good. And bring Bobbie. Mom will want to meet her.”

He stopped and rolled his eyes at her. “Lucy—”

“Come on, Clark! I want to get to know her better. She seems nice.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about what you think of her. I just hope this boyfriend of yours is a good guy.”

She laughed. “Don’t worry, you’ll like Ryan. He has a steady job and a good future. He’s an electrician.”

“Really?”

“Really. And he gets paid regularly.”

“That’s always a big plus.” He hesitated, then said, “At least you know he can always light up your life.”

He turned and escaped to the coffee shop before she could throw something at him. Her hearty laugh, though, did pursue him all the way to the door.

As Clark walked into the shop, Kendra, their regular waitress, called him over to the register. “Mr. Kent, Detective Tracey asked me to tell you that she got a call on her cell phone about the time she came in and had to go to work and that she’ll meet you here next week.”

He was surprised at the depth of his disappointment, but he tried to hide it. “I see. Thank you for delivering the message, Kendra.”

The girl leaned closer and lowered her voice. “For what it’s worth, Mr. Kent, she was totally pi – uh, she was really mad about having to leave. Something about a dead body not far from here.”

A dead body? His eyes widened. “Thank you.”

Maybe he could scrape up a story and salvage the day.

It didn’t occur to him until much later that it was the first time he’d chased a story lead entirely on his own since before Lois’ funeral.

As he exited the building, he thought it might be advantageous if Superman showed up instead of Clark Kent. So he ducked into an alley to change, then rose above the rooftops to look for a nearby congregation of police.

Then he wondered if “congregation” were the correct term for such a gathering. He’d have to look it up. He knew

that a group of baboons was a “troop,” a group of buffalo was an “obstinacy,” a gathering of cheetahs was a “coalition,” and multiple pandas were an “embarrassment,” but police officers?

Maybe they were like plovers. A rare gathering of plovers was a “congregation.”

He spotted Bill Henderson getting out of his car in front of a run-down apartment building. He landed a few yards from him and called out, “Inspector Henderson!”

Bill’s head snapped around and he registered surprise. “Superman! What are you doing here?”

“I saw the police activity and decided to offer my assistance. Anything I can do?”

“Don’t know yet. We’re checking out a body in this building. Come on in with me but don’t touch anything.”

He resisted the urge to respond flippantly and followed Bill into the foyer. “What do you know about the victim, Inspector?”

“He was found face down in a pool of blood in the basement laundry room. Gunshot wound under his chin. Officer on the scene thinks he bled out after taking the bullet.”

Superman nodded. Then he looked up and saw Bobbie Tracey interviewing someone and taking notes. He almost lifted his hand and called out a greeting to her, then realized how stupid that would be, since she’d never met Superman before. So he simply smoothed his hair with his upraised hand.

No one seemed to notice his awkward gesture. Bill led him down the stairs to the basement laundry room as the detectives tried to keep their interview subjects on track and deflect their attention from the costumed hero.

“There he is. Please stay here outside the doorway. We’re still gathering evidence.”

Superman nodded to Bill and crossed his arms. He listened to the conversation and learned that no weapon had been found, that the preliminary estimate was that the victim had been dead for anywhere from four to twelve hours, that neither his wallet or watch was missing, and so far no one in the building had admitted to hearing or seeing anything out of the ordinary. He watched the two detectives take notes and snap pictures, and he could tell they had just started examining the body.

The victim looked to be slightly less than six feet tall and gaunt to the point of being undernourished. He had stringy brown hair and an uneven ratty beard. Superman X-rayed the man’s left arm, which was sprawled to the side and covered with a heavy jacket, and saw the scars of heavy intravenous drug use inside the man’s elbow.

“Inspector?”

“Yes, Superman?”

“Have you checked him for track marks?”

“Can’t get the jacket sleeves up far enough without moving the body, and we can’t move the body until the ME gives the okay. Why, did you take a look?”

He nodded. “It appears that your victim was a long-term intravenous drug user. Some of the tracks on his left arm are pretty fresh. His body is hiding his right arm, so I can’t see it clearly enough to check for tracks.”

Bill nodded. “Might not make a difference if he was

right-handed. You see anything else that might help us?”

He frowned and swept the body with his special vision. “There’s a bullet lodged in his head behind his left eye. It looks like a small caliber round, maybe a twenty-two or a twenty-five. It appears to have entered under his chin and traveled up into his head. And there’s a small-caliber semi-auto pistol in his right hand, trapped under his body.”

Henderson looked at one of the detectives. “You sure you guys haven’t moved him yet?”

The man shook his head. “No way. The uniform who found him checked his left wrist for a pulse, but that’s it. Nobody’s touched him since then. Been waiting for the medical examiner.”

Henderson nodded and turned back to the hero. “You think it’s a suicide, Superman?”

Superman shrugged. “Not my call, but it wouldn’t surprise me, given the position of the pistol, the angle of the wound, the bullet’s location, and the way the body is arranged.”

Henderson grunted almost angrily. “I hate suicides. I’d much rather hunt down a killer than tell some family that Daddy or Bubba or Sonny offed himself. I think it’s worse than telling them that their loved one is dead.”

The scene of someone telling his parents that he’d killed himself suddenly flashed across Superman’s brain. He leaned against the doorpost and wondered how he could have been so selfish and inconsiderate to even consider committing suicide, knowing what it would do to his parents.

And to Perry.

And to Lucy and Ellen.

And to Jimmy.

And – and now to Bobbie.

Who was suddenly standing beside him. She extended her hand towards him but didn’t touch him. “Hey. Um, Superman? Are you – are you okay?”

He forced himself to stand upright. “Yes. Yes, I’m fine. It’s just—” He gestured to the body on the floor.

She frowned and pulled her hand back. “You’ve seen stiff before, haven’t you?”

“Yes. But suicides – they’re different. And – I don’t know, it just hit me how hard it will be for his family and friends.”

“Yeah. Hard.”

The odd tone in her voice drew his gaze, but she just nodded awkwardly and turned away from him to speak to her boss. “Hey, Bill, I got an ID and address for the victim. Name’s Randall Young, lives on the – he had a place on the third floor of this building, apartment thirty-two-B. Manager has the spare key and is more than willing to let us in.”

In an overly casual way, Bill asked, “You want to look it over, Detective Tracey?”

Bobbie hesitated, then seemed to force herself to match her boss’s demeanor. Superman could see that her deliberate nonchalance didn’t fool Bill, either. “Sure. I’ll take a uniform up with me.”

Bill looked around. “Better yet, take May Ling. She can take any pictures you might need.”

Bobbie nodded. “Okay. May, you ready?”

The tiny Asian woman nodded. “I got all the shots I need here.”

“Let’s go.”

Superman stepped back to allow the two women to pass him. As he did, Bobbie glanced at him with a slight frown on her face, but said nothing.

He leaned into the laundry room. “Inspector, unless there’s something else I can do, I’ll be on my way.”

“Thanks, Superman. You’ve helped a lot, saved us maybe a couple of hours here. I hope you don’t find any more bodies today.”

Superman paused and looked down at Randall Young’s mortal remains. “I hope the same for you, Inspector.”

Bobbie led May up the stairs to Young’s apartment. The brief climb allowed her to get control over her reaction to the suicide victim.

This was her first suicide investigation as a detective, the first since Glen’s death. She’d been called to three others as a uniformed patrol officer, but she hadn’t gone much past recording the facts for the investigators and telling rubberneckers to “move along, folks, nothing to see here, move along, please move along.” It was the first time she’d dug into the background of someone who’d taken his own life.

Bobbie nodded at the uniformed officer guarding the apartment door and pushed it open. She scanned the room, then stepped aside and said, “You first, May.”

The older woman nodded and lifted her camera. “Anything you want me to focus on?”

“Don’t know yet. We’ll want a couple of shots in the front room, at least one each in the kitchen and bathroom, assuming nothing’s weird there, and a couple in the bedroom. Let me know if you find a note.”

“Will do.” May moved into the room and touched off her camera twice, then moved to the tiny kitchenette. Bobbie watched her flash unit light up the grimy cabinets and the sink full of dirty dishes.

May nodded to herself, then stepped to the bathroom. From her vantage point, Bobbie couldn’t see anything that indicated violence or that another person had lived there.

May stopped in the doorway of the bedroom and changed film canisters. “I can’t wait till we go digital,” she muttered. “As soon as the resolution gets high enough and the prices low enough, I won’t touch another roll of film again.”

Bobbie grunted. “See anything yet?”

The camera flashed again, from the bedroom door. “Not yet – wait.” May took one step into the room and took a shot of what Bobbie thought was the pillow on the bed.

“Looks like a note of some kind, Detective. You want to come bag it?”

“You got a shot of it where it sits now?”

“In the can.”

Bobbie stepped closer as she donned latex gloves. She picked up the piece of paper and read it slowly, then her breath caught in her throat and she almost lost her balance.

“Bobbie!”

“Wh-what?”

“You’re awfully pale. You okay?”

Bobbie’s mouth moved but nothing came out. May grabbed her upper arm and steadied her. “Come on, Bobbie, hold it together. This is evidence in Randall Young’s death, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Bobbie took a breath and licked her lips.

“Superman was right about this guy whacking himself.”

“Then we need to get this to Bill. You have an evidence bag, don’t you?”

Bobbie reached into her jacket and pulled out a thin plastic bag. “Got it. Let’s go put a big black bow on this case.”

The story Clark filed later that day was on page three of the Sunday metro section, but it was the first byline he’d garnered without Perry assigning him the story since before Lois had died. The thought that he’d taken a material step back to the land of the living that day didn’t cross his mind until weeks later.

Clark was sorry that Randall Young had taken his own life, sorry that his family would never see him again, sorry that someone so young had run out of hope so completely and permanently. But the next morning, as he checked out the Sunday paper, he felt a tiny rush of something almost indefinably pleasant as he looked at his name above the article. He had a little bounce in his step when he arrived at work on Monday.

He didn’t know that Perry had watched him come in and had nodded in approval. Or that Perry would share this tiny step forward with Jonathan and Martha on the phone before he left the office that evening.

Or that Perry would also relate this item to Bill Henderson in the furtherance of their benign conspiracy.

Clark changed out of his professional clothes that Monday evening and thought about calling Jimmy to see if he was free. Then he remembered that he still hadn’t talked to Bobbie about dinner with the Lanes on Wednesday evening, so he picked up his phone to dial her number.

Before he punched in the fourth digit, someone knocked at his front door. A frown creased his face – that had sounded like Bobbie’s knock. But she couldn’t be there. He’d just tried to call her.

He hung up the phone and set a mental reminder to call Bobbie about dinner with the Lanes, then walked to the front door.

Bobbie was standing there, her hands in her jacket pockets and her head bent forward. She glanced up and said, “Hi.”

Surprised, all Clark could manage was “Hi yourself.” After a moment he realized that she surely hadn’t come over to stand in his doorway, so he backed up a step. “Care to come in?”

She took two long steps and stopped at the head of the stairs leading down to his living area. She glanced around the room and said, “Pretty tidy for a bachelor pad.”

“I try to keep it clean. My dad says that any animal can live in filth, but only humans could choose to live in cleanliness.”

She nodded. “Sounds like something Glen might have said. Or my dad.”

He stood beside her for a long moment, watching her look around the apartment, then said, "I'm sorry, my manners must have run away to hide. Would you like to sit down?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, thanks."

She perched on the front edge of the couch as close to the front door as she could get. Clark couldn't figure out what was bothering her. "Would you like something to drink? I have tea, several kinds of soft drinks, ice water—"

"No." She apparently realized how sharp her tone was, because she looked at him and spoke softly. "I'm sorry. No, I don't need anything to drink, but thank you."

He slowly moved to the far end of the couch and sat down. "Bobbie, is something wrong?"

"Uh – no. Yes. Maybe." She fell back and covered her face with her hands. "I really don't know."

He clasped his hands together and put them in his lap. "Why don't you try to tell me about it?"

Her hands came down slowly. She didn't look at Clark. "Uh – okay. It – it's about the story you wrote. About Randall Young. The suicide on Saturday, the thing that took me away from Starways."

"What about it?"

She dropped her hands and filled her lungs. "Bill had me make the call to his family Saturday afternoon. They live in some little town in Illinois, just a wide spot in the road, like you wrote in your story, and right now I don't remember the name of the town. I got a local sheriff's deputy to go to his parents' house and call me when he arrived, and I got on the phone with the dad and told him what had happened to his son. I could – I could hear him trying not to cry when he called his wife to the phone and I had to go through the whole thing all over again with her."

She stopped for a moment and fluttered her hands, then continued. "We found a note on his bed – that wasn't in the story, you didn't know about it, probably just as well you didn't – anyway, the note said he was a junkie, broke, friendless, sick, and he was sure his family didn't want him back, that all he could do was this one last favor to them. The poor guy was totally out of hope." She looked at Clark with liquid eyes. "He was wrong. So very wrong. I could tell, even over the phone, even though I'd never met them. They still loved him, would have taken him back in a heartbeat, would've done anything they could to help him get straight." She stopped and wiped her cheeks. "But he didn't give them the chance."

Clark nodded but didn't say anything. He scooted a little closer to Bobbie.

"It – it made me realize how selfish I'd been. About Glen, I mean. If I'd managed to kill myself – I don't know what my mother would have done. And his parents, too. They always acted like I was already their daughter." She stopped and shuddered. "Just thinking about all of them coming to my funeral – man, it just creeps me out." She shook her head. "It would have been so wrong to do that to them."

He slowly reached out and took her hands in his. "I know," he almost whispered. "I feel the same way."

She lifted a surprised face to him. "You do?"

He nodded. "I don't know whether or not you heard

what Bill said to Superman about hating to tell a family that one member had chosen suicide as a solution to the problems of life."

She licked her lips and looked away but didn't move her hands. "Yeah. I heard that."

"I reacted just about the way you did when I heard that. It hit me how devastated my family and friends would be, how cheated they'd feel, and that the only thing killing myself would accomplish would be to unload my pain onto all of them. They'd all feel as if they'd failed me, that if they'd tried just a little harder I wouldn't be dead." He stopped to wipe his own cheeks, then looked at his damp fingers.

He hadn't realized he'd started weeping.

After a long moment, he felt Bobbie's fingertips brushing away the moisture on his face. Her hand stopped and she looked deep into his eyes, then pulled back and stood. "I should go now. Thanks for letting me dump all this on you. I – I'm sorry if I hurt you in any way."

He stood also but didn't reach for her. "Don't be. You didn't do anything wrong and you didn't cause any hurt. And I'm glad I could help, even just a little bit."

She flashed him a shy smile. "You did more than you know. If nothing else, at least I know I'm not the only self-centered weirdo in town."

He chuckled. "That's the nicest thing anyone has said to me in a long time."

She smiled brighter and pushed a strand of hair back over her ear. "I'm glad I could help. Hey, you know, I – I need to get going. Thanks again for your time."

She turned to go and he said, "Bobbie? You don't have to go if you don't want to."

She stopped and said over her shoulder, "I think it would be best if I left. I kinda want to stay a little too much right now."

He sighed. "I think I understand. I'll see you Wednesday about six-thirty, okay?"

She turned and frowned at him. "You will? Why?"

He grinned impishly at her. "Lucy invited both of us to dinner Wednesday night. She wants me to meet her new boyfriend, and she probably wants you there to be a buffer for her so I don't get too big brother-ish with him."

"Huh." Bobbie tilted her head in thought for a long moment, then her face cleared and she nodded. "Okay. I'll meet you here if that's okay with you. We can ride together since I don't know the address."

"It's a date," he chirped.

She frowned again and Clark mentally slapped himself. "I'm sorry. That just slipped out. It doesn't have to be a date, it's just two friends having dinner with some other friends."

She shrugged. "I don't mind. You can think of it like that." She reached out and pulled the door open, then gave him a shy smile. "But I'm telling Bill that we've got a date. It'll get him off my back for a little while."

Bobbie was through the door before Clark could respond.

Huh. That was interesting. It was almost as if Bobbie liked the thought of going on a date with him.

Maybe he liked the idea of it being an actual date too .

Bobbie walked to her car, thinking unfamiliar thoughts. The sense of déjà vu she'd felt at the crime scene when she'd looked at a shaky Superman returned with even more force. He'd said many of the same things that Clark had said. And he'd said them with a similar intensity.

How did Clark know what Bill had said to Superman? Were they that close? There was nothing in Clark's article that hinted that he and Superman had talked about Randall Young, and Bill usually didn't say things like that to reporters, even those he trusted. Those thoughts showed that Bill was human after all under that crusty exterior, but those thoughts were also very personal, very private, and not intended for public consumption.

And something about Clark's body language just now made her think of Superman, too. She wasn't sure what it was, or why the association popped up in her mind, but it did. She'd have to think about it, mull it over, cogitate on it, try to solidify whatever link was in her mind and determine if it was something real or if she was just imagining things.

Maybe—

No.

Couldn't be.

Could it?

No way. Not possible.

Or was it?

Wouldn't it be weird if Clark really was Superman? Or maybe if Superman was really Clark?

No. Crazy to even think it. Too freaky.

She wasn't sure whether she hoped it was true or hoped it wasn't.

Chapter Five

At precisely six-twenty-eight on Wednesday evening, Clark answered the knock at his front door. He'd known it was Bobbie without peeking. Her knock was unique to her, almost like a fingerprint, and he suddenly realized that he'd memorized it without intending to.

He opened the door wide and smiled. "Right on time. I appreciate a woman who's punctual."

She lifted one eyebrow and stepped into the apartment. "I appreciate a man who's ready when I call for him. Looking pretty good, you faux fashion model you."

He threw her an amused glance as he pulled on a light jacket. "That blouse and slacks ensemble pretties you up, too. Do you want to catch a cab?"

"I brought my personal vehicle. I think it's big enough for you."

He decided to keep the banter going. "If it's big enough for a beanpole like you, Tracey, then I should fit with no problem."

Both of her eyebrows rose. "Beanpole? You must like living dangerously, Kent."

"Of course I do. I'm riding to dinner with a cop. I'm in imminent danger of being involved in anything from a ticket for illegal parking to a homicide investigation."

She took a step closer and patted him on the cheek. "Don't worry, little Clarkie, I'll protect you from all those dangerous women."

"What about the dangerous men?"

She shook her head. "You're on your own for any man-fending-off that may be needed."

Clark watched Bobbie drive with skill and ease, sliding into and out of traffic without so much as a honked horn. He decided that conversation wouldn't distract her. "What shall we discuss on our journey?"

She shrugged. "We could play 'license plate tag.' My parents used to do that with me on trips when I was a kid to keep me from getting bored and asking if we were there yet every thirty seconds."

"As much fun as that sounds, I'd rather just talk. Anything new in your life lately?"

She glanced at him for a moment, then grinned. "Lucy and I had lunch together day before yesterday." He turned to look at her, but he didn't say anything. "Yeah, she called me at the station that morning and said 'You want to get together for lunch today? My treat.' Work-a-day cops don't turn down an offer like that."

"Was it a good lunch?"

"Yes. She took me to a place called Uncle Mike's Diner. I almost expected it to be a dive, but it was actually pretty nice. Mike is her adopted uncle, by the way, which you probably already knew, and he treated both of us like beauty pageant contestants. Food was great, too."

"I know the place and the man. He gets even nicer as you get to know him."

"Thought so. Anyway, we talked about you, about men in general, and she told me a couple of things about Lois you haven't yet, probably because you weren't around when that stuff happened."

Her voice turned serious. "Lucy said she trusted you with her heart, and that you were the only man she ever knew who kept his word." She paused to swallow, then said, "She really talked you up, Kent. I just hope her testimony stands up to cross-examination."

Her eyes were still glued to the road. "So do I, Bobbie," he said quietly.

The rest of the short trip was comfortably silent. Clark entertained thoughts of a future with Bobbie in his life and wondered how soon she'd need Superman's services.

Bobbie didn't hint at the content of her musings.

Lucy opened the door to see Clark with his hand in knocking position and his eyes wide with surprise. She laughed and said, "I saw your headlights flash on the front window. Come on in." She smiled and said, "You too, Bobbie. Come in and meet my mom."

Ellen walked in from the kitchen and walked straight to Clark, then pulled his head down to her level and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm so glad you could make it tonight, Clark! I've made your favorite lasagna, along with Lucy's garlic bread recipe." She turned to Bobbie and took her hands. "Good evening, Detective Tracey. I'm so glad you came with Clark. Ryan should be here in a few minutes. He called and said he'd had to work a little late and he really needed a shower."

Bobbie smiled at the older woman. "Thank you, Mrs. Lane. Please, just call me Bobbie."

"Well, if I'm going to call you Bobbie, then you have to

call me Ellen just like Clark does! After all, any friend of Clark's is a friend of ours, too."

Bobbie nodded. "Thank you – Ellen. I appreciate the honor."

"Oh, you're welcome! Say, why don't you come help me in the kitchen? You do cook, don't you?"

Bobbie took off her windbreaker and held it against her chest until Lucy relieved her of it. "Yes, I cook, but this is your meal, your house, and I wouldn't dream of interfering."

"Nonsense!" Ellen bubbled. She tugged Bobbie toward the kitchen. "You don't have to do anything! Just come in and keep me company. Lucy's part is done and she'll keep Clark occupied until Ryan gets here, then she'll surely run interference to keep Clark from scaring Ryan away."

Bobbie shot one imploring glance at Clark over her shoulder, but he just smiled at her. He knew she'd be okay with Ellen.

He hoped so, anyway.

As Bobbie wondered what third degree technique Ellen would use on her, the older woman smiled and pointed Bobbie to a stool to one side of the cabinet. As Bobbie sat, Ellen said, "Now you know that I just wanted a minute to talk with you, don't you? Lucy thinks quite highly of you."

Bobbie frowned. "She does?"

Ellen spoke as she gathered plates and silverware. "Yes. She asked a couple of her college teachers about you, they did some discreet research, and she said they told her that you were not only honest as the day is long, you were honest at night, too. They said they'd never heard any whisper of you being anything but a hard-working straight-laced detective with top five scores on both your detective exams and your pistol qualification. And that your case closure rate started low but has dramatically improved as you've gotten more experience."

"Wow. That's high praise." Bobbie hesitated, then asked, "Is there a particular reason to have gone to such lengths about me?"

Ellen stopped. "Of course there is. Clark."

"Clark?"

"Yes. Oh, I know he'd never take up with a criminal or someone who was just digging for gold – not that he has any – but I – I wasn't a very good mother to Lois as she was growing up, and I wasn't as supportive of her after her not-marriage to Lex Luthor as I should have been. Clark sort of – filled in some of the gaps I left."

Bobbie's eyes lit up. "Yeah. I remember something about that interrupted wedding. I was in uniform then, working out of a different precinct. Never had any direct contact with Luthor, but I heard the talk about him."

Ellen picked up a towel and wiped her hands. "And about Lois?"

Bobbie shrugged. "Cops are just people, and people talk. Sometimes it's just to hear themselves yak. I heard stuff about her, but I never put any stock in that. It was always 'my cousin's babysitter's boyfriend's uncle's cellmate's buddy' kind of thing, impossible to prove or disprove or even know how much of what I heard was what was originally said, much less having any resemblance to

the truth. All I really know is that she came back strong from that disaster. The Daily Planet showed her byline a lot."

Ellen dropped the towel on the counter. "I think the best thing Lois ever did was to give her heart to Clark. He would have watched over her, taken care of her, loved her as long as the sun gave light, and he would have taken any number of bullets for her. He loved her unreservedly." She sighed. "I only wish she could have realized it and loved him back."

"So – Clark's the son-in-law you wish you'd had? Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Yes." Ellen took Bobbie's hands in hers. "I'm trying to tell you that I love that young man and I want him to be happy, whoever that happiness involves. And I hope Ryan treats Lucy right. She deserves some happiness, too."

"Don't you? Deserve some happiness, I mean."

Ellen smiled. "If my children – and I consider myself Clark's surrogate mother when Martha Kent isn't around – can have happy lives, I'll be satisfied. People my age don't always find romantic love, especially when they're not looking for it. Besides, while love and marriage are very important, they're not the only things in life."

Bobbie heard the front door open and saw Ellen's eyes change as she registered the sound. Ellen suddenly stepped back and clapped her palms together. "Ryan's here and dinner's ready. If you'll set the table for five, we'll eat. I'm getting hungry!"

After Bobbie disappeared into the kitchen with Ellen, Lucy tugged on Clark's jacket and said, "Come on, slowpoke, you know where the closet is. Hang yours up while I take care of Bobbie's."

Clark smiled at her and obeyed. As he followed her into the living room, he asked, "What's your first impression of Bobbie?"

"I already gave it to you on Saturday."

He pulled his eyebrows down at her for a moment, then asked, "Okay, what's your second impression?"

She frowned in thought for a few seconds, then said, "Still positive. So far, anyway. We'll see if she knows which piece of silverware to use and if she wipes her hands on her slacks or the napkin."

He frowned. "Come on, Lucy, she's housebroken."

Lucy whooped, then clamped her hands over her mouth and muffled her laughter. "You'd better not let her hear you say that! She's big enough to clobber you!"

Clark shook his head. "What are we having for dinner?"

"Just what Mom said, pasta and garlic bread. Simple stuff, easy to clean up afterward. Why, were you hoping for a seafood feast?"

"No, just trying to make polite conversation."

Before Lucy could respond, a rapid tattoo beat out "Shave And A Haircut" at the front entrance. Lucy jumped up and ran to the door, but before she opened it she knocked twice in response. Over her shoulder, she looked at Clark and called out, "Two bits!"

He smiled and said, "I figured."

Lucy opened the door to reveal a young, slender man about four inches shorter than Clark with short blond hair

and a neat goatee. He grinned at Lucy and grabbed her, then lifted her off her feet. “Hey, girl! I’m so glad to see you again!”

Lucy chuckled. “I’m glad to see you too, Ryan, but you need to come in and meet Clark.”

Still grinning, Ryan set her on the ground gently and strode to the living room with his hand outstretched. “Hi! You must be Clark Kent! I’m Ryan Barnes. Glad to meet you.”

Clark took his hand and smiled back. “I’m glad to meet you too, Ryan. How’s the electrician business these days?”

Their hands parted and Ryan said, “Doing really good, actually. With all the new homes going up on the West Side and the upgrades and rebuilds around Hob’s Bay, we’re busier than a one-armed paper hanger. Oh, hey, sorry, that means—”

Clark chuckled. “It’s okay, Ryan, I’m from Kansas. That’s not a new idiom for me.”

“Kansas, huh? Whereabouts?”

Lucy glanced at Clark, puzzled, but Clark smiled and replied, “Smallville. Not too far from Wichita.”

“I’m from Oklahoma, down around Poteet. We’re just about neighbors.”

“Yep.”

Lucy made shooing motions at both men. “Come on, you guys, sit down! No reason to stand on ceremony. We’re all friends here.”

Bobbie and Ellen chose that moment to walk in, so Clark and Ryan, both halfway to sitting, popped back up like Jacks-in-the-box. Lucy took Ryan’s hand in hers and said, “Ryan, I want you to meet Bobbie Tracey. Bobbie, this is—”

“Ryan – um, Barnes, right? We’ve met.”

Ryan’s face faded from smile to confusion. “Sorry, ma’am, I don’t quite recall where it was we met. Can you remind me?”

“Sure can.” Bobbie’s smile grew as she spoke. “I gave you a speeding ticket about two years ago. Pulled you over on the Curt Swan. You were doing, let’s see, I think it was ninety-eight in a sixty-five zone.”

“No ma’am, I remember that, and my speedometer only read—”

She laughed and waved at him. “It doesn’t matter, Ryan. It’s old news and I’m not here to bust you again. I don’t even know if you paid the ticket and I don’t care. I was invited for dinner, same as you, except I’m here with Clark.”

Ryan’s eyes widened and he said, “Oh.” Then he managed, “Okay.” He took a breath and added, “I did pay the ticket. It was my first moving violation.”

“Good. Didn’t impact your insurance premiums, did it?”

“Naw. They just told me I’d better not get another one for six months.”

“I take it that you didn’t.”

“Haven’t got one since then. Oh, I, uh, hope you don’t have your ticket book with you. My, uh, my pickup smokes something awful and I haven’t had time to take it to the shop.”

Lucy laughed with Bobbie and took Ryan’s arm, then led him to the table. “Mom, are we about ready to eat?”

“We are,” Ellen returned. “And Bobbie has volunteered to help me serve, so you can sit and flirt with Ryan.”

Ryan’s eyes widened again. “Oh, no, ma’am! Clark’s bigger’n me and his friend is too and besides she’s a cop! You better believe I’m on my best behavior tonight!”

Bobbie scooped out a modest helping of lasagna, took a single slice of bread, and sipped her tea. It was sweet, as she’d expected, but not tooth-rattling sweet like Clark’s was most of the time. She marveled that he still had such a terrific smile.

Of course, maybe there was a special reason – an other-worldly one – that he didn’t seem to need regular dental care. She added that to her mental evidence inventory.

She also reminded herself that she didn’t have anywhere near enough evidence for an arrest, much less a warrant. It was something to think about, though, something to occupy her mind and distract her from the stress of the evening. Standing in the kitchen with Ellen while the older woman nattered on about Lucy and Ryan’s relationship and how she hoped he really did love Lucy hadn’t settled her mind in the least. Bobbie was more tense now than when she’d knocked on Clark’s door.

She was doing her best not to show it, but she was extremely nervous, almost scared. This was Lois Lane’s family, a mother and daughter who’d practically adopted Clark after Lois’ death, two people he was still close to despite the loss of his potential future with Lois. Bobbie felt as if she’d walked up to home plate with two strikes against her before she’d seen the first pitch.

She refocused on the conversation as Ellen asked Ryan, “So, young man, is it really lack of time or actually a lack of funds that keeps your truck from being repaired?”

Ryan smiled at her. “Lack of time, ma’am. I’m a pretty fair electrician and a passable carpenter on little stuff, but cars and trucks give me fits so I don’t mess with ‘em if I can avoid it. I’d want it to run after I got done working on it.”

Ryan waited for the chuckle to run its course, then added, “I’d have to miss some work or ride in with someone or rent a car for a couple of days if I put my truck in the shop. And Lucy can’t give me a ride, cause her work schedule don’t match with mine.”

Lucy nudged Bobbie and said, “I’m surprised his truck ever did the speed limit, much less exceed it by that much.”

Bobbie smiled back. “That bad, huh?”

Lucy nodded. “He took out the bench seat in the back of the cab and made a tool storage locker out of the space. There’s a lot of extra weight back there, not to mention all the supplies he carries in the bed. Makes that six-cylinder motor work hard.”

Ryan pouted at her. “Hey, I don’t work for some big corporation. Benning Electric is a family shop, and we don’t got a big semi to haul supplies to the job for us. And I’m real particular about my ladders. They got to fit my legs just right or I’m not comfortable near the top.”

Ellen laughed. “I understand. I’m very particular about my scrubs, too.”

Ryan lifted his eyebrows. “Sorry, scrubs?”

“Nurse clothes,” Lucy supplied. “Those color-matched

shirt and pants the nurses wear. They're distinctive so doctors and other nurses know who's trained for what things."

Ryan nodded. "Sure, right. Lucy told me about 'em but I forgot for a minute."

"That's okay, honey," Lucy said. "I know more about electrical systems now than when we first met, but I still forget things I'm certain you've already explained to me."

Bobbie decided to divert some attention away from herself. She nudged Lucy and stage-whispered, "'Honey'? Should your mother brace herself for an announcement of some kind?"

Lucy giggled. Clark smiled. Ellen turned her head and glared at her daughter in obvious mock surprise.

Ryan looked horrified. "Wh – what? Announcement? Lucy, what're you tellin' your mom and your friends?"

Clark and the three women all burst out laughing. Then Clark said, "Hey, Ryan, don't sweat it. It's just that it looks like Bobbie and Lucy bonded a little quicker than I thought they would."

Still smiling wide, Ellen dabbed at her lips with her napkin, then said, "Bobbie, I don't think I've heard how you and Clark met. I bet it was some kind of story he was working on, wasn't it?"

Bobbie sobered immediately. It was a question – *the* question – she hadn't anticipated being asked tonight, hadn't wanted to answer tonight, and especially hadn't believed she'd be asked by Clark's almost-might-have-been mother-in-law.

She licked her lips and opened her mouth to say something – anything – when Lucy hissed, "Mom! I told you—" then sucked in a breath through her teeth and didn't finish her sentence.

Ellen sobered too. "Oh, dear, I've put my foot in it, haven't I? I'm so sorry, Bobbie, Clark. I completely forgot that Lucy had asked me not to mention that. She didn't tell me why and I – I'm truly sorry. Please forget I even brought up the subject."

Bobbie gently put her fork down on her plate and looked at Ellen. "No. I'm sorry. I assumed Lucy or Clark would have told you already, but since neither of them tackled that task, I'll tell you."

Ellen raised her hand. "No, really, you don't have to if you don't want to."

Bobbie shook her head. "There's no reason you shouldn't know." She paused and took a breath, then let it out, conscious of Ellen's slightly guilty look and Ryan's silent curiosity. "Clark and I met a little more than six months ago in the cemetery. He was there—"

Bobbie paused when Ellen gasped lightly but didn't speak. Bobbie turned to face the far wall and continued, "He was there visiting Lois' grave, and yes, I already knew a lot about her before tonight because Clark has told me a lot. And he knows why I was there. I was visiting my partner's grave that morning. We talked about why we were there, told each other that we each felt responsible for those graves being filled, and we mutually decided that we both needed someone to vent with, someone who really understood what each of us was experiencing. Since then, we've become friends – really good friends – and Lucy was

kind enough to invite us to dinner with the three of you tonight and it's really good and I think I like all of you a lot and I'm deeply sorry to have clobbered the mood so badly."

Bobbie closed her eyes and sat still and statue-like for a long breath. She heard someone stand, and after a brief moment two arms surrounded her in a motherly hug.

Bobbie opened her eyes to see Ellen Lane – Lois' mother – hugging her tightly. She was shocked. That one act spoke volumes about how Ellen felt about Clark, about Bobbie, about how she viewed a possible relationship between Bobbie and Clark, and about her own regret for having introduced the subject.

Bobbie heard the older woman's quiet voice in her ear, saying, "I'm so sorry, Bobbie, I'm so sorry you lost someone close to you, I'm sorry I hit you in the face with your grief, and I'm sorry for the pain I know you've gone through. But I'm not sorry you're here with us tonight. Clark is a very good man, and if he trusted you enough to bring you here with him, it means that you're a very good person. I'm so very glad you're his friend."

That did it. Bobbie lost control, grabbed Ellen's arm to hold on for dear life, and burst out in tears. Then Lucy encircled her from the other side and added her tears.

Bobbie half-expected Clark to join them, but she heard chairs scrape across the floor and knew that the men had left the table to give the ladies some room. Bobbie wept for nearly a full minute before she calmed down long enough to speak coherently.

She wiped her eyes and put her mouth close to Ellen's ear. "Ellen, would you mind if – if Clark and I – and we aren't yet and we haven't talked – but if I wanted to – to get closer to him – do I have your – your permission?"

"Oh. Dear, you aren't thinking Clark is looking for Lois' replacement, are you?"

"Uh – no, not Clark. I just wanted to – I don't want you to think – that is – oh, nuts! I don't know how to say this!"

Ellen chuckled, then lifted her head and kissed Bobbie on the cheek. "You're not Lois. And you should never, ever try to be her. She was unique and irreplaceable, just as you are unique and irreplaceable. You just be you, and if you and Clark decide to be something unique and irreplaceable together, I'll be thrilled."

"Me too," whispered Lucy. "Me too."

Bobbie would have thanked them both had her mouth been working properly.

Clark followed Ryan into the living room and sat down in the recliner as Ryan took the easy chair. "I had to get out of there, man," Ryan said quietly. "I can't take it when women get all weepy together at the same time. Makes me want to break down and join them."

Clark looked at Ryan's clear eyes and relaxed body language. Then he nodded at the man. "I know. I thought about joining them myself."

Ryan leaned back. "Probably best you didn't. I had four older sisters at home, and I learned early to let them cry together and bond. We'll go back in for dessert when they're done drying each other's faces." He lifted one hand, palm out. "Air high five, man."

Clark grinned and pushed his palm in Ryan's direction.

He didn't know if this man was Lucy's soul mate or best friend or what, but the young man had unexpected depth. Clark wondered if Ryan had a loss similar to Clark's in his life, but he'd never ask him. If Ryan wanted Clark to know, Ryan or Lucy would tell him.

Ryan chose that moment to grin at him. "Don't spill the beans, okay, but I heard a rumor from Lucy that they might pull out one of their board games tonight. With this many players, Monopoly would be very competitive."

Clark smiled back. "Yeah, it would. And I'd own all your properties by the end and drive you into bankruptcy."

Ryan snorted softly. "I ain't scared o' you, Kansas. You might be a meanie on the board, but you've likely never seen Ellen play. She's like a tiger shark, dude. You land on a property and don't buy it, she snaps it up like it's a stack of unguarded hundreds. Outbids the other players and crows about it. Loud. They use the Free Parking rule, too, and I've seen six grand in the middle of the board more'n once." At Clark's raised eyebrow, he added, "Lucy went out and bought an extra money tray a few weeks ago. Good thing, too, cause Ellen's tough to out-bid."

"I consider myself warned." Clark tried to communicate more than his thanks for the game tip. "And – thank you."

Ryan looked at him for a moment, then nodded slowly. "You're welcome."

Ryan's attention focused on the next room for a moment. "I think we have some time to chat. I did some rewiring out in the garage last month, and I found what I think was some of your handiwork."

"Sorry if it wasn't up to code. I didn't have a whole lot of tools to work with, and I'm just a casual fixer-upper."

Ryan shook his head. "Naw, man, I wasn't talking smack, I was gonna say it was pretty good work. The electrical stuff was good and solid. I didn't have to redo any of it." He tilted his head and brushed the end of his nose. "I'm guessin' you didn't run that air conditioner drain, though."

"Not my work, no. Are you saying that some of it wasn't up to code?"

"Sure wasn't. It was backing up into the drip pan because the copper pipe was just lying on the concrete, not secured to anything, and someone or something had pushed up the middle so that it was the highest point in the line. It wouldn't drain for nothin'. The drip pan had green mold growing in it. Had to scoop it out and bleach it clean before I could fix it or it would'a just got clogged again."

"Glad you took care of it. I didn't even think to check it."

"No problem, dude. Like I said, I knew it wasn't your work when I saw it. Anybody that careful with electrical lines wouldn't make a dumb mistake like that with a simple drain. Probably from the previous homeowner, or maybe some careless A/C tech. Anyway, it's fixed now and the house smells a little cleaner."

"Good for you, Ryan. You seem to have a solid handle on life. Your life, anyway."

"Thanks. Uh, can I tell you something? Something – um – kinda personal?"

"Sure. I promise not to be offended."

"Uh – actually, it's – it's real personal. So maybe I

better not say it at all."

Now Clark was intrigued. "That's your choice, of course, but I don't mind. Please, go ahead."

Ryan ducked his head and hesitated, then muttered, "Even if it's about you and Bobbie?"

Clark went still for a moment, then remembered to breathe. Ryan might get curious if he didn't breathe for a while.

After a long moment, Clark said, "Yes, it's okay. As long as you understand that I reserve the right of declining your counsel."

Ryan looked up at him and frowned for a moment, then his face cleared and he nodded. "Yeah, right. I got ya."

Ryan squared his shoulders and moved his head as if loosening his neck. "Lucy's told me a lot about you and – and her sister. She told me that you and Lois were like—" he held up one hand with the thumb and index finger almost touching "—this close to getting engaged when she – when she passed away. She said you were real bad tore up when it happened, too. Like I think I might be if Lucy died suddenly before we – while we're still dating."

Clark waited for Ryan to speak again, but the other man only looked at Clark as if asking permission to continue. "None of that is a secret, Ryan. I think it's been pretty evident for the past year and a half."

Ryan nodded. "Yeah, but now you come over with this other lady, Bobbie, and she's a cop, man, a *cop*! She's pretty cool, okay, and she apologized to me for having to give me that ticket when she handed it to me even though she told me I'd forced her to write me up cause I was driving so fast. So I ain't mad at her one bit, okay? In fact, tonight I saw her looking at you a couple of times, and she looked a lot like Lucy did after we'd been dating for a while, like the thought of a future with you didn't make her wanna toss her cookies."

Clark tried not to react, but he couldn't help it. He tried to stifle the laugh but it came out as a snort. "Thanks, I think."

"Anyway, what I'm trying to say in my very un-clever way is that if you and Bobbie decide you got a future together, Ellen and Lucy both would be totally cool with it. They don't wanna make the decision for you, but after the way Lucy talked up Bobbie this past Monday night at dinner they might plan y'all's honeymoon for you."

Clark tried not to react, but he couldn't keep his mouth closed or his eyes at normal diameter. "You – they – *that* was the conversation at dinner?!"

"Don't get me wrong, man, they're not gonna play matchmaker for you guys. They just want you to be happy. Dude, the way they talked *you* up when I first had dinner here, I almost got jealous of you. Lucy and Ellen both think you're at least the second best thing since sliced bread and peanut butter. I was worried I didn't have much of a chance with Lucy if you were gonna be around. But now that I met you and I know you're a righteous guy, I think I agree with them. You're a really nice guy and you deserve some happiness."

Clark sat back and tried to absorb some of this new information. "Wow. Thanks, Ryan. I appreciate the sentiment. But let's not forget that Bobbie has some choice

in the matter, too.”

“Course she does. And I wasn’t tryin’ to push you into something, y’all ain’t ready to do.” Ryan leaned over and looked into the dining room for a moment, then straightened and shifted closer to Clark. “But I will tell you this, okay, and it’s the last thing. Ellen said that night that if Bobbie was anything like Lucy said she seemed like, you should grab her and never let go.”

Clark’s jaw dropped again. “Ellen? Lois’ *mother* said that?”

“Yes.” Ryan smiled – a bit smugly, Clark thought – and moved back to his original position. “So, heard any good news rumors lately?”

As Lucy had expected, her mother had cornered more monopolies than anyone else and had built up the properties to increase the rents. The woman had put on a fake Scottish accent, trying to imitate Scrooge McDuck. All Ellen lacked was feathers and a bill.

At the moment, she was chuckling at Ryan, who sighed dramatically and turned the last of his already mortgaged properties over to her to satisfy his debt. He’d had the misfortune to land on Pacific Avenue without enough cash to satisfy a four-house rent. Ellen rubbed her hands together and all but cackled at him.

“Gotcha, Ryan!” she crowed. “You’re bankrupt! Go join Clark and Lucy in the poorhouse!”

Bobbie surprised Lucy when she said, “Hey, I’m the one who put Clark there. I’d cackle later if I were you.”

“Ha! I’m one up on you! I drove Lucy out!”

“Only because I set her up for you. She landed on my hotel on Ventnor three consecutive trips around the board. I ended up with both utilities and all four railroads.” Bobbie gave Ellen an evil glare. “Your turn, lady. And don’t roll those dice too fast or I’ll have to write you a ticket.”

“Oh, I’m scared now! How’s about I just bankrupt you? I’d do it just for fun!”

Bobbie smiled at her. “I thought that’s what games were supposed to be, fun. Roll ‘em.”

Ellen rattled the dice in her hand and dropped them in the middle of the game board. The seven pips showing sent her to Community Chest.

She drew the top card and looked at it. “Oh, dear. Lucy, where’s your calculator?”

Lucy sniggered and walked to her purse on the nearby cabinet. “I think Mom has the tax assessment card. Pay what, thirty-five for every house and fifty-five for each hotel?”

Ellen accepted the calculator, switched it on, and started pushing buttons. “Six hotels, and – let’s see – twenty-seven houses – add to memory – that’s – that can’t be right.”

Clark shook his head. “If it says one thousand two hundred seventy-five, then it’s right.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Ellen fumed. “I’ve never paid that much for an assessment on a real house!”

Ryan put in, “Hey, crime’s way down in Metropolis since Superman got here. Dude’s responsible for property values going up and property tax rates going down. Least that’s what my boss tells me. Ain’t that so, Luce?”

Lucy smiled at him. “That’s what the city council said

when they lowered the tax rate last year. Fewer violent crimes, less property crime, safer neighborhoods, fewer insurance damage claims and payouts, so yeah, Superman’s at least partly responsible.”

Lucy glanced at Clark, who – unaccountably – actually looked a little bit embarrassed. How could that be? Why would praise for Superman make Clark’s cheeks redden? Was he still thinking about Lucy’s tirade against Superman? Hadn’t he believed her when she’d told him she’d been wrong, that she’d only been reacting to Lois’ death?

And why did Bobbie have this calculating look on her face? Was she hoping to land on Free Parking? Or was it something else?

Bobbie pointed to the middle of the board. “We’re getting off the rails, folks. Ellen Lane needs to put twelve hundred smackers in Free Parking. And I’m only eight spaces away.”

“Don’t forget the other seventy-five dollars,” Clark added.

Ellen shot him a dirty look, then counted out her assessment. “There! I hope somebody chokes on it!”

Bobbie picked up the dice and rolled.

They showed two fours. Eight the hard way.

Bobbie moved her thimble to Free Parking, reached for the pile of Monopoly cash in the middle of the board, then stopped and took a long drink of tea. She put her glass down and breathed, “Ahhh. Now that my throat’s good and wet, I don’t think I’ll choke.”

She raked in the money and sorted it into piles by denomination as Clark, Ryan, and Lucy all howled.

After a moment, Ellen joined in.

Clark smiled at the gathering at the front door. The evening had taken some unexpected twists and turns, but in the end they’d all had an excellent time. Bobbie had proven herself resilient and fun to be around, and he thought everyone had enjoyed meeting her.

As opposed to having her bankrupt him out of the Monopoly game. He hadn’t liked that, but only because he liked to win. Bobbie was a fiercer competitor than Clark had expected, although he’d noticed that she’d never tried to bend the rules or force anyone to do things her way.

Ellen handed Bobbie’s coat to her – Clark was expected to fetch his own – then grasped her hand. “Bobbie, you come on back whenever you have the time. You’re a fun young lady, far too good for the likes of Clark Kent.”

They shared a laugh. “I haven’t met Clark’s mom yet, but she might have the opposite opinion.”

“Nonsense! Martha is a sensible, mature, grown-up woman. She’ll love you at first sight.” Then Ellen leaned closer and lowered her voice. “And if she doesn’t, just let me know. I’ll straighten her out.”

Bobbie smiled back at Ellen and almost whispered back, “I don’t doubt it. Good night, Ellen. And thank you so very much for everything. I really felt at home tonight.”

Ellen grinned. “Then you’ll have to come back, young lady. You and Lucy can argue the finer points of the law next time.”

“No way,” Bobbie said. “I don’t try them, I just arrest them. Convicting them is somebody else’s job.”

“Hey!” Lucy snapped. “My boss defends the people you arrest! They deserve competent legal representation too!”

Bobbie fixed her with one raised eyebrow and one lowered one, reminding Clark of the pro wrestler The Rock. “Then that’s what we can argue about, representing scum in criminal court.”

Lucy gave back a predatory grin. “You better come locked and loaded, then. I’ve learned a lot, and I think I can flatten you. Forensically speaking, of course.”

Bobbie’s eyes widened and she took a quick breath, but Clark turned Bobbie’s shoulders and aimed her at the open front door before she could speak. “Good night everyone she’s my ride had a great time Lucy terrific meal Ellen good to meet you Ryan come on Bobbie it’s getting late and you need to get me home.”

By the time he’d run out of words, they were halfway down the sidewalk with the whoops and cackles of two laughing Lanes pursuing them.

Chapter Six

Clark had just set foot on the newsroom floor Thursday morning when Jimmy caught his arm. “CK! Good. We need to go right now.”

Clark spun on his heel and followed. “Where are we going, Jimmy?”

“Mazik’s Jewelry. Somebody robbed it last night.”

“What!”

Jimmy looked at him oddly. “Why so surprised? The bad guys rob places with money and jewels all the time.”

Clark sighed. Jimmy couldn’t be held responsible for Clark’s mental state or the emotional associations with Jason Mazik’s store. “Okay, I’m right behind you.”

They piled into the elevator together as Jimmy did a final check of his camera and other equipment. Clark listened to his mumbled inventory and smiled. “You got everything, Jimmy?”

The young man glanced up. “Sure. Hey, what’s so funny?”

Clark shook his head. “Not funny. Refreshing.”

“What is?” Then Jimmy nodded. “Oh, yeah, I got it. Youthful enthusiasm and energy, right?”

“That’s it.”

“Hey, I can’t claim all the credit. I’ve learned a bunch of stuff from Perry, but a lot of what I know came from you and Lois.”

Clark froze for a moment, then Jimmy put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, CK, I didn’t mean to—”

“No.” Clark shook himself. “No, that’s okay. If you’re part of Lois’ legacy in the news game, then she would’ve considered it a compliment.”

The young man slowly grinned back at him. “Thanks. That means a lot to me.”

They rode the rest of the way to the ground floor in silence. As Clark stepped out, Jimmy asked, “CK? Are you doing okay?”

Clark stopped and turned, then considered the matter realistically. Six months earlier he would have simply muttered ‘Fine’ and ignored the reality of his heart, but instead he paused and gave the question some real thought.

After a long moment, he nodded and said, “You know,

Jimmy, I think I am okay. Today, at least.”

Jimmy grinned. “Can’t ask for much more than that. Come on! We got a story to cover.”

Clark and Jimmy showed their press passes and gained access to the front door of Mazik’s shop. They stopped and peeked inside, and Jimmy was surprised at the level of destruction he saw.

All of the display cases were smashed and the locked drawers beneath them had been pried open. Broken glass was scattered all over the floor. The light reflecting off the fragments made it appear that there were jewels scattered all around them.

But the detectives and the police photographer ignored the flashes, although Jimmy noticed that they did their best to step in the few areas which were clear of glass shards. One of the detectives, a redheaded woman Jimmy didn’t know, turned and saw them.

“Hey! You guys press?”

“Daily Planet,” Clark answered. “I’m Clark Kent, reporter, and this is Jimmy Olsen, photographer. We’ve been assigned to cover this breaking story.”

She cautiously made her way to the door. “We’re just about done with the preliminaries. What all do you need?”

“Pictures of the crime scene, an interview with the owner and/or manager, and a statement from the police,” Jimmy said, “along with any thoughts about who’s responsible and how soon you expect to catch them.”

“And your name, too,” added Clark. “We want to give you proper credit for solving the case.”

She frowned at Clark. “I’m Detective Felicia Ybarra. My partner is Detective Sergeant Gerald Freeman. And I can’t tell you how soon we’ll find these perps.”

Clark took a pencil and a notepad from his pocket. “Was anyone injured during the robbery, Detective?”

Ybarra shook her head. “No. It looks as if the skels – sorry, the perpetrators – waited until after the shop was locked up for the night. First thing they did was smash the security camera with a crowbar or a pipe. That swing at the lens was the only image captured, so we don’t even have a good idea of their number.” She sighed. “This is going to take a lot of legwork.”

Jimmy nodded. “Can I take some shots now?”

Ybarra turned and called out, “Jerry? I got two reporters here. Can they get some pics?”

A man in a suit looked in their direction. “Reporters for who?”

“Daily Planet. Names are Kent and Olsen.”

“Kent, huh? Sure. Just don’t catch any of our faces.”

“The Planet doesn’t print facial images unless the people are the story,” Jimmy said. “If I do happen to catch anyone’s faces, we’ll either blur them out or crop them out of the picture.”

Jerry frowned and licked his lips for a few seconds, then said, “Sure. Come on in. We’ve got all our shots.”

Jimmy stepped in first, trying to avoid as many glass fragments as possible. He didn’t want another memo from Building Services for bringing trash onto the newsroom floor. He checked his flash unit once more to make sure it was plugged into its charging port, then started

photographing everything he could see.

He heard Clark ask for Jerry's full name and rank – Detective Sergeant Gerald Freeman – then secured permission to quote Detective First Grade Felicia Ybarra. As Jimmy took a shot of one of the open drawers behind a destroyed display case, Clark broke off the conversation with Ybarra and called out, “Jimmy! Hold up a minute.”

Clark and the female detective were suddenly behind Jimmy's shoulder. “What is it, CK? Did I step on something?”

“No,” Clark said, “but I think you found something.” Clark pointed at the open drawer and said, “Can you light that up again with your flash? I think I saw a reflection of some kind.”

“What?” Ybarra asked. “What did you see?”

Jimmy triggered just his flash unit and looked down. “Wait a minute,” he said. “There's something on the floor under there.”

Jimmy reached for the open drawer, but Clark gently grabbed his forearm. “We need to let the detective check it out, Jim.” Clark turned to her and gestured for her to move past him.

Ybarra gave him a questioning look but didn't speak, then stepped past him and pushed the drawer shut with her foot.

A rectangle of paper the size of a business card lay on the floor.

She frowned at it. “That's not one of Mazik's cards. The font's all wrong.” She raised her voice. “Jerry? I think the reporters may have found us a clue.”

Freeman walked over to them, pulling on a latex glove as he approached. His eyebrow lifted at the sight of the card. He waited for Jimmy to take a shot of it as it lay, then he picked it up with his gloved hand as Ybarra opened a plastic evidence bag for him.

“Kelly's Auto Body and Repair,” Ybarra read through the bag. “Doesn't sound like something one of Mazik's customers would drop in here.”

Freeman nodded. “Except for the busted glass and a couple of smudged partial work boot footprints, the carpet is immaculate. And I doubt that many of Mazik's customers would choose that footwear.” He turned to Clark and Jimmy. “Gentlemen, I believe you have indeed given us a significant clue.”

“We won't print that you have the card unless it helps you solve the case, Detective,” Clark said. “I've got a personal reason to see that the thief or thieves get caught.”

“Well, I think you've earned a quick interview with my partner, Kent,” said Freeman. “I, in the meantime, will move on this important clue. Good eyes, both of you.”

“You would have found it eventually.”

Ybarra unbent and almost smiled at Clark. “Don't sell yourself short, big man. We have a lead quicker than we would have, thanks to you. Now, what else do you want to ask me? For your story, that is.”

Clark got a page two byline on Friday morning and Jimmy got three shots printed alongside the story. He even earned a heartfelt “attaboy” from Perry. And Clark managed to quote both Detective Inspector Gerald Freeman and

Detective Felicia Ybarra on the robbery and how quickly they anticipated solving the crime.

And they did, needing no help from Superman. On Friday afternoon just after two o'clock, Detective Felicia Ybarra, accompanied by three uniformed officers, burst into the thieves' apartment hideout with the proper warrants and arrested two men without incident. They found the tools the thieves had used to break into the store, plus several bags of mounted jewelry and a number of loose stones, all identified as missing from Mazik's store, all of which were confiscated as evidence. The tally indicated that the thieves hadn't sold any of the loot yet, probably because they didn't know who would fence it.

Clark got the exclusive on the arrest, too, printed in the Saturday morning edition, thanks to a hasty phone call from Detective Sergeant Gerald Freeman to the Daily Planet. Jimmy's follow-up on the brief saga was printed on the Sunday front page below the fold, pushed out of the banner spot by Clark's coverage of the nuclear disarmament treaty just concluded between the nations of the European Union and Israel. It included a quote from Superman to the effect that life in both Europe and the Mid-East was now safer than before.

Clark had asked Superman if he intended to help enforce the treaty. He'd answered that he wasn't involved in the political or legal process of treaty enforcement, and that it was an agreement between sovereign nations and they were responsible for following the provisions in the document. But he also stated that he'd be on hand to intercept any nuclear missiles any nation might launch toward the others and throw them into the sun.

Perry read over the final layout of the front page and smiled. Maybe – just maybe – Clark Kent was finally back.

He'd have to touch base with Clark's parents. He was certain they'd want a copy of this issue, and if they didn't already have one he'd mail one to them himself.

He'd call Bill Henderson, too. It looked to Perry as if the developing relationship Clark had with this lady detective was a good thing for Clark.

And for the Daily Planet, too.

Just before Clark left for the day that Friday, his desk phone rang. “Clark Kent, Daily Planet. How can I help you?”

“You can come to dinner with me Sunday afternoon,” Bobbie responded.

He smiled. “I think I can manage that. Where and what time?”

“I'll pick you up about eleven-thirty. We're having lunch with Glen's parents.”

Clark felt his mouth move. He knew he should probably say something, but whatever it was wouldn't come out. He licked his lips, and when that didn't help, he sat up and flexed his shoulders.

Nothing. His speech center had definitely locked up due to input overload.

Bobbie finally said, “Clark? Are you okay? Is this – is this too much?”

He shook himself and took a breath. “No, Bobbie, it's – it's not too much. You just kind of caught me by surprise,

that's all."

"I'm sorry. You don't have to go if you're uncomfortable."

"No, it's okay. I think I'd really like to meet them. From what you've told me about Glen's family, they're really good people."

The relief in her voice came down the line. "Oh, yeah, they're great! I've told them a little about you and your job and a little bit of how you – how you understand where I'm coming from. But I meant it, you don't have to come if you'd rather not. I know I just kind of threw it at you out of the blue and I don't want to put any pressure on you but I was hoping—"

"Whoa, hold on! Yeah, the invite was a surprise, but that's not a reason to turn it down. Anyway, I really can't complain, not after the way I ambushed you with dinner at the Lanes."

"That ended up being a good night! I like Lucy and Ellen. In fact, Lucy and I are meeting for lunch again on Monday. I think she wants to grill me on whether or not my intentions toward you are honorable."

Honorable intentions.

There were so many different possible responses to that.

He could tease her lightly. He could act offended. He could laugh it off. He could express his own concern about her intentions. He could turn it back on her and suggest something about his own intentions, honorable or not.

But in his mind, none of those responses fit. He knew he was special to Bobbie, just as she knew she was special to him. He also knew that it was way too early to even suggest a romantic future with her, much less something permanent. Neither of them was ready for something like that. He didn't want to scare her off, but he also didn't want to make her feel as though he thought she was pushing him in a direction he didn't want to go.

So he opted for a neutral and non-committal comment. "You just tell her your intentions include beating me at multiple board games in the near future and she'll be fine."

Bobbie's relaxed laugh eased his mind. "I'll remember that. Thanks, Clark."

"Any time. You said eleven-thirty on Sunday?"

"Yes. Oh, please wear nice clothes and clean sneakers. They raised seven kids in that house, and even though you can tell it's lived in they keep it immaculate. They're not OCD about it, but you'd better not smudge any of the glass or put your cup down without a saucer or a coaster under it. Because I *am* OCD about it. I am at their place, anyway."

"Okay. Something like my usual Saturday outfits, but slacks instead of jeans?"

"That'd be perfect. See you in the morning?"

"Unless someone makes news I have to cover or commits a crime you have to solve, yes."

"Great! Tomorrow's my treat at Starways, isn't it?"

He chuckled. "Well, I'm not keeping score, but I won't fight with you over the check. If you want to pay, it suits me just fine."

"You know I'd beat you in a fight, right?"

He smiled. "I'd let you win. See you tomorrow."

"Bye, Clark."

When Bobbie arrived at Glen's grave the next morning – a good bit earlier than usual – she paced nervously. Sure, Clark had assured her that he'd be glad to meet Glen's parents, but maybe he was just being kind. She'd not told him that the invitation to the Lanes had all but terrified her until she'd spoken with Ellen in the kitchen. The older woman's smiles and sincere manner and gentle words had eased Bobbie's trepidation slightly, and the way she'd reassured Bobbie after learning where and how Bobbie and Clark had met had dissipated any residual tension she might have still had. She wondered what Ryan and Clark had discussed in the living room, but it didn't matter all that much. Whatever it was, it hadn't spooked Clark into backing away from her.

Now, though, she'd pushed him into dinner with the LeCour family. Bobbie knew they loved her as an almost-daughter, the woman their youngest son had intended to wed, and that their interest in meeting her new masculine friend was sincere and genuine. But there was always the possibility of an accidental word or phrase or look that would damage such a new and fragile relationship, and the prospect of such an occurrence frightened her. She really hoped no one—

Bobbie stopped short as she realized something.

She was thinking more about Clark than about Glen.

What did that mean? Was it just her apprehension over the upcoming dinner? Was she putting Clark in Glen's place in her heart? Or was it just the current circumstances?

Had to be something current, she insisted to herself. No way was Clark going to crowd Glen out of her mind. Didn't matter that he wasn't trying to replace Glen in her life or that he'd never even hinted that she should forget Glen. That just wasn't going to happen. No way, no how, Glen was number one in her heart forever.

Maybe Clark could be a close number two? Maybe as a really good friend?

A sigh of relief escaped her lips. That was it. Clark would be her really good friend, someone she could and would trust, someone who would stand beside her no matter how crazy her life became. He'd be her rock, her foundation, her defense against all the heartache in the world.

And he'd smile at her like he enjoyed being all that to her.

The scuff of shoe leather behind her made her smile. Clark was here, and he was early too. She turned to greet him and—

And it wasn't Clark. It was a tall older man who appeared to be well into his seventh decade. He had gentle eyes, a large nose, and curly white hair. He wore a soft-brimmed hat, a knee-length tan coat, and a long multi-hued garish scarf wrapped loosely around his neck. The man shuffled along the path as if his life had ended but his body hadn't quite realized it yet.

The man didn't look at her, he just slowly carried the bouquet of flowers beyond Glen's grave to one four plots over. He put his free hand on the headstone, bent over, and laid the flowers at the stone's base. After a few seconds, he struggled upright again and turned to walk back the way he'd come.

This man was hurting. Bobbie knew what that felt like. She didn't know if she could offer him anything worthwhile, but she had to say something to him.

"Sir?" The man didn't respond. "Sir, are you all right?" He stopped but didn't look at her. "I'm a police officer. Is there any way I can help you?"

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly, then said, "No. But thank you. You're very kind to offer."

His accent was vaguely English. And his voice was vaguely familiar. "Are you sure? Is there someone I can call to come and get you? Or could I take you somewhere? As a police officer, I mean."

He looked up at her. If he'd been standing straight, he'd be taller than she was, but he was bent over as if he suffered from arthritis – or maybe the burdens of life had laid on his shoulders too long. The man shook his head and replied, "You truly are very kind. Perhaps I can do something for you some day."

Bobbie nodded. "I'd like that. But isn't there something I can do for you?"

For the first time, he smiled. Just a little. But it was a smile. "No, you've done quite a lot. And I thank you for it." He turned his whole body to face her and added, "I hope you have a very good life, young lady."

"Thank you, sir. You have a good life too."

He smiled again and reached out to touch her arm, then he shuffled slowly down the path and turned the corner to the main entrance.

Bobbie watched him go, then eased over to the plot where the man had placed the flowers. She read the legend on the headstone.

*Elizabeth Jane Smith
Beloved Wife and Daughter
Gone Too Soon
You Are Still Loved
You Will Always Be Missed*

Elizabeth's birth and death dates weren't that far apart. Bobbie did some quick math and came up with an age of forty-three when she'd died.

She'd died just about nine years ago.

Was Elizabeth the older man's daughter? Had they been long-term companions? Had Elizabeth been married, had she had children? Was she even family to the man? Or were they just close friends, or was the old man Elizabeth's father's friend? Or had they been husband and wife? Was he so stricken with grief that he'd aged prematurely? Had he loved and needed and missed her so much that he'd given up on living?

She'd probably never know.

She turned back to Glen's grave and looked at the headstone again. It listed his name, his birth and death dates, and displayed the badge and handcuffs of a police officer. It also indicated that he'd died in the line of duty.

Bobbie took a deep breath but didn't cry. She wasn't sure why, but the hurt wasn't as deep today. She still missed him terribly. She still felt responsible – partly, anyway – for his being shot during a stupid traffic stop. There would always be a Glen-shaped hole in her life.

But for the first time, she didn't consider joining him, didn't feel overwhelmed with grief, didn't curse herself and

accuse herself of complicity in his murder. She'd always love him, always miss him, always regret not being able to walk beside him in life, always miss whatever joy she might have experienced with him. But those feelings would no longer stop her from living.

The dead part of her heart was coming alive again. And she welcomed it back with open arms.

Her time that morning with Clark at Starways was the best hour she'd had in over a year.

The next morning, at half-past eleven, Clark looked up when Bobbie knocked on his door. Of course he recognized her knock. That knock was as obvious a clue as a hand-written cheat sheet on a college football player's forearm.

He bounced up from the couch and opened the door. "Hi! You're right on time, as usual."

She smiled brightly. "Of course I am. You ready for lunch with the LeCour family?"

"Just let me get my windbreaker. There. *Now* I'm ready."

She put her hand inside his elbow as they walked to her car. He smiled and glanced down at her. Her face wore a jaunty smile.

He looked up as they approached her car and said, "What is this? Homicide detective Roberta Tracey is double-parked?"

She smile-frowned at him and shoved him at the passenger door. "Cut it out. The emergency flashers are on and it wasn't here more than three minutes. Besides, I'm just picking up a passenger."

He nodded. "Okay, if you say so." They climbed into their respective doors and sat back, then Clark added, "But I'm gonna research the parking regulations for this part of town on Monday morning."

Her head slowly turned toward him. "Why?" she asked in a flat voice.

"Are you kidding? It's my next Metropolis exposé. 'Metro Detective Abuses Parking Laws.' I can smell the Kerth nomination now!"

Bobbie rolled her eyes and started the car. "Good thing Edward R. Murrow is retired. You'd make him nervous."

"About my obvious skill at investigating, no doubt."

"Or at the immensity of your ego."

He grabbed the left side of his chest and dramatically declaimed, "Augh! Oh, fair one, I am betrayed by thy beauty and charm! Thou hast slain me with thy viperous tongue! Thy dagger hast struck deep into mine heart and I die!"

Clark took a deep breath and held it, then toppled against the passenger door. He exhaled deeply and held the pose for a long moment, then looked up at Bobbie, who was glancing between his performance and her watch, a flat expression on her face. She shook her head, then raised her eyebrows and asked, "You about done now? We have a lunch engagement and I don't want to tell them we were late because you got bit by a Shakespeare beetle."

He straightened and buckled his seat belt. "Everybody's a drama critic."

Bobbie rolled to a stop in the circular driveway of a

fairly large house and watched Clark's eyes get bigger by the moment. He scanned the width of the two-story building, then turned to her and said, "Tell me this is a fancy restaurant in an expensive hotel where we're meeting Glen's parents."

She grinned. "Nope. This is their home. The four oldest siblings have their own homes, but the two youngest live here with their families. And it's not because they're lazy or out of work. They do the upkeep on the lawns and the maintenance on the house and their kids keep *Grand-maman et Grand-papa* young. At least, that's what Étienne and Evonne say. I don't think they'd want it any other way."

Clark released his seat belt latch and looked down at himself. "Now I wish I'd worn a suit," he mumbled. "I'm way underdressed."

"No you're not," she insisted. "Look at me. I'm wearing slacks and blouse with my tennies and they'll be thrilled to see me. You'll be fine as long as you're with me, okay?" She opened the driver's door and released her own seat belt. "I promise, Clark. They won't judge you and they won't run you off. They're good people."

He sighed. "I suppose I'll have to take your word for it. Oh, how's their English? Or do they prefer French?"

She nodded. "English is fine, although a few French terms wouldn't upset them. I usually say '*bonne apr è s-midi*' – that's 'good afternoon' – when I come over for lunch. Ah, you do speak some French, right?"

He nodded. "Learned in Paris."

"Really? When were you in France?"

He turned and almost smiled. "Paris, Texas."

"Oh, funny, real funny. You better not kid around like that with them or I'm liable to arrest you."

"The French are often accused by other Europeans of having a poor sense of humor. I really did spend some time across the pond, as the Brits say, and I found that rumor to be untrue. They laugh at different things than Americans do, but they laugh a lot."

They stepped out of the car through their respective doors and stood. He met her at the foot of the walkway. "I agree with you. The LeCour family doesn't belly laugh like the Lane family does, but they smile a lot and often chuckle modestly. They also don't try to shove French food at Americans on first meeting, so we won't have snails or fish eggs or fried insects today."

He shook his head as they walked. "Too bad. Fried cricket is high in protein."

She smiled. "Yeah, but you better floss before bedtime or you'll end up spitting out little pieces of leg all night and the next day."

He kept his smile hidden. "True. All great blessings have drawbacks."

"Uh-huh. Just keep the jokes to the absolute minimum and we'll be fine."

He lifted his right hand in a Boy Scout salute, palm forward with three fingers up together and his little finger held down with his thumb. His hand went down when Bobbie reached out and pressed the doorbell.

A cathedral-like "Bing-bong" rang out sonorously as she stepped back and smoothed her hair. Clark wondered if he had time to get his hair styled before the door opened,

and then it did open.

A tall older man stood in the doorway, wearing slacks and a golf shirt. He smiled at Bobbie and said, "*Bienvenue, Roberta! Et bienvenue à votre ami également. Veuillez entrer.*" (Welcome, Roberta! And welcome to your friend. Please come in.)

Bobbie smiled. "*Merci, Étienne.* This is my friend Clark Kent."

Clark smiled and bowed ever so slightly. "*Bonsoir, monsieur LeCour. Merci de m'avoir invité dans votre belle maison.*" (Good evening, Mr. LeCour. Thank you for inviting me to your beautiful home.)

Both Mr. LeCour and Bobbie blinked at him, then the man smiled wider and gestured for them to enter. "You have an excellent accent, Mr. Kent. Have you spent much time in Paris?"

Bobbie broke in. "Yeah, the one in Texas."

Mr. LeCour chuckled and shut the door behind them. "Ah, yes, the city of Texas lights. I am continually surprised that they have not erected a replica of the Eiffel Tower in their downtown area."

"I'm sure it would boost tourism there," Clark answered. "Might even pay for itself pretty quick."

"No doubt," the older man said. "I hope you enjoy takeout food, Mr. Kent. Our grandchildren threatened to go on strike unless we served real American pizza this evening. And please, address me as Étienne, as Roberta does."

"I'm honored, sir. Forgive me, Étienne. Please call me Clark. And yes, I've been known to eat pizza. I rarely have to be threatened, in fact."

Their host clapped him gently on the shoulder. "Excellent! Come, you must meet my wife, the lovely Evonne LeCour. Any praise I might sing of her would pale against the reality of her beauty and grace."

Bobbie stopped and stared at him. "Okay, who are you and what have you done with Étienne LeCour?"

Étienne surprised Clark by laughing aloud. "My dear, we are simply happy that you have met a young man whom you trust. He would not be here had you not believed him worthy of your friendship."

She nodded. "As long as you understand that friends is all we are." She waggled her index finger in front of his face. "No matchmaking allowed, understand?"

He laughed again. "Of course not, Roberta. You are, as you always have been, free to make your own choices. Now come, the grandchildren are prepared to assault you once again. Mr. Kent, I hope – oh, now I must ask your forgiveness. Clark, I hope you like playing volleyball. Our six grandchildren are quite competitive."

"Volleyball, eh?" Clark asked. Étienne nodded. "Before or after dinner?"

The man laughed yet again. "After, I fear. The two of you are surely young and agile enough to prevent yourselves from being embarrassed."

Before either Bobbie or Clark could respond, a woman's musical alto said, "My husband, it is rude to monopolize our guests before presenting them to your loving wife." The woman smiled at them and said, "Greetings, Roberta. I am pleased to see you once again." She turned to Clark and put her hands on her hips. "And this substantial young man

must be the most estimable Clark Kent!" She reached out and grasped his hands in hers. "I am most please to meet you. Roberta has told me so much about you."

Étienne said, "Has she told you that Clark speaks excellent French?"

Evonne's smile turned quizzical. "No, she has not. Perhaps she was unaware of this talent." She switched languages. "*Est-ce vrai, monsieur Kent?*" (Is that true, Mr. Kent?)

"*Oui, madame, c'est vrai. Je l'ai surpris avec ça aujourd'hui quand nous sommes arrivés.*" (Yes, ma'am, it's true. I surprised her with it today when we arrived.)

A young teenager stuck her head around the corner and called out, "Hey, can we stick with English tonight? I don't want to miss anything."

Her grandparents laughed. "Then you should study harder, Nancy," said Evonne. "Come, Mr. Kent. Dinner is ready to be served."

Clark let Evonne put her hand through his arm. "Please call me Clark, *madame.*"

"Then you shall call me Evonne, as Roberta does. I hope you are hungry."

He put on an exaggerated Texas accent and walked as if he were suddenly bowlegged. "Yes, ma'am, Ah shorely am. Ah think Ah could eat a horse, hooves and bridle and saddle included."

All the adults except Bobbie laughed. Nancy rolled her eyes and said, "Bobbie, you told me he was nice!"

Bobbie glared at Clark. "I also told him to keep the jokes to a minimum or I'd arrest him. Don't make me pull out my spare cuffs today, buster."

Chapter Seven

Clark had been nervous about meeting Glen's parents, but they quickly put him at ease. Neither of them even hinted that Bobbie might be forgetting their son or betraying his memory by being with Clark. Both of them seemed to accept Bobbie's insistence that she and Clark were no more than good friends who understood each other at face value.

It bothered him for a moment when Evonne mentioned that Bobbie had revealed her relationship with Clark only a week before, but then he remembered how long he'd put off telling the Lanes about Bobbie. He deliberately assumed that her reasons were the same as his, namely that neither of them wanted any premature speculation – or pressure – about any possible romantic relationship in their shared future, whether near or far.

The pizza was fresh and hot. The soft drinks were cold, fizzy, tasty, and varied. There were more than six grandchildren, but those six between ten and sixteen made up the volleyball squad, with one to three adults participating to even up the sides. The rest of the grandkids were still too young to participate. Clark refrained from joking with the adults but traded a few with the older kids.

Étienne and Evonne led the troop outside to choose teams. Clark looked around in amazement. "I'm impressed, Étienne. This yard is almost a pasture."

Étienne smiled. "And you, as you are being from Kansas, would be acquainted with pastures. Thank you."

Clark caught the volleyball that Bobbie tossed his way. "I see why you have the court. You could play basketball here, too."

Étienne's smile dimmed slightly. "We did, at times, when Glen was still with us. Now, though, it seems – we have taken down the goals and – *je suis désolé*, I am sorry. I cannot explain."

Clark stopped in place. "Oh, Étienne, please, let me apologize. I had no intention of causing you discomfort."

"You have not done so. And you had no manner of knowing. Never mind. My past losses are in the past and cannot be compared to those of others such as Roberta." He sighed. "She is an excellent young woman. Evonne and I still regret that she is not our daughter-in-law." He lifted his head and clapped his hands. "Voilà! We shall live in the present. I choose you for my team, Clark."

Evonne, who had wandered closer, chimed in with, "And I begin with Roberta."

"I follow with Nancy."

"Michelle."

"I choose Allan."

"Jeanne."

"Gerard."

"Paul."

Clark smiled and flipped the ball underhanded to Evonne, who caught it easily. "Who serves first?"

Fourteen-year-old Nancy tried not to show how excited she was to have Clark on her team. Bobbie had told Nancy several times that she and Clark weren't dating, weren't in that kind of relationship, and that he was just as free to look for a girlfriend as Bobbie was free to look for a boyfriend. Nancy always nodded and gave her a look that said, "Oh, really?" After the first few times, Bobbie had learned to give it back to her.

Evonne tossed the ball to Clark and said, "You have first serve. Underhand serve only to make it more equal. You may not reach beyond the net to strike the ball. Any questions?" Clark smiled and shook his head. "Very well. Set your formations and be ready to play!"

As Bobbie gathered her teammates in a huddle, Nancy called Clark near. "Clark," she said, "We like to play a diamond formation, one in the middle at the net, one at the back line, and the other two close to either sideline about halfway between the net and the back corner. The player on the back line covers the middle. When the ball's in their court, the sideline guys drop back a little to cover the back corners. If whoever's at the front point can jump, we try to set up spikes."

"Net player moves back and forth across the net?"

"Yeah. Right sideline player serves from the back corner. I want you to start on the back line, see how you move. Oh, we rotate counter-clockwise when we get the serve back. That means you're our second server."

Clark nodded. "What defense does Bobbie like to play?"

"Four corners, usually, but they end up all over their side. And you never know where they're going to hit it, so stay alert."

He smiled. "Got it. I'll spike it at Bobbie's feet if I can."

Nancy frowned at him. “You better. She’s easily the best player on their team. She can jump like a grasshopper. And she likes to spike me in the face.”

Clark looked at her as if he wanted to laugh and frown at the same time, as if he were trying to treat her like a mature little girl. Which she wasn’t. She’d be fifteen in seven weeks, the next thing to a woman, and she planned to make him look at her as if she were a full-grown woman.

She still wasn’t quite clear on how she’d accomplish that, though. Oh, well, there was plenty of time. They had all evening.

Nancy snatched the ball from Clark and tossed it to Gerard, then said, “You serve. Allan, left sideline.” She marched to the net and glared over her shoulder as she secured her shoulder-length light brown hair in a scrunchie. “You guys ready?”

“Ready to beat you bad!” Paul shouted back.

Rather than return the trash talk, Nancy bent her knees in a ready stance and yelled, “Let it go, Gerard!”

The match was competitive but never too intense. Étienne and Evonne served as judges, one at each far corner, and they both teased and encouraged their grandchildren. For the most part, Bobbie had fun, although she suspected that some of Clark’s spikes at her feet were a little harder than they needed to be.

By the middle of the first game, the kid’s parents were around the court, cheering on all the kids and teasing Bobbie. After he faked throwing the ball at Nancy’s father – at which Nancy clapped and laughed – Clark was included in the teasing. Bobbie did notice, though, that the barbs aimed at him were far blunter than those tossed at her.

She insisted to herself that she wasn’t jealous of the easy acceptance they displayed toward Clark.

Bobbie’s team won the first game by six points. By that time, though, Clark’s team had figured out that feeding him the ball just above the net was better than hitting it high and deep where their opponents could set up Bobbie for a spike. He hit several setups for points, but one went out of bounds when it hit the back line and Evonne ruled it out. Mournful cries from Clark’s teammates of “*Grand-mère, s’il te plaît!*” (Grandmother, please!) fell upon deaf ears. Nancy occasionally tried to do more than she should, and Bobbie suspected she was trying to impress their handsome guest.

She needn’t have tried so hard. Clark applauded her effort each time she overextended herself, and by the second game she’d settled into her own rhythm. To Bobbie’s hidden delight, Clark’s team won the second game by four.

As the teams again changed sides after game two, Clark passed Bobbie and smiled. “I didn’t know I was going to have to work this hard for pizza. I think you owe me a home-cooked dinner of some kind.”

She gave him her best mock-frown. “No way! I’m working just as hard as you are. They’re not taking it easy on me because you’re playing, so I think you owe me instead!”

Nancy jumped up and slapped Clark on the side of his head. “Come on! Allan’s serving and you’re at the net! Get ready!”

Clark turned back to Bobbie and shrugged. “Duty calls, I guess. Get ready for another beating.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Not happening, Kansas. You goin’ down hard!”

“You think so?”

“Word up, dawg!”

That was when she realized everyone was focused on her and Clark – especially Nancy, who stood a few steps away with her hands on her hips and intensity on her face. All the adults laughed or chuckled. The younger kids all yelled for them to start the game. The other players moaned or drawled “Eww!” except for Jeanne, who growled, “Get a room, you two!”

Jeanne’s taunt startled Bobbie and she stalked, suddenly embarrassed, to her back corner position. Her face felt warm and she clapped her hands hard. “Come on, team, let’s get them!”

The third game went back and forth, with long, spirited rallies, and neither team was able to build a lead greater than two points. Twice Bobbie tried to spike Clark in the head, but both times he shifted his hands at the last instant and knocked the ball back over the net. The second time it came back at her, Bobbie misjudged the height of the ball, and instead of slapping it to the side for a setup, her fingertips brushed it just enough to make it seem to hang in the air just on the other side. Behind her, Nancy popped the ball up and just into the far court.

Bobbie landed like a cat and bounced right back up, jumped again, and tried to block Clark’s expected spike. He went up and swung – and again gently tapped it back over with his other hand to her left, just beyond her outstretched fingers. She reached for it in midair, overbalanced, and went down on her side harder than she would have preferred.

Her breath left her lungs in a rush and she couldn’t move for a moment. Before she realized it, Clark was beside her, holding her shoulders still and gently supporting her head. A part of her realized he was waiting for her to tell him she wasn’t hurt.

She took a deep breath and let it out. “I’m fine, Clark. I can wiggle my toes and fingers, my vision’s clear, and there’s no pain in my chest.” She pushed vainly against his restraint for a moment, then lowered her voice and said, “Really, I’m fine. I just knocked the wind out of my lungs. No permanent damage. Shoot, I’ve taken harder hits than this playing touch football with these hooligans.”

He gave her a lopsided smile and helped her stand. She stretched and rolled her head, then put her hand on his upper arm. “Thank you,” she told him, “but I’m okay.”

Bobbie held his gaze for a slow three-count, then Gerard said, “What did Jeanne say, you two?”

Clark reached out and snatched the ball from him, then bounced it off his head twice. “That’s what you get for being a smart-aleck, young man!” He laughed and pointed. “Get back to your position or I’m gonna let Bobbie smoke you bad!”

“No way!” Gerard yelled back. “Team first always!”

The adults in the cheap seats laughed and called out encouragement in both English and French. Bobbie clapped her hands and snapped, “So serve it already! It’s time to end

this!”

Nancy took her place with the ball in her hand and a determined expression on her face. “Nine serving ten! Ready!” she shouted, then popped the ball high and deep toward the far corner.

That corner was occupied by her cousin Michelle. The girl was probably the least athletic of all the players there that afternoon, but she gamely stretched out her arms, put her fists together, and popped the ball up and toward the net where Bobbie bumped it over. The ball floated past Clark’s outstretched hand toward the middle of their team.

Twelve-year-old Paul leaped forward and managed to keep the ball off the court, but it came up at an angle toward his twin brother Allan. Allan managed to put it up far enough for Clark to slap it back over the net toward the middle, angled just enough to get around Bobbie’s outstretched fingers.

Michelle and Paul both lunged for it. Both missed the ball and crashed into each other as Paul’s shoulder hit Michelle’s upper arm. They spun apart and dropped to the grass.

Before Bobbie could blink, Michelle’s and Paul’s parents were bent over their respective children. Neither of the kids was crying, but neither was trying to rise yet. Clark knelt down between the men and put one hand on each concerned father.

“I – I’m sorry,” he breathed. “I’m so very sorry. I never meant for them to get hurt.”

“I don’t think they’re badly hurt,” Paul’s father said, “but I am sure they’re both bruised. Does anyone need anything from inside? Ice? Towels?”

Paul’s mother looked up and shook her head. “Not for this daredevil. Perhaps for Michelle?”

Michelle’s father gently probed his daughter’s arm and said, “How much does that hurt?”

She flinched slightly. “A little. Not much, though.” She gathered her legs under herself and slowly stood. “Okay. I’m fine. Just a bruise. If Paul’s good, let’s go.”

Paul sat up and rotated his shoulder. “I’m fine. That was their point, wasn’t it? Ten all, then. Let’s finish.”

Clark stood and shook his head. “I’m done. I never wanted anyone to be hurt. I’m really sorry, Michelle, Paul. Please accept my apology.”

Bobbie stepped up next to him and, without thinking about it, took his hand in hers. “It’s okay, Clark. The kids are fine. They know you weren’t trying to hurt anyone. It’s the kind of accident kids have all the time. Especially these kids. And their parents aren’t mad.” She leaned against his arm and whispered, “You’re okay, too. Right?”

Étienne put his hand on Clark’s other shoulder. “Roberta is correct, Clark. There is no offence here, and no one is truly injured. These children receive worse bruises playing amongst themselves.”

Bobbie watched Clark struggle with the situation. He clenched and opened his fists several times and kept licking his lips. His color wasn’t good, either. She took his other hand and squeezed both, then whispered, “It’s not your fault, Clark. And even if it were, nobody’s really hurt. Everybody’s fine. These nutty kids even want to finish the game.” She stepped closer and kissed him on the cheek.

“Okay?”

He closed his eyes and took a shaky breath. “I’m not supposed to hurt people. I’m supposed to help them. I’m supposed to save them. I’m supposed to show good people who the bad people are. The bad people are the ones who hurt the innocent.” He opened his eyes and looked at her. “How can I be a good person if I hurt innocents?”

Bobbie’s mouth fell open. Hurt innocents? What was he talking about?

Before she could recover, Étienne lifted his hands and announced, “We shall call this game a tie. Since the set score was one to one, this match is a draw.” He turned and faced Clark with a smile. “Perhaps we can invite Clark to participate again very soon.”

Instead of answering, Clark turned sharply and quickly walked through the house toward the front door. Bobbie turned to Étienne and said, “I’m – I’m sorry. I think this somehow reminded him of the woman – the friend he lost over a year ago and it was a lot like me and Glen. I guess he’s still hurting.”

Evonne leaned close and quietly said, “As are you, Roberta.”

The older woman’s obvious concern touched her. “Yeah, well, I’m his ride and I think I need to talk to him and let him talk to me and thank you for both of us and I’m sorry to leave like this but—”

Evonne gave her a little push. “Go. Care for your friend. Treat him well, for he is a good man. And you must tell him that I said so. We will see you again soon.”

Bobbie took a step to follow Clark, then stopped, still uncertain if she should follow him. Nancy pointed at the back door and growled, “If you don’t go after him right now I will. And I won’t leave him until I know he’s okay.” Bobbie blinked twice, then smiled and trotted through the house.

Clark sat on the curb beside Bobbie’s car and wrapped his arms around his knees. *I played football and baseball in high school*, he thought. *I played football in college and had pro scouts talking to me in my junior year. The day I graduated, I had three agents contact me about representation in the pros. In all that time, I never lost control, never hurt anyone.*

And now I hurt two junior high kids in a pickup volleyball game. Idiot!

He closed his eyes to keep them from leaking. *Didn’t used to cry so easily. I used to have rock-solid control of my emotions. Then I lost Lois.*

No. He didn’t lose her. She was dead. And it was his fault.

Just like those kids today. He hadn’t meant to hurt them. He hadn’t meant for anyone to be hurt. He thought he had enough control to play just well enough for everyone to have fun.

Paul and Michelle hadn’t had much fun.

On top of that, he’d insulted the entire LeCour family by leaving so abruptly and without explanation. Maybe Bobbie would cover for him.

Maybe she’d wised up and was waiting until he just walked away. Maybe she didn’t want to see him anymore.

She could – no, she *should* arrest him for endangering a child.

He didn't know Bobbie was behind him until she touched his shoulder.

"Clark? Are you – sorry. You're not okay. And I think I understand why." He didn't move, didn't speak. After a long moment, she asked, "May I sit down beside you?"

He jerked his head to one side. "It's a free country. Or curb, in this case."

He felt her sit down beside him without touching him. They sat side by side for maybe two minutes, maybe a little longer, before Bobbie said, "I had fun."

He didn't respond.

"The kids had fun, too. That was the best volleyball match I've played here since – in a long time. Étienne and Evonne would tell you the same if you asked them."

He sighed. "I'm not supposed to hurt people."

She touched his arm. "You didn't hurt anyone. It was an accident, and not a bad one."

"Oh, really?" He snorted. "You've seen worse?"

"Yes. About a year and a half ago, I came to dinner with Glen and got into a touch football game with his siblings. Daniel and I – Daniel is Yolanda's husband, Gerard's father – collided when I tried to intercept a pass aimed at him. He came down with a sprained wrist and two broken fingers. He just went to the emergency room and promised to clobber me next time."

"It's not the same thing. He was an adult."

"No, it's not. But it's the same principle. All the LeCour kids and grandkids know that nobody tries to hurt anyone in those games, but if you do athletic stuff, little hurts and bruises are part and parcel of it. All you did was hit a ball over a net. You weren't trying to hurt anyone." He felt her shift closer. "I promise you, Clark, you didn't do anything wrong."

He lifted his head and glared at the far curb. "You don't understand! I'm not supposed to hurt people! I'm supposed to help them!"

"So am I. But I still do sometimes."

She didn't get it. She didn't know about Superman. And he couldn't tell her. Not yet. She didn't understand that he could have played every position on both sides of the net and never let the ball hit the ground.

It was frustrating.

He clenched his fists and abruptly jumped to his feet but didn't go anywhere. There was no place where he could hide from this guilt. Not even his Fortress of Solitude in Smallville was far enough to go and hide. His responsibility would track him even there.

Suddenly Bobbie stood before him. She reached out and took his right hand, massaged it, and slowly uncurled his fingers. She caressed his palm until he sighed and released some of the tension.

Then she quietly asked, "Clark, did you kill Lois Lane?" He stopped breathing.

He knew his mouth was hanging open, but he couldn't close it. Her question had hit him in the gut, right where he lived. It cut through his defenses and slammed against his heart.

And she'd known it would.

She lifted his hand and kissed his palm. "I know the answer. The answer is no. A very definite no. You did not kill Lois Lane. No one thinks you did. No one blames you. No one blames Superman either, and he was directly involved. But it wasn't his fault. Or yours." She released his hand and put her arms around him with her head next to his. "Please, Clark, don't do this to yourself."

He gently pushed her away. "You don't understand. I wish you did."

She smiled. "Remember the day you found me at Glen's grave with my hand on my sidearm? I was going to do it that day. I'd planned to end the pain right then and there. But you brought me back. You reminded me that I wasn't the only one who'd ever been hurt, wasn't the only one who'd suffered a huge loss, wasn't the only person who'd lost the one she loved more than anyone else."

She leaned forward and gently kissed his cheek. "And now you're my friend. My best friend. When you hurt, I hurt. When you rejoice, I rejoice. I watched you playing back there. You were having a wonderful time with those kids, and they loved playing with you. You're a big hit. Please don't lose that. Don't forget any of it."

Her words made sense. Paul and Michelle had wanted to finish the game. No one had been angry with him. Neither Étienne nor Evonne, nor any of the parents, nor any of the kids blamed him. And especially not Bobbie.

As bad as he felt about the kids being hurt, he knew he couldn't have taken it if Bobbie had blamed him.

He relaxed and dropped his shoulders. He looked up and saw Bobbie's smile grow. He took a breath and said, "Okay."

She nodded. "You want some dessert?"

He felt one corner of his mouth move up a little. "We can stop at a little café I know and pick up a peach cobbler. It's not as good as my mom's, but it's not bad."

She nodded and gestured to her car. "Sounds like a plan. Let's go."

Bobbie drove them to the café where Clark bought the peach cobbler. They took a booth and ate half of it over the next two hours. By the time they both decided they were full, Clark was smiling again.

She drove him home and walked him to his front door. As he took out his keyring, she said, "When will you call me this week?"

He lifted one eyebrow. "Oh, when I find the time, or when I run out of busywork."

She chuckled. "Like that's gonna happen. You reporters are always scrambling for your next story."

He unlocked the door and paused. "Unlike the detective precinct. You're only busy when people do bad things to each other." He pushed the door open as he shook his head. "I don't think I could work like that, not all the time."

She sighed. "Yeah. It's the one part of my job I hate. I'm only needed when somebody has actually committed a crime." She stood outside, holding the remains of the cobbler, until he tilted his head and frowned at her. "Aren't you going to invite me in?" she asked sweetly.

"Of course." He smiled a little and gestured for her to enter. "Please come in. I'll put the cobbler we didn't eat in

the fridge for later.”

She walked in and handed him the box. “Not too much later, I hope. That was really good cobbler and I don’t want it to grow mold.”

This time he smiled more easily. “Not to worry. I’ll eat it before that happens.”

As he turned back from the fridge, she said, “Can we – can I ask you some questions? That are maybe, um, kinda intrusive?”

Clark’s smile faded and his face went slack. “Intrusive how?”

“Uh – about the volleyball game.”

He ducked his head. “I’d really rather not answer those questions right now. I hope you don’t mind.”

She stepped closer and hugged him for a moment, then backed up a little. “But I do mind. I kinda almost understand why you reacted the way you did when the kids knocked each other down, but not quite. You knew they weren’t really hurt, just knocked around a little. It was just one of those things that happens to people sometimes. Besides, kids who don’t get a few bruises now and then aren’t doing anything.”

It was as if a wall slammed down between them. He stiffened and backed up a foot or so, then said, “I’m sorry you don’t understand. And I’m also sorry that I can’t explain my reaction. I would if I could. I have to ask you to just accept that.”

She closed her eyes and let out the breath she’d been holding, then looked at him again. “Then I’ll accept it. I hope someday you’ll trust me enough to let me in and tell me why that bothered you so much.”

He held his ground for a few seconds, then seemed to relax a little. “I hope so too.” He turned and gestured to the couch. “You want to watch TV with me? I think we could find a movie on one of the premium channels. Or we could watch a video.”

She smiled and shook her head. “Thanks, but I really need to go home and do laundry. I’m almost out of clean underwear.”

He fought the chuckle for a moment, then let it out in a burst. “Oh, yes, do your laundry so you can wear clean underwear.” He grinned wide and shook his head. “I don’t know if I’d like you less if you wore dirty undies or none at all.”

Bobbie feigned shock at his comment. “Why, Mr. Kent! I assure you I’d buy a package of cheap panties at Costco before I’d go commando! Especially at work!”

He laughed openly. “Please, go spend your money on detergent and not extra clothing. I’ll talk to you later this week.”

“Okay. You have a good evening, Clark.”

“You too, Bobbie. Thanks for the afternoon.” She tilted her head at him until he added, “The whole afternoon. Overall I think I had a lot of fun. Étienne and Evonne are good people.” He sighed. “I’ll have to write a letter of apology to them.”

“I don’t think you have to, but if you want to it wouldn’t do any harm. I think they understood.”

“You – you explained about Lois?”

“Just the bare bones, no details, and then I came outside

to find you.” She turned and waved at the door. “I better get going.”

He nodded. “Okay. Drive safely.”

“I will. Good night, my friend.”

His eyes warmed at her turn of phrase. “Good night, lady friend. Be well.”

He opened the door for her and she walked to her car.

It surprised her to realize that she hadn’t wanted to leave.

Clark watched Bobbie from his front door as she walked to the car, got in, and glanced out the driver’s side window to see him watching. Her jaunty wave lifted his spirits even more and made him smile, so he decided that Superman needed to make a patrol.

The fact that his patrol route followed Bobbie’s route home was purely a coincidence.

He scanned the streets ahead of her for stupid drivers, accidents, inattentive pedestrians, or anything else that might block her way. There was nothing that needed his attention.

She pulled into her apartment’s reserved parking space and climbed out. For a microsecond, he thought about flying down and saying something nice to her, like another thanks for her attention and care with him earlier that day. Then he realized that not only was he hovering over her, he’d momentarily forgotten that he had to keep Clark and Superman separate with Bobbie. He couldn’t interact with her while wearing the Suit. It would be dangerous for both of them, and might even be a hindrance in her detective work.

He sighed, knowing she couldn’t see or hear him, then arrowed to Suicide Slum. There were always people behaving badly there.

As Bobbie closed the door and locked the car, she glanced up to the northeast. She saw something that looked like a big bird hovering over her part of the city.

The bird suddenly turned and vanished at impossible speed.

It had to have been Superman.

Why would Superman be watching over her?

It didn’t mean anything. It couldn’t. Superman might have been tracking one or more suspicious characters nearby, or checking to see if he’d be needed at an accident or a crime scene. Just because he was overhead didn’t mean he was following her.

Although if he had been, she didn’t think she’d mind having him as her own personal super-stalker. As long as he respected her boundaries, of course.

And didn’t try to get between her and Clark.

Hmm.

Superman was watching over her. Food for thought. And one more tidbit for her mental evidence file.

Chapter Eight

On the first Saturday morning of November, two weeks after the volleyball game and a little more than a year and a half since Lois’ funeral, Clark woke up smiling. After he made himself a light breakfast, he checked the weather

forecast and saw that clear skies with above normal temperatures were predicted. *Jeans and golf shirt today*, he thought. *Maybe a windbreaker, too.*

He surprised himself by hoping that Bobbie liked him in blue jeans and a tan golf shirt.

He checked his watch as he entered the cemetery and was surprised to see that he was twenty minutes early, so instead of kneeling beside Lois' grave as he usually did, he sat down cross-legged and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees.

He sat silent for a few minutes, then sighed deeply. "I miss you, Lois."

He blinked and realized he'd spoken aloud. "Wow. I didn't realize it until just now that – you know, this is the first time I've spoken to you since – since you died. Don't worry, I don't expect you to answer."

He smiled as he envisioned Lois' bemused reaction. "I still miss you. I still dream about you a lot, but not as much as before. Last night, I don't think I dreamed about anything. And I slept at least nine hours, maybe a little more. That may be the longest straight stretch of sleep I've had in a year and a half."

He shifted. "I don't mind telling you that it was one of the few good nights I've had in that time. But none of that is your fault. It's mine."

He ducked his head and closed his eyes. "You probably know that I was planning to join you. Even had a couple of extra plans in reserve, just in case my first choice didn't pan out."

He opened his eyes and looked at the slight mound of earth, now covered with grass and barely discernible from the surrounding land. "But Bill Henderson sent a detective to keep me from hurting myself. I've never told her that if I really decided to kill myself, she'd have no chance to stop me. And I think Bill did it as much to keep her from hurting herself as he did to help me, because she was mourning the death of her partner and almost-fiancé, too. And, like me with you, she blamed herself for his death."

He put one hand on the dirt, trying to feel some kind of connection. "It wasn't her fault, Lois. From what Bill told me and what I read in the Planet's files, if she had walked up to that car with Glen they probably would have killed her, too. And they might have killed more people before they were stopped."

He stopped and took a deep breath. "And – and I'm almost to the point now where I can tell myself that I didn't kill you either. Even Lucy has stopped blaming Superman, which makes me feel a lot better. Sure, I wish I'd managed to think of something else. In fact, I've thought of a whole bunch of other plans that didn't involve you risking your neck. And I wish I'd thought of them back then. Or that you had. That was a pretty stupid idea, you know."

"But we didn't come up with anything else. Superman froze you, then got trapped by Nigel's Kryptonite, and then you – you wouldn't wake up." He squeezed his eyes shut. "And I'm sorry, Lois, so very sorry."

He felt the burning in his eyes, but the tears still wouldn't come.

He sat beside the grave, kneading the ground with his hands and digging small holes in the dirt, until Bobbie

gently laid her hand on his shoulder from behind.

He didn't care at that moment that he hadn't heard her approach and didn't know what she'd heard him say to Lois.

"Clark?" she all but whispered. He didn't respond. He sensed her as she knelt beside him. "Clark, I'm here. Let me help you."

He ducked his head and let her pull him hesitantly towards an awkward embrace. He lifted one hand to grasp her arm.

Still he didn't cry.

"I miss her so much," he moaned.

"I know."

"It still hurts so much."

Bobbie hesitantly stroked his hair. "I know."

"I – I wish – she—"

"Shh." She kissed the top of his head. "I know. It'll be okay. I promise."

The acid of his grief finally dissolved his steel control and the tears flowed. Some small part of his mind kept him from crushing Bobbie as he heaved with sobs. She accepted every lunge and wild cry and wrapped herself tightly around him.

After a long time, his chest heaved twice, then he relaxed. Bobbie slowly eased her grip and leaned away but kept one hand on his upper arm.

Clark took off his glasses and rubbed his face with both hands. "I – I'm sorry."

Without letting him go, she gave him the tiniest shove on the shoulder. "Don't be silly. Friends are there for each other."

His breathing eventually returned to normal and he sat up. Almost as an afterthought, he put on his glasses and stood, then put his hand out to her and smiled slightly. "You ready for coffee?"

She was staring at him oddly, almost as if she were seeing him for the first time. She blinked twice and muttered, "Huh?"

"Bobbie? You want some coffee?"

"Coffee? Oh. Yeah, sure." She grabbed his hands and stood. "My week to buy, right?"

He nodded. "I think so." He turned towards Starways, then stopped. "Do you want to go see Glen first?"

She shook her head slowly. "No. I think I need to stick with you today."

"Bobbie, I'm okay now. I'm not—"

"I don't want to lose you, Clark."

Her sudden statement startled him. It seemed to startle her, too. She took a quick breath and continued, "I mean as a friend. I don't have very – I don't have so many friends that I can afford to let one of them go."

He nodded slowly. "Okay. I promise I'm not going anywhere."

"Better not, Kent, or I'll come find you and beat the snot out of you."

That got a grin from him. "Okay."

"And I expect you to wash your hands and face before I buy you anything."

"What?"

"Sheesh, Clark, you're a mess. I can't take you

anywhere.”

He glanced at his hands and was surprised to see dirt and grass stains. “Oh. I – didn’t realize—”

“Don’t worry about it. Just get cleaned up before someone wonders what you’ve been doing in your free time.”

He smiled down at her. She smiled back, then ducked her head and bumped his upper arm with her shoulder.

They started across the manicured lawn to the coffee shop and to their weekly ritual.

And it turned out to be a good day for Clark after all.

It was an interesting day for Bobbie as well.

She’d almost said more to Clark than she’d intended when he helped her stand at Lois’ grave. There was something there, something inside her that wanted to come out, but she wasn’t ready for whatever it was to see daylight. Not now, not yet. She couldn’t be unfaithful to Glen.

And yes, she told herself, that’s silly and you know it. *You can’t be either faithful or unfaithful to a dead person. No one can.*

But the perception was still in her mind, lurking just behind her eyes. And she was pretty sure that if she’d hit Clark with her nascent, undefined, and uncertain feelings, he wouldn’t be able to make the choice to reciprocate without feeling as if he were being unfaithful to Lois. There was no way she’d put him in that position. Nor was she willing to risk asking too much from him. Driving him away by acting like an overly attached girlfriend would be stupid.

Besides, there was something about Clark she didn’t know yet, something important. When she’d looked up at him from the ground, she’d gotten a strong flash of déjà vu, as if she’d seen him recently in another context, one where he’d seemed upset. But she couldn’t think of what it was. Something about his glasses bothered her, too, but she couldn’t identify what that was either.

She’d known he was strong just by looking at him, knowledge that had been reinforced as he’d lifted her from the grass without exerting any discernible effort. His balance was that of a dancer, his agility that of an antelope, his upper body that of a serious weightlifter – but she knew from discreet inquiries she’d made that he didn’t appear to work out on a regular basis. Anyone with that physique had to spend significant hours maintaining it.

Clark didn’t. He simply *was*.

Maybe he did all kinds of calisthenics and isometric exercises at home.

Maybe not.

And she’d been distracted by the divots he’d dug in the ground where he’d been kneeling. His hands hadn’t just disturbed the grass – they’d dug holes deep enough for her to put her fist in past her wrist. Her hands were proportional to her size but still large for a woman. As soon as they finished their coffee date – the term still made her slightly uncomfortable, but it bothered her less and less as time went on – she’d come back and fill them in. No sense in having someone else’s mind wander down the path hers was now surveying.

Not only that, she’d caught his comment to Lois that Bobbie couldn’t have stopped him if he’d really intended to kill himself. Was that bravado? Confidence? Something else?

He appeared to have mixed himself up with Superman, too. Maybe she’d heard wrong – it wouldn’t be the first time. Maybe he had a Superman complex. Maybe he was too emotional to keep everything straight in his head. Maybe she was chasing phantoms, facts that didn’t exist, coincidences that didn’t mean what they hinted at.

And maybe she was onto something after all.

Bobbie met Clark at the Starways counter, happy that he’d cleaned up so well and still looked good in his casual ensemble despite the grass stains on the knees of his jeans. At least his hands and face were well-scrubbed. And he was smiling. It was a tired smile, one that still hinted at a deep loss, but it was there.

She didn’t know how to feel about the smile. She’d helped put it there, sure, but why did the thought please her so? And did she have a similar smile?

She shook those dangerous thoughts away as she paid for their drinks and pastries. The pastries were a new thing for their meetings, just as they were new to this Starways. For the past six weeks or so, they’d purchased turnovers or specialty donuts or cinnamon sticks or almost anything sweet and chewy to go with their conversation.

It seemed to help. She’d found that, in case of a lull in the conversation, she could take a small bite and chew it into liquid paste while she came up with another topic. She suspected that Clark had done the same thing a few times, although neither of them had ever fessed up to it.

Today, though, she knew what she wanted to talk about. Or, rather, who she wanted to talk about.

Lois.

Bobbie already knew Lois’ physical description and her appearance from department records, of course, a peek that she’d initially justified to Bill Henderson – and to herself – as necessary to the job he’d assigned to her of keeping Clark alive. She’d learned that Lois had been Clark’s partner at the Daily Planet. She also knew that Clark had loved her from afar for quite a while. She suspected that Lois had had a few bad experiences earlier in her life, and that was at least part of the reason she’d never told him that she loved him.

She and Glen had almost taken that step toward lifetime commitment. Apparently Clark and Lois had been at that same threshold but had never stepped over it. Their situations were similar but not identical.

It was something she planned to explore, assuming she could get past the fact that while Bobbie knew she wasn’t a hag, that she didn’t have to put a paper sack over her head to keep from scaring little kids, she also knew that her looks couldn’t compare to Lois’. The woman had been stunningly beautiful, with a smile that covered her face and put Bobbie at ease even through the photograph. If Lois had had a sparkling personality to go with that killer body and gorgeous face, Bobbie knew she’d come in fourth in a two-woman beauty pageant against Lois.

Even dead, the woman was that intimidating.

“How’s your coffee?”

Clark’s question jerked her out of her reverie. “Huh? Oh, the coffee. Good, it’s good, just like usual.”

He tilted his head at her. “How do you know? You haven’t tasted it yet.”

“Oh. Right.”

She pulled the cover off the cup and inhaled the aroma. As usual, both the act and the aroma gave her great pleasure. She blew on the surface of the liquid and took a sip, then stuck her tongue out. “Bleah. Still a little too hot.”

He chuckled. “It is what it is.”

She glared at him. “That’s one of the dumbest clichés in existence. It ranks right up there on the ‘Duh’ scale with ‘Love means never having to say you’re sorry.’ If you’re sorry about doing something stupid, the person you love the most is going to be the one you should apologize to most of all.”

A mask seemed to cover his face and he looked out the window. “Yeah. I agree with you on that one.”

Uh-oh. She’d hit a nerve without aiming at it. She put her hand on his wrist. “Clark, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to hurt.”

He dropped his gaze to the table between them. “I know that. You couldn’t possibly have known that I—”

He didn’t speak for several seconds, so she gave his hand a quick squeeze. “You can tell me anything you want me to know, Clark. You have to know that by now.”

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. “I – I have a secret.”

“Okay.” He didn’t continue. “Clark? What kind of secret is it?”

He leaned forward as if preparing to pass the plans for a new and improved starship-mounted phaser to a Romulan undercover agent. “One that no one else knows but my parents.”

She frowned a little. “Are you hinting to me that you never told Lois this secret?”

“No.” He sat back in the booth. “I’m saying flat out that I never told her. I tried to, several times, but – things just kept getting in the way.”

“Obviously it’s an important secret.” She paused to let him speak. He didn’t, so she quietly asked, “Are you thinking about telling me? Is that why you brought it up?”

This time he frowned. “I don’t know. It’s the kind of thing that – it might be dangerous to know this.”

“Dangerous?” He nodded to her. “How is your secret dangerous?”

He pressed his lips together for a moment, then said, “I can’t tell you that without telling you the secret. I’m sorry.” He turned in the booth as if he were about to stand up. “I shouldn’t have brought it up. I shouldn’t have tantalized you.”

She smiled a little. “That word ‘tantalize’ is interesting. And not a little provocative. It almost makes me think that you like to sing on stage in gay bars dressed as a drag queen.”

His eyes widened and his head twitched to one side. “What? Me, a drag queen? Singing in gay bars?” He laughed. “You’ve obviously never heard me sing.”

She giggled in return. “Yeah, that response isn’t

revealing at all. You went right past my suggestion about a possible alternate lifestyle and focused on the singing part.”

“And what did I reveal, Professor Jung?”

Now he was teasing her, and it felt good, even if she couldn’t quite remember at the moment who Professor Young was. “That you’re very comfortable being a man. And that you’re very confident in your masculinity. And you – you are definitely a man, Clark Kent.”

That was close. She’d almost slipped again and said too much too soon. He was definitely cutting right through all of her defenses. And he wasn’t even trying hard.

He gave her that thousand-watt smile of his and broke through her last wall. “Drink your coffee, Detective.”

Whatever she’d planned to ask him about Lois fled from her mind. That smile – that fabulous, brilliant, open, warm smile – was all she could see.

Clark watched Bobbie’s eyes as her smile grew. She reminded him of someone just then, someone he’d known well, but he couldn’t come up with the face or the name of the other woman. He lifted his donut stick and took a small bite as Bobbie took a deep breath, then sipped her coffee. He tried to think of other women he’d known who had shoulder-length brown hair, but no one resembled Bobbie, especially around the eyes.

He swallowed and said, “Didn’t you say you were having lunch with Lucy today?”

Her eyes blinked twice, then she said, “I thought we’d hit the Chick-Fil-A near her house unless she wants to go somewhere else. She gave me the option to choose, but I won’t force her to go if she doesn’t want to.”

“I just hope she doesn’t think you’re playing chicken with her.”

Bobbie frowned. “Why would she – wait a minute!” She thrust her face forward in mock anger. “I told you, puns are a felony with me! Jokes I can take, but puns are forbidden! They’re worse than somebody spitting on someone else’s kitchen floor!”

He raised his hands and laughed. “I’m sorry, I just couldn’t resist. You looked like you were a little worried about it, so I thought I’d get you to laugh. I promise you, Lucy won’t eat you, especially if you feed her.”

She shook her index finger at his face and growled, “I ought to arrest you! I wouldn’t even need a warrant!”

She held her fake anger for a long moment, then dissolved into laughter with him. As they laughed, he thought about how attractive she was.

Lois had been more beautiful than Bobbie. No question about it. Bobbie had a very nice appearance, especially when she smiled, but Lois had been beautiful no matter the expression on her face.

But Bobbie had something that Lois had also had. They each had a drive to succeed, a supreme confidence, and a heart for others, although with Lois he’d had to find the path to it. Bobbie’s heart was more open, more apparent, softer and gentler than Lois’ had been, although she could be just as tough when it was necessary.

The basis of their relationship was different, too. Clark had worked hard to overcome Lois’ legitimate fear of being used and abandoned, and getting past her walls had ranged

from challenging to exhausting. They'd done it, though, and he believed Lois had known that he'd loved her.

The thought surprised him. The past perfect tense did, too. Clark *had* loved Lois. Of that there was no doubt.

Did he still love her?

That was a different question, with different permutations.

If he still loved Lois, did that mean he couldn't love another woman just as much? That he'd always look to Lois as his ultimate soul mate? Or would he always remember her fondly and miss her? Would his memory of her prevent him from committing to someone else?

He suddenly realized that Bobbie was sitting across from him, wearing a slight frown. He shook his head and sat forward. "Sorry. I got caught in a mental whirlpool for a minute."

She looked into his eyes for a long moment, then sat back. "Maybe I'd better go."

She looked hurt. The questions over which he'd been mulling were important, but he never wanted to hurt her. She was too important to him.

"Bobbie, I – I'm sorry. I just – I started thinking about Lois and I – fell through a time warp for a few seconds. I'm back now. Really."

She looked at her coffee cup and sighed, then asked, "Were you comparing me to her?"

The fish-like alien starship commander from the Star Wars movies, Admiral Ackbar, leaned into one ear and shouted, "It's a trap!" From the other side, Admiral James Kirk peeked around the far corner and yelled, "Kobayashi Maru!"

If he said he hadn't been, she might not have believed him. If he said he had, he risked hurting her yet again. There was no right answer.

So he decided to try the truth.

"In a way, yes, but not comparing you to Lois like she was better in this aspect and you're better in that. It just hit me that you and Lois have some similarities and some differences. You're different people, and not only is that a fact, it's a good thing. If you want to ask me if we'd have this relationship if Lois hadn't died, no, we couldn't have, because me losing Lois and you losing Glen is a big part of what brought us together."

Clark leaned on his elbows and lowered his voice. "But it's not the only thing. Similar losses brought us together at the beginning, but I've learned a lot more about you than just that. I hope you've learned more about me, too."

She nodded but didn't look up. "I've seen her picture." She stopped for a breath. "She was beautiful."

"Yes. She was."

Bobbie looked up, her lips pressed closed. "She was more beautiful than I'll ever be."

Clark bit the inside of his lip. "If you tied me to a chair, put a live hand grenade in my lap, and told me I had to decide which of you was the more beautiful or I'd regret it for a few microseconds, I'd ask for a recount."

Her mouth opened and her eyes bugged out, then she chuckled. "You would, too, wouldn't you?" She lifted her hands and put both of hers on his right hand. "Thank you. Sometimes I – I get too concerned about my looks. I had a

couple of almost boyfriends in high school who told me I was too plain, that I should use more makeup, make myself prettier."

"They were idiots." She chuckled again. "Have I ever told you about Lana?"

Her head tilted and she frowned in apparent thought. "I don't think so."

"Lana was my high school girlfriend. I thought I loved her, like forever, 'C+L=4Ever' in permanent ink on her book cover kind of love. She was truly beautiful. Long beautiful blonde hair, a very nice petite figure, a smile that lit up the room, smart as a whip, head cheerleader for her junior and senior years, and she loved being my girlfriend. I was All-State as a safety my senior year and there was a full scholarship waiting for me at Kansas State. She was going to steer my life and make sure I was happy."

"Hmm," Bobbie said. "I can hear a 'but' coming."

He nodded. "I found out – the hard way – that she was also self-centered and selfish. If we had plans for the weekend, or went to dinner after a game, or just hung out somewhere, it was where she wanted to be and what she wanted to do. If I expressed a preference, she'd try to cajole me into doing it her way. At first I thought it was cute, but it got harder and harder to be happy about what she wanted to do. They weren't bad things, they just weren't the things I wanted to do. It got to the point that we never did what I wanted."

"Ah," she replied. "So one day when you said, 'I want to do this thing,' and she said, 'no, I wanna do this other thing,' you realized that you were there for her but she wasn't there for you. Right?"

"Pretty much. We broke up right before senior prom. She went as another jock's date, and I took the county sheriff's daughter."

Her mouth quirked up on one side. "Tell me it wasn't a pity date."

He grinned. "No, not at all. Rachel is a very nice young lady who is now the duly elected sheriff of Smallville, Kansas. It's what she's wanted to be since she was about eleven. We had a good time and I took her home and kissed her chastely on the cheek and we said goodnight and I still don't miss Lana."

"That's a nice story."

"It applies here. If you put Lois and Lana against each other in a beauty contest, Lana might win – and I emphasize 'might' – but Lois would destroy her in a contest about personal integrity and character. It's just the opposite with you. You're very pretty and you have a great smile, but Lois would have the edge in pure looks. You and she are pretty even in the personality competition, though, and the character contest would be a dead heat. And ever since I broke up with Lana, I've stuck to the belief that true beauty comes from inside, from the heart."

Bobbie smiled shyly. "You're telling me you think I have a good heart?"

He took her hands in his. "Yes. You have a good heart. It's not just my opinion, it's the truth. And I never – never! – look at you and wish you looked like Lois. That's not fair to either of you. I just won't do it."

She smiled wider. "Thank you, Clark. Yours isn't the

only opinion on that subject, but I thank you for your kindness.”

“You’re welcome.”

And then her pager beeped.

She snatched it from her belt and looked at the display, then snarled. “Nuts!” She turned the pager so Clark could see the display. “Seven-two. Means my boss needs me on a case right now. I’ll have to call him for the address. Call me this afternoon?”

“Sure. Don’t worry about dropping me off. I can use the exercise.”

As she slid out and stood, she said, “Thanks for not asking to come along. Bill usually doesn’t mind, but I’d rather not hear the guys in the squad room chattering at me about my pet reporter.”

He stood and nodded. “No more than I want to hear about my pet detective from the other reporters.”

“I understand.” She took two steps toward the door as she said, “Tell Kendra bye for me. And wish me luck.”

“You just be safe, Bobbie. You’re good enough not to need luck.”

She forced herself not to turn back, grab him, and kiss him right smack on the mouth.

But it wasn’t easy.

Chapter Nine

Clark called Bobbie’s home phone at three-thirty that Saturday afternoon and asked how bad the crime scene had been.

“False alarm. Some idiot dropped a mannequin out of a second story window in one of the downtown tailor shops and a concerned citizen dialed 911 before realizing there was no blood and the body was hard plastic. No biggie, really. Bill was disgusted at the nothing call, but I’d rather have a couple of those every week than real bodies any day.”

“I don’t blame you. So you don’t have a hot news tip for me?”

She chuckled into the phone. “Sorry, no. If I’d known what the call was about, I wouldn’t have left my coffee on the table unfinished.”

Whimsy poked his mouth and he said, “Well, then, let’s go for round two. Same place, same order.”

“Huh.” She paused, and Clark thought she was about to decline. Then she said, “Sure. I can pick up something to munch on, too, unless you’d rather not take food into Starways.”

“I don’t want Kendra to get in trouble. Maybe we can hit a fast food place after.”

“Sounds great to me. Meet you there at what, four-fifteen? I need a quick shower.”

“Sure. I can meander there, take my time and smell the roses along the way.”

Bobbie’s tone turned dry. “Just get there on time.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Clark and Bobbie walked out of Starways together, close but not touching. Clark somehow knew that even if he felt comfortable holding her hand or putting his arm around her – things he assuredly did *not* feel comfortable even

thinking about, much less actually doing them – she was nowhere near ready for that kind of contact.

But they were close to that point, closer than he’d believed possible on the day they’d first met, when she shoved him down on the grass at the foot of Lois’ grave. They’d known each other more than six – no, nearly eight months now, and he’d told her things about himself he hadn’t told his parents. Shoot, he’d almost told her about Superman.

That was not a burden he was willing to lay on her at this point in their relationship.

But one of the things that contributed to Lois’ death was her not knowing his secret. Assuming he ever got close to another woman, he’d have to tell her before they got too involved. He’d known that he’d needed to tell Lois, but he’d chickened out more than once. And her not knowing his Big Secret had contributed to her death.

If only he’d told her—

Spilled milk, he insisted to himself. *What had happened had happened and there was no going back. No one can change the past and get away with it. Even the Doctor knew there was a price to pay for altering the time line —*

“Clark?”

The voice seemed to come from far away. “Yes?”

A woman’s hand on his chest checked his forward progress. “Hey. Where’d you go?”

His vision cleared and he saw Bobbie standing before him with a worried look on her face. “Sorry. I was woolgathering.”

She lowered her hand. “You must have been picking out the sheep, too, and the loom to weave it on. I called to you three times before you responded.”

He shuffled his feet in his best “aw-shucks” manner. “I’m sorry. I was kind of thinking about Lois.”

Her visage cleared. “Good things, I hope.”

He took a deep breath and let it out. “Some regrets I have, things I did that I shouldn’t have, things I should’ve done but didn’t, that kind of thing.”

She looked at him closely, then smiled, reached out, and took his hand. “Come on. Let’s go sit in the park. You can tell me about some of those regrets and I’ll see if I can top any of them.” With that, she set off for the park with him in tow.

How about that. She’d taken his hand without any prompting on his part. And, surprisingly, her hand felt good in his.

Clark followed Bobbie to a bench in Livingston Park away from the regular foot traffic patterns but not too private. He silently approved of her choice. She obviously didn’t want him to get the idea that she was about to start making out with him.

She tugged him to the bench she’d selected and sat him down, then took a seat close to the other end. The bench could seat four good friends if they were all very slender and willing to sit hip to hip with little or no wiggle room, but it usually had no more than three occupants. So he and Bobbie could sit close together without being shoved up against one another. Clark felt safe sitting next to her.

She released his hand as she sat. “Okay, Clark, I think

we should exchange regrets now. I'll start unless you want to go first."

He smiled thinly. He hadn't been very successful going first in serious male-female conversations in his life. "You go ahead."

She nodded. "Okay. Um – I guess I'll start with a big one." She put her hands in her lap and seemed to shrink in on herself. "I – I've never told anyone this, okay? Not even my mom. And I – I'm taking a big risk telling you this."

Clark held up a hand. "Wait, please. Is this going to be some kind of quid pro quo? You spill a deep dark secret and then I do the same thing?"

She shook her head. "No. I don't care if you tell me something or if you don't tell me anything. That's entirely up to you. I just – it seems like our – our friendship is at the point where I can tell you whatever comes in my head and you'll still be my friend."

He nodded slowly. "I'd like to think that too."

She took a breath and let it out slowly. "Okay. Oh, just one more thing. Whatever I tell you, it won't be that I'm involved in something crooked or illegal."

"I never thought you would be into anything like that, Bobbie."

She seemed to relax a little. "Thank you. That makes me feel better about what I'm going to say." She looked down at her hands, which were clasping each other in her lap. "Glen and I – we spent a night together." Clark didn't respond. "You know – the whole night together." He still didn't respond. She turned her face to him and all but demanded, "Are you listening to me? Did you hear what I said?"

"I heard you, Bobbie," he said softly. "I'm waiting for the regret part."

"Ah. Thank you. Again." She hunched forward on the bench. "He was my first. You know, the first one who – anyway. It was the – the morning after that night that Glen asked me to marry him. I know I disappointed him when I told him that I had to think about it, but the answer would probably be yes. I said I just had to kick it around first, you know, look at it from a lot of angles, not just the horizontal one." She blushed a little. "And that was a really great angle, too. That night was epic, almost magic. He – wait, you – you really don't want to know all that, do you?"

He smiled. "Probably not."

"Yeah. I mean no! Anyway, we had a dinner date set up four days later. I was going to tell him 'yes' during dessert and see how he reacted. But we – we never – he was shot – the day – the day before and I never – I never got to tell him – I never told him how much I—"

Clark scooted to her side and touched her hand. "Bobbie —"

She turned and buried her face in his shoulder. Her long arms wrapped around his chest and squeezed. If he hadn't had his powers, he would have had a hard time breathing.

Clark held Bobbie until she finally slowed down. His shirt was soaked and her nose needed a good blowing or two. When her arms released her death grip on him, he fished out a handkerchief and tried to clean her face.

"It's okay, Bobbie. It'll be okay." She took the kerchief from him and wiped her upper lip. "I'm sure Glen knew

you loved him."

She nodded but didn't speak. "Do you want to hear one of my great regrets now?" he asked.

She sniffed hard. "Only – if you want me to know."

"I do." He gently pushed her upright. "But I'd like to tell your face and not the top of your head."

She sat up and assayed a damp grin, then wiped her eyes and nodded. "Please, Clark, go ahead. I'll try to be as understanding as you have been."

He tried to smile but it wouldn't form on his face. "Okay. Here it comes."

Bobbie knew this was going to be big. Clark might not have been willing to tell her anything if he'd thought she was trying to pry, but she understood that he wanted to let her know how much he trusted her.

Because Bobbie trusted Clark completely. And the realization startled her.

He took a deep breath and pulled her attention back to his words. "I told you that I regret not sharing my deepest, darkest, most private secret with Lois, right?" She nodded to him. "Another dark secret of mine is a little like yours. I never – Lois didn't ever—" he stopped and ran his hand through his hair. "Let me start over. Lucy has told me several times that Lois really did love me, that she would have married me if she – if she had survived. But I never heard – she never told me that herself. And I deeply – I wish more than anything that she had. And that I'd somehow made her understand that I loved her and wanted to spend the rest of my life with her."

She reached up and touched his cheek for a moment, then realized how intimate the gesture was and let her hand slip away.

Just not very quickly.

"Thank you for trusting me," she whispered. At a more normal volume, she said, "I understand how painful that memory is. And – because you're such a good friend, I wish I could take the pain away from you. I wish I could take away your grief and loss, just like I wish someone could take mine away."

He took her hands in both of his and gently massaged them. "As much as those memories hurt me, Bobbie, as much as I grieve because of them, as much as I miss Lois, as much as it cuts me at times, I don't want to forget anything I went through with her. As often as she frustrated me, as much as she infuriated me, as many times as I got angry with her or she got angry with me, all that is part of me now. I'd have to give up a big part of myself if I lost all that."

She looked at their joined hands and smiled. "I think I understand what you mean. But – in the long run, is it worth it? I mean, think of all the empty days you've had since Lois – since she left. And all the long, lonely nights you've spent alone, knowing that your aloneness wouldn't go away with the morning sun. Is all that ongoing pain, all that heartache, all that emptiness worth keeping that part of yourself?"

She knew she was projecting her own experiences on Clark, but she also knew that he'd understand that. And he had to have gone through many of the same things she'd

gone through. Maybe he'd never become hysterical at three in the morning and destroyed his bedroom along with half his clothes. Maybe he'd never stepped out of a department therapy session into the hall and started screaming incoherently and been restrained by other officers nearby. But he had a sensitive heart and a beautiful soul. He'd know what she was saying, what she was asking of him.

He took a breath and let it out slowly. "To quote a cynical passage in a very enjoyable and otherwise optimistic recent movie: 'Life *is* pain, princess. Anyone who tells you different is selling something.' I know it's hard – those memories will always be painful – but they teach us, too. They teach us that loving someone is a huge risk, no matter what the character of that someone might be. It's a risk to love your parents, your siblings, your children, your friends, because they all have the potential to break your heart."

He gave her hand a soft squeeze. "But those folks also make life fuller, brighter, more interesting—" he paused as she snorted lightly. "Yeah, you can take 'more interesting' any way you want to take it – but in the long run, I believe that loving people is better than not loving people."

She nodded and turned away – she didn't look at him, couldn't look at him. For this question, she couldn't see his face as he heard what she asked. "Clark – I kinda want – I guess I need to know – have you always felt this way?"

She felt him stiffen for a moment, then he exhaled again. "No. After Lois died, I wanted – I tried to build a fortress around my heart. I did a pretty good job, too, almost had it finished – until the morning when you pushed me down on the cemetery lawn."

She looked up and smiled a little. He met her gaze and said, "You reminded me that I'm not unique, that I'm not the only person in the world who has suffered a great loss. Other people survive pain like this and build active, fruitful lives. I don't want to leave this life yet. There are still stories to write, criminals to catch, corrupt politicians and businessmen to uncover, good people who need their stories told, and people who want me in their lives. I may question their taste in friends, but I'm not selfish enough to take the choice away from them. Not now, not anymore."

She watched his face – his handsome, caring face – and decided that there was no guile in Clark Kent. None whatsoever. He was indeed the straight shooter Bill had told her he was.

It was more than enough to build a friendship on. She just hoped she could be the rock for him that he was for her. Maybe even more than a friendship.

All she had to do was risk her heart again.

On the following Wednesday afternoon, his work phone rang.

"Clark Kent, Daily Planet."

"Hey, Clark, this is Bobbie."

He couldn't help the smile that grew on his lips. "Hi, Bobbie. Long time no see."

"Yeah, right, four whole days. Hey, I had a real good time at dinner with Ellen and Lucy at The Steak Palace last week. The manager almost put us out of the restaurant, we laughed so much."

"You've told me, and I've told them, and you've told them, but I'll pass it along again the next time I see them. Is that the only reason you called?"

"Well – no, it's not. See, I kinda wanted to have dinner with you – just you – but not in a public place where people might see us and maybe get the wrong idea or where we can't talk about – you know, stuff, the kind of stuff we talk about sometimes, so how would you like to eat at my place on Friday?"

Interesting. He hadn't had dinner alone with a woman – much less in her apartment – since the last meal he'd shared with Lois. The memory of that meal, and the gentle time following it, didn't distress him as much as he would have thought.

Maybe it was time to reach out to a friend.

"Clark?" she quavered. "I – I'm sorry. I've overstepped, haven't I?"

He'd been quiet too long, and she'd gotten nervous. He didn't want that. "No, Bobbie, you haven't. I was just – remembering, that's all."

"Was it a good memory?"

He paused, then said, "Yes. It was a very good memory."

"Did it make you smile? You sound like you're smiling."

He smiled wider. "Yes, I am, and it did. And I'd love to have dinner with you Friday evening. Are you as good a cook as you say you are?"

"Oh, no way, Kent!" The impish grin was back in her voice. "You've bragged on your culinary skills once too often. You've got kitchen duty."

"Me? Little old me?"

She chuckled. "Yes, little old you. I'll provide the setting, the beverages, the spices, and the cooking utensils. You pick the menu and bring the food. And don't forget the receipts! We're going Dutch on this one and splitting the cost."

"As you wish, my lady. What time shall I begin preparing this repast?"

"Let's aim to start eating about seven-thirty, so you let me know how much prep time you'll need and you can come over then. Okay?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Great! I'll see you Friday if not before! I'm supposed to finish up some paperwork on a case we just handed off to the DA's office, that knife killing you and your hungry snitch helped me with, so I have to go. Bye!"

"Bye, Bobbie."

She hung up almost before he finished his salutation.

He sat back and smiled. Dinner with an attractive, professional, slightly dangerous woman with a past that probably made her a safe friend for him. He wasn't sure he was ready for a relationship with her – or with anyone, for that matter. Lois was still prominent in his waking thoughts.

Although, he mused, she was inhabiting his dreams less frequently. And he was sleeping through the night more and more, not waking up out of a nightmare as often. They still snuck up on him occasionally, but even those didn't yank him out of slumber with frozen heart and stilled lungs any longer. He still missed Lois – he knew he would always

miss her – but he no longer pondered the various and sundry ways he might join her.

Bobbie surely wasn't looking for a relationship either. Glen was still important to her, was still the real reason she visited the cemetery every Saturday morning, and still had a hold on her soul. Just as he missed Lois, he was certain she still missed Glen and always would.

That didn't mean they couldn't be good friends.

And he had work to do, too. It was time he attacked the background data Jimmy had dug up on the subject of his current investigation. There was something there, something the man was hiding, something that would damage his budding political career if it were made public. If it was a real scandal, something with legal repercussions, Clark would ferret it out and publish it.

The truth was still important to him – or, rather, it had become important to him once again.

Six-forty-five on Friday evening came slowly, but it did finally come.

Clark shifted the canvas bag in his right hand to his left to join its mate and knocked on Bobbie's front door. His cooking skills were on the line tonight, and he'd promised her a delicious dinner. She'd promised beverages and to make her spice rack available to him, plus provide the after-dinner entertainment.

It was shaping up to be a good night to have a friend. Especially a friend like Bobbie Tracey.

She opened the door as he moved a bag from his overloaded left hand back to his empty right. Her honey-blond hair was down and brushed to a fine sheen. It shimmered as it danced on her shoulders. Her smile felt full and open and – and soft. He wasn't sure how that had happened or why he perceived it that way, but that's the impression he got.

"Come on in, master chef," she said. "Kitchen is thataway. Cookware is already pulled out and waiting for you, as requested."

"I remember where it is, Bobbie." He lifted both bags for her inspection as he crossed her threshold. "I have flank steak, pork 'n' beans, sweet potatoes, green salad – no onions, I don't much care for store-bought ones—"

"Good," she broke in. "Wouldn't want your onion breath in my face after dinner."

He set the bags on the kitchen counter and began unloading it. "Just what will we be doing after dinner? I'm really curious."

"Oh, you'll enjoy this, Clark. You can bet on it."

With that slightly cryptic comment, she turned to the silverware drawer and took out place settings for the two of them. He noticed that the plates were already on her small dining table.

"Hey, Clark, I almost forgot something. I talked to Glen's folks yesterday and they told me again how much they enjoyed having you over for dinner the other night. Wanted me to invite you for a third time. Evonne said you surprised her again by being such a wonderful gentleman."

Surprised, he stopped and turned toward her. "Really? Even with my behavior after that volleyball game? She thought I was a gentleman?"

Bobbie smiled. "She's used to the stereotypical Ugly American going to Paris and insulting everyone he meets. And you really wowed them when you discussed the Seine with them in French."

He nodded. "I see. They were looking for a younger American male who wasn't a complete idiot."

She gave him a lop-sided grin. "Actually, Étienne said he wanted to host the young man who'd put the smile back in my voice again. And they want us both to come back again soon. Evonne promised to make a traditional French dinner."

He shouldn't have been surprised again, but he was. Bobbie had told him a great deal about Glen's parents, just as he'd told her a great deal about Lois' family, but he hadn't realized how close they still were. It sounded like they'd informally adopted Bobbie just like Ellen and Lucy had informally adopted him. It confirmed the impressions he'd received the day they'd had lunch and volleyball with the LeCour family, impressions they'd reinforced with the recent dinner at their home.

After a moment that almost lasted too long, he nodded and said, "Sure, I'd be glad to. Just let me know when would be a good time."

"I'll talk to them about it. Hey, chef, let's get to cooking!"

As he began loading the stove, he noted with some pleasure that the burners were well-used but clean, as was the oven below. He unwrapped the steak and laid it out on the cutting board. "Hey, Bobbie, how do you like your steak?"

"Still mooing."

He stopped, a bit startled, then realized that she'd told him to cook it rare. "Still mooing it is. When you slice into it, you'll probably tell me you've seen cows hurt worse than this get up and walk away."

Her liquid laugh filled his ears and he smiled widely. She sure was fun to be around, especially now that they both felt free to tease the other, and neither of them was afraid to say anything to the other.

That didn't mean that either of them ever made light of the other's loss. Clark respected Glen's memory as much as Bobbie respected Lois'. But they each took their reference cues from the other. If Bobbie told him a funny story about Glen, he felt free to laugh or even poke a little fun at her, and if Clark told her a tender story about Lois, she sympathized with him and offered comfort. The reverse was true, too.

The thought made him curious, and he decided to risk a question. "Bobbie, can I ask you something about you and Glen?"

She stepped to the kitchen opening and said, "Sure."

He hesitated and almost changed his mind, then decided to forge ahead. "How often did Glen make dinner for the two of you?"

He was startled when she barked out a laugh. He turned to look at her and saw a sad smile on her lips. "Never. For all his other accomplishments, Glen was no cook. He could burn sandwiches."

He stopped and blinked at her. "What?"

Her smile widened. "It's true! He came over one night

and tried to make grilled cheese sandwiches and the bread caught fire. Ruined a good baking sheet and scorched the inside of the vent hood. To this day I don't know how he accomplished that feat. You can still see the residue if you bend over a little."

He looked, and yes, there were scorch marks in the paint on the inside of the vent hood. He shook his head and went back to prepping the steak. "Wow. And I thought Lois was a bad cook."

"She was, huh?"

"Fraid so. She wanted to make dinner for me one night, so she made rumaki."

"I didn't know that was a dish all by itself. I thought it was a method of preparation, you know, for shrimp and meatballs and such."

"It is. Lois didn't realize that until she started following the recipe. She managed to finish it with hamburger meat, and I ate it, but it gave me indigestion."

She snorted again. "And here I thought you could eat anything, you renowned world traveler you!"

"Just goes to show you, I guess. Some things just aren't meant to be eaten."

He glanced up at her. Her mouth moved as if she were about to add a comment, then apparently thought better of it and didn't speak. She smiled wide and nodded at him, then went back to the dining area.

"What kind of music do you like?" she called out.

He continued prepping the steak. "Oh, just about anything as long as it's not too loud or non-melodic."

"How about some Mozart? I've got 'Eine kleine Nachtmusik' on a CD, along with some other pieces of his."

"Including that nifty solo piano thing, oh, what's the name of it?"

"Starts out in A minor, switches to A major, then comes back to A minor again? 'Rondo Alla Turca'?"

"That's the one! He wrote so many wonderful piano solo pieces. I like his orchestral stuff, too."

He heard her load the disc and tap the buttons to start it, then adjust the volume to a background level. "I hope you're not a big opera fan. I can't sit still that long."

He grinned. "No, not really. I like some operatic pieces performed by themselves but rarely the whole work. Can't stand to listen to some soprano or tenor lament about a lost love for two hours. The singer ought to stand up to life and do something about it instead."

All he heard was Mozart for a long moment. The thought that he might have crossed a line appeared in his mind. Then Bobby spoke from the kitchen doorway. "How's my wounded cow coming along?"

He grinned at her, thankful that the line was further away than he'd momentarily feared it might be. "It's about ready to slap on the burner. I'm going to start the potatoes and beans. I'm making my steak with yours, so we should be ready to go soon." He turned toward her. "You want to toss the salad for me? I thought I'd have more time, but live cow cooks pretty fast."

She smiled. "Sure. Hand me the fixings and I'll get started by the sink."

"Fixings? I think you're the first Metropolitan I've ever

heard use that word."

"I was born here, but I spent most of my summers in West Texas on a ranch not far from Midland and Odessa. My uncle owned the place, and he made sure his nieces and nephews earned their dinners and beds. Met my best girlfriend Wanda Dallas there, too. We—"

"Wait a minute! Her name is what?"

"Wanda Dallas. She's a firefighter in Marshall, Texas. Why? You don't know her, do you?"

"No. It's just – a very unusual name."

She grinned without looking at him and paused for a long moment, then continued. "As I tried to say, we worked as ranch hands from the time I was eleven until I turned eighteen and graduated from high school. That's when I applied to the Police Academy here in Metropolis."

"You said you were in a patrol car for a while?"

"Started as a rookie. Five plus years either walking a beat or riding in a patrol car. Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering. You're a detective now, though. How'd that happen?"

She stopped her salad prep for a moment, then resumed. "I took the detective's exam three weeks before that last patrol with Glen. I didn't find out I'd passed until a couple of weeks after – after he died. Bill Henderson came to the precinct and laid out my options – stay in patrol, leave the force and go back home to my mom, or join his team. He said he understood my – my situation and he wouldn't push me into anything that made me uncomfortable until I got my feet under me. Said it was my call all the way. I went home, talked to my mom, came back and talked to Glen's parents, cried for a couple of days, then called Bill and told him he had me if he still wanted me."

He waited for her to continue, but she didn't. "I'm sorry, Bobbie," he said. "I didn't realize it was a painful memory for you."

She sniffed once and said, "You didn't know. It isn't that painful, not now, not really, just – it's still kinda hard. You get it."

He nodded, knowing she couldn't see him. "Yes. I do." Then he forced some cheer into his voice. "I hope you have cinnamon and brown sugar. That goes great with the sweet potatoes."

He heard the forced lilt in her voice. "Sure. The spice rack is arranged alphabetically, so you should be able to find them, assuming you remember your A-B-Cs."

He paused, then dropped the steaks on the grill and slid them over the burner. "That's it. You're getting yours well done, you skinny pest."

"Skinny? Why you wide-bodied jumbo jet you! I oughta clobber you for that!"

"Nu-uh. You'll never know how good this meal would have been if you do."

"Sometimes one must make sacrifices in life," she said darkly.

"You mess with me too much and Glen's scorch marks will be gone because I'll burn down the whole place."

She was silent for a moment, then she chuckled. "You'd do it, wouldn't you?"

"Hey, I've never agreed with the Klingons."

"The Klingons?"

“That revenge is a dish best served cold.”

She laughed so hard she nearly spilled the salad on the floor.

Chapter Ten

Dinner was almost over. Mozart had given way to a classical guitar album, providing a soft underpinning to the meal. Clark watched with a smile as Bobbie leaned back and took a big drink of iced tea – unsweetened, just the way Clark disliked it but was too polite to complain about – then covered her mouth with her hand and emitted a very small, ladylike burp. “Sorry,” she said. “That was a really good dinner. Thank you so much.”

Clark leaned back and smiled at her. “There are cultures around the world in which a burp after dinner is not only expected, it’s rude if the diner doesn’t offer one. It’s a compliment to the cook and to the host.”

She giggled. “What are you laughing about?” he asked.

She waved her hand aimlessly. “Nothing! Nothing at all!”

“Come on, it has to be something. What was it?”

She looked into his eyes and grinned. “I thought about Lois’ rumaki and how your burps weren’t compliments for that cook.”

He smiled, then chortled. “No, they weren’t. She limited her meal preparation to calling delivery places after that.” He fixed her with a Popeye glare. “Probably a lot like Glen’s cooking skills.”

She nodded. “He was a whiz at microwave meals. Harder to mess them up. Hey, you ready for the evening’s entertainment?”

“Sure, as soon as I clear the table.”

“No way! You cooked, I clean up after. Just sit tight and I’ll be done in a jiffy.”

She was as good as her word. She rinsed off the plates and set them in the sink to soak, then dried her hands and opened a drawer Clark hadn’t touched while cooking. She came back with a deck of cards in her hand and a small rack of chips in the other.

He tilted his head to one side. “Straight draw, seven-card stud, or blackjack?”

“Naw. Them’s kiddie games, pilgrim. We’re playing a real man’s game.” She sat and mock-glared at him. “And I’m gonna clean your clock, old son.”

He pointed to the chip holder. “I hope we’re not playing for real money.”

She grinned. “Not yet. I still have to teach you Texas Hold-Em the way I learned it. You’re not ready for a live hand yet.”

His eyebrows rose. “Texas Hold-Em? I don’t know that game.”

“You’ll pick it up quick. Here, divide the chips while I shuffle.”

“How many per player?”

“All of them. That’s my small tray. White is one, blue is five, red is ten. We won’t play for actual money, but those are usually dollar amounts. Don’t pull out the black chips – they’re hundreds, reserved for real serious players.”

He tried to look miffed. “I can be real serious.”

She glanced up at him. “You’re like that steak, Clark.

You’re good, but you need some seasoning first. That steak was terrific, by the way, just how I like it.”

He nodded. “I thank you, madam, and I bow to your excellent wisdom. On both counts.”

“Just to be clear, there are no wild cards. That okay with you?”

“I’m going to have enough to keep track of just learning the basics. Don’t make it any crazier, please.”

She grinned at him for a moment. “Okay, we’ve got our chips, I’ve shuffled, and you cut. Good. Now, we can’t really play a proper game with just the two of us, because it really needs a minimum of three players plus a dealer, but you can learn the basics pretty quickly.

“Now pay attention, cause you’re gonna need to remember this. On the first hand, the dealer is called the ‘button,’ and the two players to the button’s left are the ‘small blind’ and the ‘big blind,’ in that order. The small blind, on the button’s left, puts money in the pot to start – there’s usually no ante – and the big blind, on the small blind’s left, puts double that amount in the pot. So if Joe, to my left, drops in two whites, then Jim, to his left, puts in four whites. That sets the betting amounts for the hand. And the small blind bet can be just about anything up to the table limit, although most players start fairly small. Since there’s only two of us, though, we’ll each ante two whites.”

He tossed two white chips to the middle of the table. “Got it. I think.”

“One more thing. This won’t matter with just the two of us, but the button moves one player to the left between hands even if the dealer remains the same. And both the small blind and the big blind shift one player to the left along with the button, so all the players get to participate equally. It’s a little confusing at first, but it’ll make sense once you play a few hands with several players.”

She matched his ante. “Next, the remaining players buy into the hand. Usually the buy-in is at least twenty times the big blind, so if small blind Joe puts in two whites and big blind Jim puts in four, the buy-in for everyone else in the game is at least eighty.”

“We bet before we get any cards?”

“Yep. That’s why they call it ‘gambling.’”

Clark’s eyes widened for a moment. “Wow. Eighty dollars? That can get really expensive really fast.”

She grinned and nodded. “The maximum is one hundred times the big blind. Any of the other players could force that much money from each player into the pot by dropping in four hundred. Say your buy-in is eighty after Joe and Jim have bet, that’s what you put in. Alice, the player to your left, might buy in with a hundred, meaning everyone who’s already bet needs to make up the difference or fold, including the small and big blinds. You’d have to add another twenty to stay in the hand. And a hundred becomes the buy-in for Brenda, the player to Alice’s left. And Brenda can raise if she wants to.”

Clark’s eyes widened again and his lips parted in surprise. “I take it back. Eighty bucks is nothing.” He looked at her, astonished. “Are you sure that’s right?”

She chuckled. “You want to make the white chips a penny, the blue a nickel, and the red a dime?”

“That’s – no, I guess not. Wait, you did say we weren’t

playing for real money yet, didn't you?"

She grinned. "Not yet. I'll let you know when we do."

He nodded and tossed in forty units worth of chips.

"Okay, we're past the buy-in. What's next?"

"Now each player gets two cards face down. Those are your hole cards, just like in seven-card stud. You can look at them, but don't let me see them. Ready?"

He nodded. "Just – go slow, okay?"

She dealt and said, "Take a gander at them. And don't tell me what they are!"

"Okay, I won't! You don't have to yell at me." He tipped up his hole cards and saw that he had the king of spades and the four of diamonds. "Okay, but I have no idea if it's a good hand or not."

"We'll find out in a minute. Now we go around the table and bet again. This part is called the 'pre-flop.' Everybody gets a chance to fold, call and bet the big blind amount, or raise and bet double the big blind. What do you want to do?"

He tossed in four white chips. "I guess I'm kind of a coward."

"No, you're just learning the game. I could raise you, but this time I'll just call. Now we take the top card off the deck and put it off to the side, face down. It's called a 'burn' card, and if anyone folds, we take that player's cards and put them top of the burn pile, all of them face down. We don't want anyone counting cards."

"I can understand that."

"Now the dealer lays out the next three cards face up in the middle of the table. When these cards are down, you can take your cards – still keep them from the rest of the players – and try to build the best poker hand you can. This is called the 'flop' and it follows the pre-flop."

"Got it."

"Okay, now we see the flop. Ooh, we have the jack of hearts, the jack of clubs, and the five of hearts. The hand isn't over yet, but now you look at your hole cards and see what you can make of them. Then you bet."

"I suppose there's a magic way to do that, too."

She smiled. "Of course. Now everybody bets, starting with the small blind to the button's left. Of course, a player can fold, call, or raise. If you fold, you're out of the hand, just like in regular poker. If you call, you have to match what the previous bettor tossed in the pot. This game, that would be four bucks. If you raise, you put in double the big blind's amount, in this case eight bucks. If a player raises, the play keeps going around the table in sequence until everyone has either folded or met the latest raise. You can see that two or three aggressive players in a game like this would make for some pretty big pots."

"Yeah," he breathed. "Okay, I bet now, right?"

"Four or eight, your pick."

"Four."

"I raise, which means I put in double your bet. You need to put in four more or fold."

He pulled out a white chip and tossed in a blue one.

"Okay. Call."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. The small blind and big blind subtract their initial buy-in from whatever they bet, and they have to put in the blind amounts every time before the

next card is dealt unless they fold."

He sighed and shook his head. "Are you sure this isn't really Fizzbin ¹ ? From Star Trek?"

She laughed. "No. I know it sounds like it, but I'm really not making this up as I go along. Ready for the next card?"

"I don't know. It's not after midnight on Tuesday, is it?"

She chuckled. "It's Friday evening, smart-aleck. We have another burn card. I think the object of the burn cards is to make it harder to rig the deck." She took the next one off the top and laid it face-up beside the flop. "This one is called the 'turn.' Ten of spades. Now we bet again, except all the bets are doubled."

"Doubled? Wow, this is getting really expensive."

"I told you it would. Your bet."

He frowned at the table, then put in a red and pulled out two whites. "I guess that's a call."

"It is. I call. One more burn card before the last one." She discarded the burn card, then stopped and held up the fifth card. "This one is called the 'river.' Please don't ask me why they're named what they are because I have no idea. Just roll with it."

"Got it – I think. We're rolling on the river, right?"

She gave him a mock-glare. "No quoting oldies pop songs during play. That's a house rule. It interferes with the classical background music."

She dropped the river face-up beside the others. "Seven of clubs. That's going to be a tough one to match."

"Yeah. Do we bet again?"

"Yes. Oh, did I tell you about checking?"

He sighed. "No. And I don't believe you. This isn't Texas Hold-Em, it's Dragon Poker ² with multi-level spells to match."

She smiled again. "If you don't want to bet, you can check and wait for the other players to fold, call, raise, or check. You can do that in any betting round. If you're the only one checking, you have to call or raise to stay in the game. If everybody checks, no money goes in the pot that round. But that rarely happens. With just the two of us, I don't think checking would work, because I'm going to bet no matter what."

He sighed again. "Fine. Are we still betting double on the big blind?"

She smiled wider. "See! You're getting it! Yes, it's still double."

"Then I raise." He put a red, a blue, and a white in the pot for a total of sixteen.

She looked at the pile of chips in the middle. "You must think you have a good hand. Let's find out." She matched his bet and steepled her hands together over her remaining chips. "Call."

Clark turned over his hole cards and frowned. "I think the best I can do is a pair of jacks from the flop with a king in my hole cards. What do you have?"

She turned over the nine of diamonds and the jack of spades. "Three of a kind, all jacks. I win."

He leaned back and shook his head as Bobbie raked the pot into her chip pile. "Something tells me I'm in for a long night."

Clark looked at his meager pile of chips, then at Bobbie's giant hoard – neatly stacked in twenty-five-chip columns and grouped by color – and shook his head. "I don't think I can match your raise."

She grinned mischievously. "Then you have to go all in. Best thing to do is to just give up now."

It had been a long night of losing for him. He'd won maybe four hands, none of them big ones. And they'd been playing long enough for the Mozart disc to restart.

He sat back and shook his head. "It won't do me any good to fold. I couldn't survive another hand."

"Too late, Clark. Your only hope is that your hand beats mine."

He sighed mournfully and pushed the few chips remaining to him in the pot. "I call."

She reached out and counted his bet with one finger. "You're light. You can't match my raise."

"We're playing table stakes, remember? I don't have anything else."

She grinned again, almost evilly this time. "That's okay. If I win, I'll figure something out."

"Fine," he sighed. "Show me your cards."

"Uh-uh. You bet first on the river because I checked, so you have to show your hand first."

"And after you told me you weren't checking." The only answer she gave him was an evil Groucho Marx grin, minus the mustache but with the eyebrow wiggle. "Fine," Clark muttered. He turned over his hole cards. "This is all I have. How about you?"

She revealed her hole cards. He didn't need to think too hard, since her smile threatened to split her face. Bobbie hadn't needed the river to beat him.

He tossed his cards on the discard pile. "Okay, I'm busted and I owe you something. Can I work it off in the kitchen?"

Her mouth opened, closed, and opened again. "No. I want a kiss from you."

His eyebrows and lower jaw moved as far apart as his biology would allow. "You – you want – a – a kiss? From me?"

Her expression made Clark think of someone who'd just stepped off the high dive at the swimming pool for the first time and would dearly love to back up. She licked her lips and hesitated, then said, "Yes. Just one. And no longer than you want it to be."

He hesitated, thinking. It wouldn't be all that different from giving someone a hug who needed one. It certainly wouldn't mean that he was deeply in love with her, or that she was deeply in love with him. And if Lois knew, she wouldn't mind. She'd want him to move on with his life.

Maybe Bobbie was thinking the same thing about Glen. Maybe this was a way for her to tie a ribbon onto that interrupted relationship. Maybe she needed the closure.

Mozart's "Eine klein Nachtmuzik" started playing again on the stereo. It was light, a bit breezy, and sounded simple even though Clark knew it really wasn't. But it seemed to fit the moment.

One kiss. Sounded simple. No way it really could be. But a Kent never welshed on a bet, even if he got snookered into making it.

He smiled and nodded. "Okay. Do we stand?"

One corner of her mouth bent upward. "We can't do this with the table between us, so I think we pretty much have to."

They stood and came around the table to face each other. Bobbie stepped closer to him and looked into his eyes as if securing permission for her lips to touch his. He licked his lips to combat the sudden dryness in his mouth. Her hands lifted to his elbows. His hands raised to touch her rib cage. With her height, her nose was just about level with his mouth.

Now he wondered which of them would make the first move. Maybe he should start it? Yeah, let's see how that works.

Clark leaned towards Bobbie and stopped. After a moment, her eyes closed and she shrank the distance between them.

Their lips touched gently. She quickly pulled away a little, then pressed her lips to his again. Clark's eyes drifted shut. He kept his hands on her lower ribs, but Bobbie lifted her hands to either side of his face. Her fingers were finest cotton against his skin and her lips were a tender living thing.

The first kiss lasted only a brief moment. The second kiss was soft and warm and they held it for just over three seconds and eleventeen minutes.

When Clark opened his eyes again, Bobbie's eyes were shining and her smile was as bright as the morning sun.

Then her eyes bulged and her smile vanished. She jerked and spun on her feet and sprinted to the bathroom and slammed the door shut.

Oh, boy, thought Clark, I've really blown it now. She'll never want to speak to me again. I should never have agreed to that bet. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

He wanted to punch himself. Why was he so strong and yet so weak when it came to not doing stupid things around beautiful women? He really was super-stupid.

He stood and slowly cleared the cards and chips from the table, then put their drinking glasses in the dishwasher. He rinsed the dishes and put them in her dishwasher with the glasses, then put away the spices and condiments Bobbie had provided. He packed up the leftover steak in tinfoil and decided at the last minute to put it in the bottom of Bobbie's refrigerator. At least she could get another meal out of this disaster, he mused.

When he closed the refrigerator door, he saw Bobbie standing in the doorway as if she'd appeared from nowhere. He jumped, then closed his eyes and sighed. She shouldn't have been able to sneak up on him, but he was that upset with himself.

They began speaking at the same time. "Bobbie, I—" "Clark—"

Remembering another time when – disastrously – he'd insisted on speaking first, he said, "Okay, you go first. And don't bother being gentle with me."

"What?"

"I know I made a mistake. I'm sorry. I can only—"

"Hey! I thought you said I could go first."

The tiny smile he saw trying to push past her lips puzzled him. "Okay. You talk, I listen."

“Good. Because I – I don’t think I could say this again.”

She began pacing in the small kitchen. “When you kissed me – and don’t say anything that sounds like an apology because not only did I not fight you I kissed you too – it was nice. No, it was more than nice. It was great. I felt alive, I felt real, I felt – I felt like a woman again.” She stopped and leaned forward against the counter across the kitchen from him. “I haven’t felt that way since the day Glen died.”

She turned and looked into his eyes. “And when I leaned back, looking at you – and you were the only one I saw at that moment – I suddenly realized that I wasn’t thinking about Glen. I wasn’t pretending that his lips were on mine or wishing his were the arms around me. He wasn’t in my thoughts at all. And that’s – it’s the first time I haven’t thought about him when I was anywhere near another man, even just in the same room with one. It scared me.”

He nodded slowly, not quite knowing where she was going with this. “Okay.”

“It scared me, because for a minute I thought I was starting to forget him. And I don’t want to lose Glen or his memory. He was important to me – always will be important to me – but I – I think this means that I’m getting over losing him. I’m starting to see what you were talking about, how our past is important to our present. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

He sighed and put his hands in his pockets. “My parents told me that I – that someone who loses someone special will – that person will eventually get to the point where I – where he remembers the good memories more clearly than the bad memories, that the person will become someone else from – because of the good memories. It didn’t make much sense when they told me, but I think it’s starting to.”

She nodded. “The department therapist told me that I’d never forget Glen. She also told me that fresh grief is like a terrible flood that covers everything, and that eventually the waters recede and little islands of normal will start to appear in my life.” She blinked and glanced away, then looked straight at him again. “That kinda sounds like what your folks said.”

When she didn’t continue, he gently asked, “Are you telling me that I’m an island in your flood of grief?”

She shook her head. “No. At least – no, I don’t think so. The therapist also said that the landscape of my life would be permanently changed by my personal flood, and that when my flood eventually receded, I’d go on with my life. She also said that my life would change permanently, like land swept by rushing water, just like everyone else’s life does who gets flooded out like that. I think that’s what’s happening between us.”

He frowned, puzzling at her meaning. “So, are you telling me that I’m a geographic feature in your altered reality?”

She tilted her head to one side. “I think you’re a significant part of my new reality. You might be a big part, a medium sized part, or even the basis of it, but you’re a part of my life. I don’t want to lose that part of me that you are now. Does that make sense to you?”

“I think so. It means you’re moving on, right?”

Her eyes flickered once and she made a sound like a cross between a hiccup and a sob. “Yes. Yes, I think I am. And I think Glen would want me to move on. I think if I could pick up the phone right now and call him, he’d tell me it was about time for me to move on.” She stepped close to him and reached out as if to touch his arm, but dropped her hand at the last moment. “Do you think – maybe you could tell me if Lois would be mad if she knew about all this? You know, if you could call her and talk to her?”

Softly, he whispered, “Bobbie? Lois is dead, remember?”

She nodded without taking her eyes from his and whispered back, “Then, that would make it a long-distance call, right?”

He goggled at her for a moment, then slowly smiled. She saw his smile and raised him a giggle. He saw the giggle with a chuckle and raised her a laugh.

She checked his bet. He raised by pulling her into a warm embrace, a raise she called with enthusiasm.

No one else in the world could have gotten away with such a joke, especially at this moment.

With her arms under Clark’s and with her head on his shoulder, she asked, “So are we okay?”

He squeezed her a little tighter and she responded by burrowing deeper into his embrace. With her voice muffled against his chest, she said, “I’ll take that as a ‘yes’ unless you’re bluffing.”

He kissed the top of her head. “No. This is no bluff.”

“Good.” She inhaled deeply, then let it out slowly. “Because I’m not bluffing either.”

Clark glanced back into the living room where they had laid their cards on the table. His hand was a queen high diamond flush, but Bobbie’s hand was a straight flush topped by the king of hearts.

He wondered if the card values meant something beyond determining who won the hand.

And he wondered if Bobbie wondered the same thing.

Chapter Eleven

Bobbie and Clark stood in the middle of the kitchen for three or four minutes, silent, just holding each other, as one occasionally caressed the other’s hair or back or shoulders. Bobbie didn’t dare sit down with him – she knew if that happened she’d want to take another step with him, then another, and another, and pretty soon they’d be doing something she wasn’t sure she was emotionally ready to do.

But it was hard to let him go. He’d made no demands on her, offered no suggestions on what they should or should not do next, as if he himself weren’t certain what he really wanted. And Bobbie was sure that Clark was not into casual sex with anyone. If he were to sleep with a woman – any woman – she could be confident that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

He reminded her so much of Glen that it frightened her a little. She might even be projecting her memories of Glen onto Clark. They were different men, sure, but they were similar in many ways—

Nuts. She’d promised herself that she wouldn’t compare them. It wasn’t fair to her or to Clark. Nor was it fair to Glen.

Or to Lois.

So, after careful deliberation and with great reluctance, she put her hands on his chest and softly moved away from him.

She was surprised when his hands slipped over her arms as she disengaged, as if he were as reluctant to separate as she, but not willing to force her into anything. And Bobbie knew it wouldn't have been too difficult for him to encourage her to remain in his embrace. He was a genuinely good man. She'd been alone for so long, had missed the feel of strong and faithful arms around her, had cried herself to sleep alone in a bed made for two so many times, and she had to admit that waking up next to Clark Kent wouldn't be a hardship for her.

It might also be a disaster of epic proportions. Clark would want – no, he'd almost demand – permanence as a basis for any romantic relationship. If she wanted to wake up next to him some morning in the future, she'd have to commit to waking up next to him every morning for a long, long time – at least as long as they both were alive.

Like, “married” committed. Forever if not longer.

Bobbie didn't know her own heart on the “forever” question right at that moment. Maybe she'd be thrilled to marry him. She thought she would. But would Clark be thrilled? Was he looking forward to waking up next to her every morning, having breakfast and dinner with her nearly every day, washing the dishes, cleaning house, doing the laundry, going grocery shopping, sharing the cooking chores and the resultant meals and work problems and confidences and sources and credit for closing cases?

Waiting for her to come home as he hoped and prayed some crazy hadn't blown her head off or knifed her and left her to bleed out?

He'd kept giving her occasional tips from that gourmet snitch he knew, but Bobbie still hadn't met the guy. And she didn't know if it was the snitch's choice or Clark's reluctance to share him with her. Maybe he wasn't completely comfortable about letting her all the way into his life.

“Forever” would have to wait and see. There were too many unknowns.

She sighed quietly. At this point, there was no way to know any of that stuff. She could either play it safe and fold, or raise and kiss him again, or go all in and invite him to spend the night.

And going all in would be a terminally stupid bet. Not only would that course of action risk her heart, it would put his at risk also. If he accepted her invitation, it would be an incredible night – but it might lead to a horrible morning, with apologies and regrets and tears and damaged hearts on both sides and Bobbie wasn't ready to dive into that nest of barbed wire. Not yet. She wasn't ready to risk herself.

And she dared not risk him.

She took the safe route and said, “Clark, you're a wonderful friend. Maybe – maybe we can be more than friends someday.”

Clark wanted Bobbie to stay where she was. It felt good holding her in his arms. It was almost – not quite, but very nearly – as good as he'd ever felt while holding Lois.

He tried not to let his body betray his thoughts, but apparently his control wasn't as strong as he'd thought. It seemed that she'd sensed a slight change in him and deduced that she'd reminded him of Lois.

Or, maybe, he'd reminded her of Glen. Either way, the result was the same.

She pushed back from him – but not out of his reach, letting his hands slide down her arms to her own hands – and paused as if considering her next words. Then she said, “Clark, you're a wonderful friend. Maybe – maybe we can be more than friends someday.”

He smiled, because he'd been thinking something very similar. “You're a pretty good friend, too, Bobbie.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then looked at her again and said, “It's getting late. I think maybe we both need to get some sleep.”

She lifted one eyebrow at him and once again he wanted to punch himself.

“Aw, nuts,” he blurted. “I meant you sleep here and I sleep at my place. I didn't mean that we—”

She smiled wide and put two fingers on his lips. “I understood exactly what you meant. I gave you the eyebrow because I was thinking pretty much the same thing.”

He exhaled and relaxed. “Then I guess we're on the same wavelength.”

“For now, yes. So – so how about I walk you to the door and you hug me again before you go home?”

He looked in her eyes and saw fragility. He saw uncertainty. He saw confusion.

And he also saw some very positive signs. Wow, did she ever have expressive eyes.

So he did the only thing he could do. He gathered her in his arms again and stroked her hair with one hand. “Good night, Bobbie. I'm very glad I came tonight.”

She slipped her arms around his neck and squeezed. Her whisper found his ear and said, “I'm glad too, Clark. We'll have to do this again sometime soon.”

He chuckled softly. “My place next time. You cook and I'll pick the after-dinner entertainment.”

She slipped back, almost reluctantly. “It's a date. We'll talk later to firm it up.”

He caught her hands and held them for a long moment, then let her fingers slide through his. “I'll call you tomorrow afternoon, okay?”

“More than okay.” He turned and opened the door. “Good night.”

Bobbie locked the door, then leaned her forehead against it.

What had she been thinking?

What had she started?

The kiss part of the bet had been a spur-of-the-moment thing. She hadn't planned it.

Had she?

Maybe. Possibly. Even probably. No, she was almost sure she hadn't planned it. Objection from the prosecution! Teaching him Texas Hold-Em might have been more than just a little leading of the witness, your honor – Hold-Em could very easily imply Hold-Me. And she'd told him she'd spent significant time in Texas. Texas Hold-Me? Subtle, but

very suggestive.

At least she hadn't suggested strip poker.

She stifled the almost-frantic laugh that came up at that thought. Surely Clark wouldn't have gone for it. He was far too straight-laced for something that dangerous, at least with a woman who wasn't already his wife.

Then another thought hit her, a repeat visitor with a croquet mallet.

Clark was too good a man, too good a friend, too much a Boy Scout to sleep with a woman unless they had a long-term permanent relationship going. He'd never given her any hint that he'd welcome her attempt to "ease his troubled mind," as so many blues songs put it. Clark was as solid and dependable as any man, even Glen. The term "casual sex" didn't exist in his vocabulary. She doubted – no, she was certain that he'd never slept with Lois. It just wasn't in him to take advantage of a woman like that.

So what if that was sexist thinking! She could always sue herself for discrimination!

The clock in the hallway said it was late. She was tired, dog-tired, both physically and emotionally, as evidenced by her stupid consideration about suing herself for a random thought. It was time to sleep – perchance to dream.

Perchance to dream of Clark.

Or to dream of being tied up with barbed wire and beaten with angry porcupines.

Clark's steps took him home, just not quite straight home. He kept a listening ear out for any cries for super-help, but none came. He was left with his own thoughts.

And a fine mess of thoughts they were, too, he thought, then mentally apologized to Oliver Hardy for almost plagiarizing his catchphrase.

He tried not to think of Bobbie, her soft hair, her tender smile, her deft hands, her gentle lips—

Whoa, big fella. Keep your feet on the sidewalk and think of sitting naked on an iceberg and leaving a butt-shaped melted depression on the surface. Or about Perry's reaction to a missed deadline.

Oh, yeah, that helped a whole lot, like not at all. He wished he'd memorized the value of Pi to the millionth decimal value so he could redirect his mind by repeating it aloud.

Clark wondered for a moment if the card game – Texas Hold-Em – had been a subliminal message from Bobbie to induce him to get a little closer to her. On reflection, though, he didn't think so. She'd never before hinted that she wanted anything more than a friendship with him, not explicitly. He was fairly sure that the few things she'd said that might be construed as flirting by one with a cynical bent were probably just slips of the tongue and not slips of the Freud. She wasn't trying to seduce him tonight.

A stupid joke he'd heard years ago flashed into his mind.

If Sigmund Freud were alive today and wrote another psychology book and went on the talk show circuit to promote it, would that be a Freudian schlep?

Yeah, that was a stupid joke.

He thought about Bobbie some more. She was certainly attractive, more so than many women Clark had known –

just not Lois-level beautiful. And Lois' angry face had been forceful and more than a little intimidating, but Bobbie's was just downright scary. Bobbie didn't have the emotional control that Lois had had, but then Bobbie was still recovering from losing Glen. Maybe she was starting to move past all that pain and loss. Maybe she really liked him – like more-than-a-friend liked him.

And maybe he should send her a hand-drawn Valentine in two crayon colors like a third-grader.

He stopped and glared at the lamppost on the corner as if it were responsible for his mental state. This was nuts! he insisted to himself. He was moving away from obsessing about Lois to obsessing about Bobbie! Lois hadn't been gone for two years yet! It was too soon!

Wasn't it?

Maybe. Maybe not.

He tried to imagine what Lois might say to him. He tried to envision her walking beside him, chiding him, teasing him, advising him about whether or not to move forward with Bobbie.

Nothing. Lois refused to manifest in his mind. And he didn't know what her silence meant to him.

Was he ready to move on? Was he just riding an emotional high from Bobbie's kisses? Did he actually love her or was he trying to replace Lois with Bobbie?

Were two years of grief enough? He didn't know.

And Glen hadn't been gone as long as Lois had.

Maybe it was too soon for Bobbie too.

He needed to get home and sleep on it.

Bobbie changed into sleepwear, made sure the ringer on her bedside phone was turned on, and shut off the lights. As she slipped under the covers, she thought about the night she'd spent with Glen.

This time the memories made her smile sadly instead of pushing her to weep and wail and pound her pillows into shredded foam rubber.

It had been sudden, unexpected, a complete surprise to both of them – at least that's what Glen had told her – and it was a memory she'd keep and cherish as long as her memory was intact. He'd been kind, gentle, attentive to her desires, more patient than Bobbie had thought any man would be—

Clark would be just as tender and patient. She was sure of it. He'd—

No! She absolutely did *not* need to think about sex with Clark just before going to sleep! He'd already invaded her life, eluded her defenses, and gotten closer than anyone had since Glen. She didn't need him looming in her dreams. It was too soon. She'd let him get too close to her.

Then Bobbie remembered Lois.

It hadn't quite been two years for Clark. From what little she knew of men and women who fell in love with another person after their first loves had died, most men seemed to establish romantic relationships quicker and remarry – or just marry – than most women. Statistically speaking, she'd flipped their roles and taken the initiative quicker than he had.

But it wasn't as if she'd tackled him and pulled him down on top of her. And he hadn't exactly objected to the

kiss – no, the kisses. He'd given her the impression that he'd enjoyed them as much as she had. That second one had been – whew.

But—

He could have been humoring her, letting her get the physical contact out of the way so they could go back to being platonic friends. Maybe he really was angling for a one-nighter with her, or a passionate weekend he could brag about to his buddies. Or maybe now that he knew she'd spent a night with Glen he figured he could talk her into spending one with him.

He didn't come across to her that way, but—

Maybe she'd scared him off by being so brazen, so forward. Maybe she'd squashed any possibility that he'd be open to a permanent relationship with her. That would solve the problem, at least.

Or maybe it would hurt her even more deeply.

She snapped over onto her back and let out a low growl. *Go to sleep ! she told herself. You're not accomplishing anything ! You're just keeping yourself awake !*

She rolled to her side and ordered herself to go to sleep.

Clark paused when he finally arrived at his apartment door and extended his hearing. It was pretty late – nearly two in the morning – and any hope for a Superman emergency to distract him was met with dead silence. Apparently the recent resurgence in Superman's activity had dissuaded many of the lowlifes and street scum from pursuing their trade in this part of the city.

He did, however, pick up the sounds of the couple upstairs who were engaged in passionate activities. He shut off his hearing as soon as he realized it was Rick and Teresa Wright, the young couple who'd recently moved into the building. At least he no longer blushed bright red – or worse, became furious with envy at their love for each other – on the rare occasions when he accidentally overheard them.

A chuckle bubbled up as he unlocked his door. The Wrights had rented the apartment three floors up from his about three months before, and they often embraced and kissed so enthusiastically – in front of anybody and everybody – that the newlyweds often forgot where they were and that they were in plain sight of anyone in the hall. Clark had recently started whistling the final answer theme from Jeopardy whenever they locked lips in front of him. It always brought them back to reality wearing mutually loving and slightly embarrassed smiles.

Rick and Teresa were young, deeply in love, and smiled a lot, both at their neighbors and at each other. Clark wondered for a moment if he'd have been able to smile when thinking about them a year ago.

He was pretty sure the answer would have been no.

And he was equally sure that Bobbie was a big part of the reason he could smile about them today.

That was it. He needed to get some sleep and get Bobbie out of his mind for the night.

Bobbie walked through a foggy meadow wearing a light blue knee-length nightgown. She couldn't see very far, but the grass was soft and tickled her feet. All she could hear

was the sound of her passage through the foliage.

Someone walked beside her, silent as winter snow.

She turned to look, but all she could see was a vague outline. Whoever it was seemed to nod at her in either recognition or acknowledgment, then stepped a little closer.

She couldn't see the figure's face, but it seemed to be a woman, someone shorter and more petite than she. Bobbie took a step toward the woman, but it didn't close the gap between them. The woman lifted what looked like her near hand and reached out.

Bobbie reached for the woman's hand. Their fingers brushed and the woman drew closer. Her hand was surprisingly warm. The woman seemed to smile at Bobbie.

"Hi," Bobbie said. "Who are you?"

The woman's voice seemed muffled by the thickening fog. "You know who I am."

They were closer, but Bobbie still couldn't see the woman's face. "I do?" she asked.

"Yes."

Bobbie resumed her original course, still touching the other woman's hand. "How do I know you?"

"You just do."

Could you get frustrated in a dream? "But I don't."

A male voice in front of her said, "Yes you do."

Bobbie stopped and looked at the man who'd suddenly appeared before her. Was that – could it be – was it possible – was it Glen?

She wanted to leap at him and tackle him and knock him to the ground and yank his clothes off and have her way with him and never let him go but her feet were frozen to the ground and all of a sudden she couldn't move—

Glen was standing right in front of her. Right there! Right in front of her in a full-length powder blue robe of some kind and she tried to tell him she loved him but the words wouldn't pass her lips. She wanted to show him how much she loved him but her body wouldn't obey her mind.

"Glen – I – I can't – I want to but—"

"It's okay," he said with a smile.

"What? What's okay?"

"You know that too."

"No I don't! I don't know who she is and I don't know what's okay and I don't—"

Bobbie lurched up in bed and yelled, "—know what you're talking about!"

That panicked moment when one snaps out of an intense dream to sudden wakefulness seemed to her to last several minutes. Slowly, very slowly, her breathing eased. She put her hands to her face and found sweat. Then she felt her arms and found more.

The covers were thrown back with deliberate intent as she all but leaped up and nearly fell. She grabbed her dresser and steadied herself, then when the panic had completely faded she stumbled to the bathroom.

Her nightie was soaked in sweat. The old Victorian caution that "Horses sweat, men perspire, women glow" flashed across her mind. She grabbed the hand towel beside the sink and wiped a layer of "glow" from her arms.

Bobbie leaned on the counter and thought about her dream.

She'd often dreamed of Glen since that terrible day. She'd relived the shotgun blast that had taken his life dozens of times. She'd dreamed that she'd bent over his broken, bloody body and screamed at him to get up and marry her. She'd dreamed that the gunman had shot Glen, then had aimed at her and fired again and hit her in the middle of the body and she'd known she was dead and she'd lurched up in bed screaming and crying. She'd dreamed that she'd pulled her weapon and shot the man with the shotgun only to see Glen struck down by a second gunman in the car.

That one might have been the worst.

But this dream was nothing like any of those. Who was that woman? What was the woman trying to tell Bobbie? What had Glen been trying to tell her? What was she supposed to know?

What did he mean by telling her it was okay? What was okay? What was her subconscious trying to tell her?

Maybe – maybe Glen was trying to tell her not to forget him. Maybe the woman was trying to say the same thing. Maybe she needed a shower before she went back to bed.

She definitely needed a fresh nightgown.

A glance at the bedside clock put the kibosh on the sleep idea. It was already a quarter past five. She had time for a leisurely shower and shampoo, a session with Ms. Hairdryer, a relaxed breakfast, and an early arrival at the office. There were cases she could work, leads she could pursue, crimes to solve, work to do.

She'd let the conundrum of her dream work itself out, assuming that it was possible.

Clark lay in bed trying to keep his eyes closed. Nothing helped. He'd counted nearly four thousand sheep. He'd ordered every joint and muscle in his body to relax. He'd meditated to clear his mind. He'd taken a long, hot bath. Nothing.

It was worse than the dream he'd once had a few years ago, just after he'd taken up the red cape, where he'd tried to vacuum his living room while wearing the Superman suit and when he turned around there was more dirt and the bag was full and he kept running the vacuum over the carpet and changing the bag but nothing helped and the dirt kept coming and coming—

He'd awakened cold and shivering. He'd never quite figured out where that dream had originated or exactly what it had signified. He'd just been thankful that it had never returned.

He hadn't thought much about it since that week.

The problem he was facing now wasn't a mystery, though. He knew why he couldn't go to sleep.

It was Detective Roberta Tracey – with an 'e' – Bobbie to her friends. And now apparently his girlfriend.

Was she really his girlfriend? Neither of them had said those scary words. Neither one had spoken the terrifying L-word, either. How did he really feel about her? How did she really feel about him?

That kiss, though – that had been some kiss. And the holding afterward? That had been – well, wonderful. She'd surrounded him freely, asked for nothing but a good-night hug, had slipped back from him after that first really long

and gentle embrace, her head against his shoulder, her hair tickling his nose while his head was upright – she was pretty tall.

Taller than Lois.

That thought jarred him. He was trying very hard not to compare Bobbie with Lois. It wasn't fair to either woman, and it wasn't fair to him, either. Adults didn't compare their friends with their other friends to decide which one was better. Comparing Bobbie to Lois was stupid. And dangerous.

And maybe she was lying in bed comparing him to Glen, a contest he was sure to lose.

The thought made him want to call her, but he ruthlessly quashed that impulse right away. He had no right, and certainly not the privilege, to call her at such an inconvenient hour. He didn't even know if she was a perky morning person or a wake-up-grumpy night person. And this was *not* the time to find out.

Nor was it the time for him to dump his emotional baggage onto her.

Bobbie thought about her dream and about Clark the whole time she was in the shower. She wondered if he was really ready for a new romance. She wondered if she was ready for one. She thought about the kiss again and all but cursed at herself for trapping him into locking lips with her. She thought about that last embrace, how gentle his arms had been, how safe she'd known she was, how loved she'd felt—

No!

She couldn't project her needs, her desires, her expectations onto Clark. She couldn't expect him to be in love with her unless he actually said the words and backed them up with action. She couldn't even count herself as his girlfriend without a verbal commitment of some kind between them.

She was moving too fast, pushing him too much, pushing herself too far.

It was time to put on the brakes and shift into a lower gear. Whether or not she was ready to move on, whether or not she was starting to fall in love with Clark, she liked him a lot and thought very highly of him. He was a good friend, one she didn't want to lose. She was a private person, not necessarily hostile to others but not very social either and a bit prickly at times, and Clark was probably her best friend. And she was trying to be a good friend to Clark.

Huh. A detective whose best friend was a reporter. How's *that* for a potential conflict of interest? It hadn't happened yet, but she could envision a case she was investigating and Clark was reporting and he wanted to print something she didn't want made public and they'd argue about it and it would go past a professional disagreement and right into a personal fight and they'd damage their friendship and deeply damage anything romantic between them and he'd storm off furious and then she'd look for a brick wall to head-butt for an hour or two.

Bobbie wouldn't let that happen.

The water started turning cool and she realized her tiny water heater was empty, so she rinsed off the last of the soap and got out to dry herself. The hairdryer would make

enough noise to drown out her thoughts for a little while.

The realization that she wouldn't cook Clark that dinner at his apartment any time soon saddened her.

The green numbers glowing on Clark's clock radio taunted him. *Five-twenty-nine , idiot , and you haven't slept a wink. Good thing you're Superman. You can fake being awake and alert for most of the day.*

He got up to shower and dress for work and try not to think too much about Bobbie and what he was going to do about her.

Did he care for her? Yes, absolutely. How much? Harder question. He liked her a lot, as a friend, and if they went further down that road toward a romantic relationship it wouldn't be a hardship for him. Of course, she might not want to travel that road. Glen had only been gone a little more than a year and a half, and Clark knew enough about him to know that Bobbie would never forget him.

Just as he'd never forget Lois.

They were moving too fast. They had to slow down. They had to give each other space to think, to breathe, to—
To grieve.

Maybe Bobbie had processed her grief over losing Glen, but he wasn't sure she'd processed her grief over the violent end of her relationship with him. Nor was he confident that he was finished grieving over losing Lois' love and friendship.

Something Dr. Friskin had told him floated to the surface of his mind.

"Clark, you need to understand that you're not only grieving over losing Lois – which is natural and right and proper – but you're also grieving over the loss of that relationship with her, the one you both envisioned but the one neither of you ever got to experience. Grief isn't just losing the person you love, it's losing the relationship, the future that you wanted together, a future which can never be. You'll grieve both for Lois herself and for the loss of that future relationship, and you'll grieve for them both together and for each one separately. You might think of something Lois once said that made you laugh and you'll smile, then you'll want to cry because she'll never again make you laugh. Those two griefs will always be intertwined, but they're not inseparable. Just remember that neither of them will crush you forever."

Stupid eidetic memory.

Dr. Friskin had been right. And as he considered Bobbie and Glen and their relationship, he could see that Bobbie might still be grieving the loss of a future with Glen. He couldn't replace Glen if he tried. Not even Superman could do that.

He couldn't get in the way of her recovery. She deserved to take all the time she needed to process her loss. Clark couldn't help her speed up her grief. Those five stages weren't necessarily sequential, nor were they exclusive. And moving on to stage four or five didn't mean you never hit stage one or two again.

He wouldn't take that away from her. It would be wrong, so wrong, on so many levels. They had to ease off the throttle, to slow down, to give each other space to recover. He cared for her too much to rob her of her

recovery. There would be no rebound romance between Clark Kent and Bobbie Tracey.

The realization that she wouldn't cook him dinner at his place any time soon saddened him.

Chapter Twelve

Perry often came to work on Saturday morning just to make sure everything was fine for the weekend, and today was no different. Eight o'clock found him at his desk reviewing the Sunday supplement. Breaking news still got priority coverage, of course, but many of the Sunday-only features and sections were set up on Thursday or Friday by assistant editors. They were competent and they knew their jobs, of course, but the general editor still checked their work just to make sure. And because his assistants were so good at their jobs, Perry usually didn't have very much to do on Saturday.

Today was one of those days, so the boss took the opportunity to lean back and scan his domain. Not many people were in the office this morning, but he did see Steve Lombard in sports talking on the phone. He was probably trying to get some inside info on the high school basketball game last night. The Albany Prep Giants had enjoyed a big lead late in the second half but had lost it to the visiting South Metro High Bears on an unlikely late-game comeback.

He watched Jimmy trot by on some errand. *That young man has grown up a lot lately*, Perry mused. *Maybe it was time he got a raise and more responsibility.*

The editor smiled as he saw Cat Grant stride past, intently reading a fax she'd just received. The girl – no, the young woman – had come back from California just five months ago, full of purpose and drive and sporting a somewhat more modest wardrobe. And she'd stopped flirting with every male human she saw. Cat had worked hard and remade herself into a real reporter, and she contributed significantly to the Planet's circulation. She and Clark had made a good team when they'd worked together on a story. She wasn't as good as Lois had been, but no one else was, either.

No one else could be, Perry thought. He still missed her terribly.

He was glad that Clark seemed to have gotten past the worst of his grief. According to Bill Henderson, having that lady detective in his circle of friends was a good thing for both Clark and the lady.

Speaking of Clark, there he was.

Perry watched Clark leave the elevator and saw immediately that something was wrong. The young man stopped at the top of the ramp, glanced at Lois' old desk – now Cat's desk – sighed, then trod heavily down to the lower level and the coffee machine.

Instead of pouring a cup, he just looked at the empty mug in his hand and sighed again. Then he walked to his desk and put the mug down. He all but flopped down into his chair, turned on his computer, and sat staring at the logon screen, his face a mask of hurt and disappointment.

That man could not hide his emotions any more than a dove could hide its wings.

This was bad. It was as if he'd regressed to a state

almost like the one he'd suffered through after Lois had died. He looked like he was in pain, suffering a loss of some sort.

Then Clark leaned forward and began typing. *At least he was working*, Perry mused.

Inspector Henderson leaned against the wall beside the precinct break room and smiled at the desk sergeant, who was seated in the break room with a fresh cup of java. "That was some game last night, huh, Sarge?" Bill said.

"Yeah," Zalinski answered. "I thought the Bears were done for, but they won! How far behind were they?"

"Eighteen points with nine minutes left in the game, and their top point guard had fouled out." Bill shook his head and smiled.

Zalinski sipped his coffee, then blew on it once. "Some comeback. That's got to be a record of some kind, Inspector."

"I don't know if it is, but that comeback will be on the local sports segments for the rest of the week. The talking heads won't be able to stop yakking about it."

They paused as the back door to the precinct house opened and Detective Roberta Tracey walked in like an exhausted weightlifter. Zalinski lifted his cup and said, "Good morning, Detective."

Without glancing at him, Tracey grunted something inarticulate and turned toward her desk. Bill looked at the sergeant. The sergeant looked at Bill. They widened their eyes at each other.

"What's with her?" said Zalinski.

Bill frowned and put down his own cup. "I don't know, but I'm going to find out."

Bobbie sat at her desk and began shuffling papers without actually looking at them. She needed to call Clark. She didn't want to, but she needed to. It would be worse if she just didn't show up at his place for dinner.

But there were reasons she shouldn't call him now. It was barely eight o'clock, too early to call on a Saturday. He might be sleeping late. It might be a work day for him. He might get mad at her for – for stopping whatever it was that they had started the night before. It was entirely possible that he really was ready to move forward and she was really the coward, using Glen as an excuse to keep her heart from further risk. Maybe he was at the cemetery, apologizing to Lois for putting his lips – those delicious lips – on Bobbie's.

They weren't valid reasons, just excuses, and pretty thin ones at that. She'd heard better from suspects as she put the cuffs on them.

Her lips still tingled where they'd touched Clark's.

She sighed, let the papers fall wherever the air took them, and dropped her face into her hands. Why was Clark so – so wonderful? Why was he such a great guy? Why was she pushing him so hard? Calling a time-out on their relationship would be so much easier if he were a selfish jerk!

No answers presented themselves to her before her boss pulled up a chair and sat down beside her desk. "Good morning, Detective."

Bill needed to find out if his and Perry's conspiracy had gone bust. They'd put too much effort into it to just give up at this stage.

Bobbie lifted her head and aimed weary eyes at Bill. "Morning, Inspector."

He waved his hand in her general direction. "What's with the long face? You aren't a horse."

She huffed at him. "Please, no Sarah Jessica Parker jokes. They are not funny."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Bill leaned back in the chair and tilted his head. "What's going on with you?"

She turned her gaze away and began shuffling the papers again. "What makes you think anything's going on?"

"Oh, I dunno, maybe it's because you look like you've just lost your best friend." She stopped moving, not even breathing. Bill continued in a quieter voice, "Is that what happened, Bobbie?"

Bobbie's eyes squeezed shut and her fists clenched, crumpling a burglary report and bending a suspect's profile folder. "I – I don't know."

Bill shifted forward. "Nobody's around right now. You can tell me. You know I won't spill any beans."

She nodded. "I know. It – it's hard to describe." Her voice broke as she said, "I think – I think I ran Clark out of my life last night."

Bill put his hand on her wrist and pressed gently. "How did you do that?"

She tried to stop the tears but couldn't. "I – I was stupid!" she stuttered. "I was teaching him Te – Texas Hold-Em and I beat him and – and his last bet was short and I told him he could – could make it up with a kiss and – and I kissed him and it – I know it reminded him of Lois and – and I pushed him too far and too fast and too hard and – and I may never see him again!"

Bill squeezed a little harder. "I'm sorry. Is that what Clark said to you?"

Her hair danced on her shoulders as she shook her head. "No! He was really nice and he kissed me back and he put his arms around me and I didn't say it but I didn't want him to leave and after he left I realized I – he must think I'm some kind of nympho or something – I was supposed to make dinner for him next week and – it's not gonna happen and – oh, I'm such an idiot!"

She leaned back in her chair and pulled her arms across her chest and cried quietly. Bill reached out and put the tissue box on her desk directly in front of her. After several deep sobs, she grabbed a tissue and dabbed at her eyes and blew her nose.

Bill leaned back and said, "I'm very sorry, Bobbie. I thought you two were getting along pretty well."

She sniffed and wiped her cheeks with yet another tissue. "We were. We really were. It was just – it was too good to last."

He patted her on the shoulder. "May I ask you a personal question?"

She sobbed and chuckled at the same time and Bill thought for a quick moment that she was choking. "Sure," she said. "Ask me anything."

"Okay. Exactly what did Clark say to you to convince you he didn't want to be friends with you anymore?"

“Nothing.” She blew her nose again.

Bill paused a moment, then asked, “He didn’t say anything to make you think what you’re thinking, but you’re convinced he doesn’t want to be around you now?”

“Of course! I pushed him too fast, Bill! He’s still mourning for Lois! He still misses her terribly! He’s not ready for a relationship with me – with any woman! It’s too soon for him and I’ll regret pushing him away for the rest of my life!”

“Huh.” Bill leaned back and thought for a moment. Bobbie’s thought processes were logical, but the premise on which they were based was a thin one. Kent would not kiss a woman just to settle a bet. He had to have enjoyed it. He might have been surprised, but assuming Bobbie’s narrative was accurate, she didn’t trap him into that kiss. He’d walked into it with his eyes open.

Probably closed them while he kissed her, though.

Bill pushed that bit of feeble humor out of his mind. “Detective, I’m going to ask you to do something. I can’t order you to do this because your personal life is your personal life, not mine. But if your personal life intrudes on my squad room like it has today, I’m going to say something. I’ve got to, because this will affect the efficiency of the entire squad if it’s not resolved pretty soon. You ready?”

She sniffed and looked at Bill’s shoes. “Yeah. Go ahead.”

“It sounds to me like you’ve made up this whole thing in your head but you don’t really have any idea if it’s true or partially true or if you’re justifying your own fear or if you’re just deluding yourself. You need to talk to Kent and find out what he’s thinking, what he’s feeling.” Bill leaned forward and looked into her eyes. “I can’t have you moping around the station all day. I need you on my team, need you out there investigating, need you picking up the other guys when they’re stuck.

“You can’t do that if you’re too distracted to focus. You’ve been doing an excellent job for the last few months and you’ve made yourself into a valuable team member. You can’t backtrack into a shell, not now.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I know. And I don’t want to hurt the team. I just – I guess I’m more fragile than I thought I was.”

“Okay.” Bill sat back and crossed his arms. “I’m going to call the department shrink and ask her if you can get in a quick session this morning, even if it’s just half an hour. You need to listen to someone you trust on this.”

Mouse-quiet, she whispered, “I trust you, Bill.”

“I know. And I appreciate the vote of confidence. But I’m not the best counselor for you right now. You go talk to Doc Penny and see what she says, okay?”

Bobbie opened her sad eyes and nodded. “Okay. I’ll talk to her.”

“Good. Now, see if you can make some sense out of one of those cases on your desk while you’re waiting.”

Cat leaned back in her chair and smiled. Another article finished, sent to Perry, and ready for publication. She was sure he wouldn’t kick it back for another rewrite this time. The man was hard and firm, but he was also honest and

caring. None of his critiques of her were personal – they were all aimed at making her a better writer and reporter.

And she appreciated his concern. She often recalled their conversation when he’d officially brought her back on board.

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*“You do know that you’re coming on to fill Lois’ spot on the team, right?”*

*“I do, Perry. And I promise you that I’ll do my very best to make you – and Lois – proud of me.”*

*He’d sighed. “Look, Catharine, no one expects you to change your personality or your life to replace Lois Lane. No one could do that. For that matter, if you’d died, Lois couldn’t have taken your place. No one ever really replaces anyone else. The best you can do is to pick up the baton and keep on running the race the other person started. But you’ll never replace her because you can’t. Your stride is different, your overall speed isn’t the same, and your methods of dealing with obstacles are different. And that’s fine. In fact, that’s the way it should be.”*

*He’d leaned closer. “That doesn’t mean you can’t learn something from your predecessor. Study her, learn from her, pick up anything from her that you can use. But I want to make a promise to you right now. I will never ask you to become Lois, not in any way, shape, form, or fashion. You just be the best Catharine Grant you can be, and we’ll get along like peanut butter and fried banana sandwiches in the King’s kitchen.”*

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He’d kept his word, too. He’d never referred to Lois as someone Cat should emulate. He’d never suggested that she change her writing style to mimic Lois’. He’d never implied that Cat should behave as Lois had.

And it had worked out well. She’d picked up a couple of Lois’ old snitches and learned to cajole them into cooperation, as opposed to Lois’ usual method of steamrolling them. She’d even developed two of her own sources, one in the MPD and one in the DA’s office, people from whom Lois had never gotten so much as the time of day. All in all, she’d succeeded Lois ably without assuming all of her various roles.

That included Lois’ role of girlfriend with Clark Kent.

Clark had greeted her sincerely, if quietly, when she’d returned, and it appeared to her that he was starting to open up and live once again. She’d made a concerted effort to be friendly but not butt into his life, or even into his personal space. And it seemed to be the right tack to take with him. He’d taken to smiling at her in the office and exchanging greetings with her. They told each other occasional jokes, and they’d worked well together on a couple of bigger stories where Perry had put them together to gather information more efficiently.

Today, though, he hadn’t even acknowledged her existence. He’d sat at his desk, staring past the monitor as if his mind were somewhere in outer space. He’d seemed so engaged lately, so alive and alert and almost happy again. She hadn’t dared to ask him for details, but there had been rumors of a girlfriend, a police detective with a tragic past similar to Clark’s who seemed to have put the light back in his eyes.

That light wasn't shining this morning, and it wasn't just because he was tired.

Could that relationship be the problem? If so, maybe she could help him fix it.

But did she dare?

She remembered how she'd just about clawed him when he'd first come to work, how at times he'd all but crawled after Lois and at other times had stood his ground and successfully tamed the worst of her excesses, how his heart had broken when Lois had accepted Luthor's proposal, how broken they'd both seemed after Luthor had killed himself.

She hadn't stayed around to watch them work past that two-thousand-pound gorilla. The story she'd gotten from Jimmy was that he'd stayed with her, had remained a loyal and fierce friend, and had loved her as much as she'd allow. From what she'd heard from others in the office, he'd nearly won Lois over.

Then she'd died.

It was tragic, both for him and for the Daily Planet.

And for Cat, too. She no longer had Lois as a target on whom she could vent her frustrations and insecurities. Lois' professional accomplishments were now a goal Cat could strive to reach. The woman had set the bar high, and Cat was determined to get there.

But she didn't have to step on anyone to do it.

She'd offer Clark some gentle counsel, a listening ear, a sympathetic friend. If he chose not to accept it, she'd go on. But she couldn't, in good conscience, ignore a friend in need.

She stood and walked to his desk. "Clark?" He didn't respond, so she put her hand on his shoulder. "Hey, Clark?" Still nothing. She waved her hand in front of his face. "Earth to Clark, come in please. Comm check. Do you read?"

He blinked a few times, then looked up at her as if returning from a long, strange trip. "What – Cat? What is it?"

"You looked like you were in an old Outer Limits episode. You know, the old black-and-white TV show where they controlled what you saw and what you heard?"

He stuttered a breathy laugh that wasn't completely fake. "Yeah, sorry about that. I guess I was absent without leave." He took a deep breath and faced her with some life in his eyes. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Cat put on the most serious face she could call up. He mustn't misunderstand her intentions, not now. "Actually, I wanted to ask if there was something I could do for you."

His eyes narrowed. "Like what?"

She shook her head. "I think we need to step into the conference room." At his wary look, she added, "Just as a friend, honest. You look like you could use one right about now."

He rubbed his cheeks with both hands, then nodded. "Okay. I think I could stand talking to someone."

She allowed herself a small smile. "Good. Is now a good time for you?"

He smiled without humor and stood. "Sure. Let's rip off the bandage and see how bad the damage really is."

As Cat led him to the conference room, she thought about what he'd said and hoped she hadn't stuffed more

bubble gum in her mouth than she could chew.

Cat sat at the end of the table as Clark took the seat just around the corner from her. She clasped her hands in front of her and started. "Look, I want you to know what I'm doing here and why I want to talk to you. I'm not trying to hit on you or offer you any kind of physical comfort. I just – I see my friend hurting, and I want to help him because he's a good man and a good friend to me."

He nodded slowly. "I see. What kind of help do you think this guy needs right now?"

She pressed both lips between her teeth for a moment, then said, "The relationship kind."

He nodded again. "I take it that you've heard about Bobbie?"

"If Bobbie is the lady detective you've been seeing for the past few months, yes."

"She is. And would it offend you if I told you that this is none of your business?"

Her head tilted to one side and she turned toward him in her chair. "But it is my business, Clark. You're my friend. You've been very good to me since I came back, and those stories we worked together were just about the best times I've had since Perry rehired me. You're a valuable asset to the paper, you're a fantastic resource for me when I have questions or concerns about what to put in and what to leave out, and I count you as a close friend." She sat up straight. "So if you absolutely insist that it's none of my business, I'll accept that, but I'll also know that you're wrong."

He looked into her eyes for a moment, then sighed. "Okay, I admit it, I have a problem. I need – I think it's best that Bobbie and I break up and I don't want to make the call."

After a three-count, Cat crossed her arms and leaned back. "I notice that you did not say, 'I want to break up with Bobbie.' You said only that you think it's best. I assume that's a deliberate word choice?"

He worked his mouth and looked away, then said, "Yes," in a quiet voice.

"Okay. It also sounds to me as if this isn't your preferred choice, that you're considering breaking up with her because you think she wants to."

He nodded without looking at her. "That's about it, yeah."

"Okay, one more, and this might hit a hot button, so just remember that I'm not trying to push you. I'm just looking for information. Ready?" She waited until he nodded, then she asked, "Are you concerned about what Lois might have thought about you and another woman? Specifically what she might have thought about you and Bobbie?"

He glanced her way, then lowered his head and almost grinned. "No. I've made my peace with how Lois might react. I really think she'd be happy that I'm recovering, so that's not a problem for me."

Cat frowned, thinking, then leaned forward and put one hand on his arm. "Then may I ask you something? As a friend who's focused on your well-being? As someone who cares about you on a personal level?"

He turned to look at her. "Yes, of course."

She took a breath and let it out slowly, then asked, “Clark, have you been taking stupid pills lately?”

His eyes bulged and his mouth fell open. “Wh-what? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean that you sound like you’ve made a decision without finding out what Bobbie wants or what she thinks about your relationship. Have you asked her if she wants to move forward? Have you asked if your history with Lois is a problem for her? Have you talked with her about anything in her past that might have an impact on the two of you together? Have you gathered all the information you need to make this decision for the two of you? Because it doesn’t sound like it from where I sit.”

Clark’s mouth closed and his eyes narrowed. “Cat, I appreciate that you’re concerned about me. I’m glad you’re trying to be a good friend. I’m pleased that you’re taking this interest in me.” He deliberately pulled his arm away from her hand, then stood slowly and stared down at her. “But understand this: I don’t have to justify my relationship decisions to anyone but myself. I am the only one who can weigh all the factors involved, because no one else has all the necessary information. I thank you for your concern, but your assistance in this matter is not needed.”

With that, he walked out of the room and left the door open.

Cat took a deep breath and blew it out through her nose. *The conversation between Clark and Bobbie won’t end well*, she mused. *And I’m not waiting around to pick up the pieces.*

She needed to touch base with Perry, then she had some grocery shopping to do. Christie Powell from advertising was coming over for dinner, and Cat wanted to try that new Martha Stewart chicken recipe this evening.

As much as she wanted to help Clark, her life and other friendships weren’t going to crash and burn because he didn’t want to listen to her.

Just after ten-fifteen, Clark ran out of busywork. He pushed back from his desk and blew out a long breath, then he stretched out his arm and picked up the phone. It was time to step on the land mine and let the explosion happen.

He put the receiver to his ear and didn’t hear a dial tone. “Huh. Now what?”

“C-Clark? Is – is that you?”

“Bobbie?”

“Yes. I didn’t hear a ring. What – what happened?”

He couldn’t help it. He smiled. “I think we must have had the same idea at the same time and called each other simultaneously. I picked up the phone after your call connected but before my phone rang.”

Her deep breath came through the connection. “Yeah, that has to be it. Um – since you called me, do you want to speak your piece first?”

Good question. He did but he didn’t. Saying what he’d planned to say would feel like what he imagined a normal person would feel with one hand deep in the garbage disposal as another person flipped the switch on.

He chickened out.

“No. You actually called me first, I think, so you go ahead. Ladies first, remember?”

“Sure.” She paused as Clark reflected that she didn’t sound enthusiastic about the content of this conversation. Then she said, “Um – I’ve been thinking.”

He waited for a moment, then said, “Thinking about what?”

“Uh – about – about last night.”

He waited another moment. “What do you think about last night?”

The sound of another deep breath rattled through the phone line. “I – I think – man, this is hard to say. Especially to you. I kinda don’t want to but I feel like I have to.”

He waited for her to continue for yet another moment while thinking that she was going to hit the circuit breaker on whatever it was that happened the night before. It made him deeply sad, even though he’d planned to say basically the same thing to her.

“Clark? Are you still there?”

He closed his eyes and for a brief moment considered just hanging up, then said, “Yes. I’m still here.”

“So – what do you think?”

“Bobbie, you haven’t said what it is you don’t want to say but feel you must.”

“Oh. Yeah, I – I guess I didn’t.”

“Not yet. Can you tell me what you need to say now?”

He heard what sounded like a choking noise, then she said, “I – I think we should push the pause button on – on whatever our relationship is. On wherever it’s going.”

Clark closed his eyes for a long moment. She’d said it. And it hurt. Didn’t much matter that he’d planned to say the same thing to her. She’d said it first.

And he couldn’t hurt her back. It would be wrong.

“Bobbie? I – I’m pretty sure I agree with you, that we shouldn’t move forward at this time.”

She went silent for a long two seconds, then spoke in a clear and controlled voice. “You agree with me?”

He hesitated, then answered, “Yes. I agree. I think it’s probably for the best.”

Her voice stayed clear and controlled. “I see. In that case, I probably shouldn’t make dinner for you at your place next week.”

Clark licked his lips. This hurt even more than he’d thought it would. “No, that wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“No, it wouldn’t. And now, I think I should say goodbye and wish you well.”

“I wish you well too, Bobbie. I’ll see you around.”

“Yeah. Catch you at a crime scene soon.”

He tried to chuckle but it came out almost dismissive. “Sure.” He paused, then softly said, “Have a good life, okay?”

He heard her breath catch, then she said, “Thanks. You too. You deserve a good life.”

“So do you.” They were both silent for almost four seconds. “Goodbye, Bobbie.”

“Goodbye, Clark.”

He settled the handset in the cradle. Then he leaned back and closed his eyes.

He told himself it was a mutual decision. They’d gone too far too fast and she’d gotten scared. And she’d had every right to end it between them. He’d pushed her too much, expected from her more than she had to give him.

He deserved the pain he felt. He'd earned the heartbreak and the grief over yet another disastrous relationship. Maybe she wouldn't hate him too much.

He wondered how long it would take for him to stop missing her and how long his heart would feel broken.

It suddenly struck him that they'd never made any plans for Christmas. Neither of them had even mentioned any thoughts to the other on the subject. He didn't realize how much he'd hoped she'd spend Christmas with him until she – wasn't going to.

Maybe they'd never spend Christmas together.

Bobbie listened to the phone until Clark hung up. She felt almost desperate to hear something from him, anything from him, despite the fact that she obviously didn't mean as much to him as he meant to her.

If only he'd said that he cared. If only he'd said that there might be a chance for them. She would have waited for him. She would have loved him at arm's length, from across the room, from the next block, if only he'd said—

Well. Now he never would say it, not even if she said it first. And she'd never say it to him now, now that there was no hope.

She loved him. He didn't love her. Or maybe he did love her, just not as much as she loved him, not enough to either get angry or ask her to reconsider. He'd just let her cut the cord. No protest, no objection, no discussion. Like tossing your lunch wrapper into the trash. It tasted good, but it's all done now.

Didn't matter who he was or wasn't. Didn't matter whether or not he had a part-time job in a clown suit. Didn't matter how good a reporter he was. He'd crushed her heart like an empty soda can.

She'd made the call hoping that she wouldn't hurt him too deeply. Ha! What a laugh. He obviously wasn't hurt too badly. He'd get over her soon enough.

She only hoped she could get over losing him.

Already she missed him desperately.

Chapter Thirteen

It was just before nine-thirty on a Wednesday morning in mid-March. Cat stood before Perry's desk, nervously shifting her weight from one foot to the other. She and Clark had pushed through this investigation for the past five weeks, dodging the bad guys and following leads and working Jimmy and Jack to the bone running down financial information, travel histories, and phone records. Now her boss was reviewing the final copy prior to submitting it to Legal for review.

Perry finally put the sheets of paper on his desk and leaned back. He gave Cat a stern look, then asked, "Has Clark put his stamp of approval on this text?"

"Yes!" she burst out. Then in a calmer tone, she continued, "He gave a thumbs-up to every paragraph."

Perry nodded. "Was it his idea to put your name first or was it yours?"

"His. He claimed he didn't do as much work as I did."

"That true?"

Cat frowned in thought. "Not really. I did most of the fieldwork and Clark did most of the info gathering and

story organization, but we both wrote the text. We interviewed most of the people mentioned in the story together. Jimmy and Jack helped a lot, too, especially with the computer-based research."

He nodded. "I assume that's why their names are listed as 'Also Contributing'."

"Yes. Clark suggested it first, but I totally agree with him. They should get credit for what they contributed."

"Hmm." He looked through the pages again. "Did both of you interview this detective? Um, her name is Roberta Tracey."

"No. Clark told me to take that one solo. Said he had some other items to chase down and there was no sense in two of us doing a one-person job."

"Did Detective Tracey ask about Clark?"

"She said she'd expected him to come with me. Uh – she might have been a little disappointed, or she might have been relieved. I couldn't quite tell."

Perry tilted his head to one side. "Both of you interviewed the other subjects together, right?"

"Well, yeah, Chief, but most of those people were part of the story. Detective Tracey was an official police source, not a hostile witness, and not any kind of threat to either of us. I didn't need him as backup with her. And Clark was with me on all four stakeouts, including the one where our cover was almost blown."

"Good to know. Let's call Clark in for a minute. Will you do the honors?"

She suppressed her smile as much as she could – which wasn't much. She spun to the door and all but leaped through it and sprinted to Clark's desk. "Clark! Come on! Perry wants to see us both about the story! I think he loves it!"

He nodded as he stood. "He should. You spent a lot of time on it."

"So did you!" She grabbed his arm and yanked. "Come on! We're burning printer's ink here!"

She all but dragged him across the floor, ignoring the quiet giggles of their coworkers at the incongruous sight. She led him into Perry's office and shoved him in front of the editor's desk, then reached back and shut the door.

"Got him!" she crowed. "Tell him, Chief! Tell him!"

Perry's mouth worked as if he were biting off a laugh. After a moment, he said, "Clark, Cat says you signed off on this story as is. That true?"

Clark nodded. "Yes. I know it's a big story and a lot of people are going to be angry, but every point in there has been verified by at least two sources and legal documentation. This is the best work Cat has done since I've known her, and if Legal has any questions about it I'll talk to them myself."

Perry smiled. "That's what I like to hear from my staff. Good job, you two. I don't know if the nominating committee will agree with me, but I'd bet any Elvis reissue album that this will get a Kerth nomination next year."

"Don't forget Jimmy and Jack!" Cat interjected. "They helped a lot!"

"I won't forget. Cat, I want you to take this copy and walk it up to Legal. And take a digital copy too. They can't read our folders on the network any more than we can read

theirs, and if they gripe at you about it just remind them that they're the ones who insisted on that particular security restriction."

"Got it, Chief!" Cat snatched the paper from Perry's hand and all but ran through the door to her desk. She grabbed the thumb drive containing a copy of the story off her desk and leaped up the ramp to the elevator bank.

This was great, this was terrific, this was wonderful! She was sure now that the Planet would keep her. Her six-month review was a little late, but now it would include this story. She and Clark had worked well together, almost as well as he and Lois used to. Retirement vesting and permanent employment, here I come!

The elevator finally came and she whirled into the car and punched the button for the Legal department floor. As the doors closed, she saw both Perry and Clark grinning at her. In fact, Clark was almost laughing.

Cat didn't care. She was a real reporter. She held the proof in her hands and no one could take this away from her. This article was the best work she'd ever done. Even if she moved to another media outlet someday, she could lay this down in front of any interviewer and impress him or her.

No one would ever again accuse her of being just a gossip girl masquerading as an investigator. She'd shown them. She'd shown everyone.

Clark watched Cat bounce into the elevator. She was almost hopping with anticipation, and it made him smile.

Her enthusiasm was contagious, too. "Chief, unless you need me to focus on something else, I'm going to touch base with the DA's office and try to line up some follow-up articles."

Perry nodded. "Good. But sit down for a minute, will ya? I want to ask you something."

Clark sat. "What is it?"

"It's about one of the interviews in the story."

Clark frowned. "Which one? Is there a problem with one of them?"

"No, no problem. I was just wondering why you let Cat interview Bobbie Tracey by herself."

Clark felt his face go blank. He tried to reset it to something more attentive, but he knew Perry had seen it. "Uh – I knew Cat would do a good job, and I wanted to chase down some additional verification for a couple of the more sensitive items we had." Perry looked at him with what looked like skepticism. "Honest, Perry, that was the reason."

"Uh-huh. You sure there wasn't something personal about that decision?"

Clark's mouth opened but nothing came out. He didn't want to lie, but he also didn't want to admit that he still couldn't face Bobbie. Their breakup had wounded him more than he'd thought it would.

And he didn't know how to tell his boss – his friend – how much it still hurt.

He sighed. "Okay, the reason I didn't go with Cat was a little bit personal. But I really did know that she'd ask all the right questions and follow up on anything new that Bobbie might say. I would have been there with her if I'd

thought I really needed to be."

Perry nodded again. "It's been, what, about two months since you two broke up, right?" Clark nodded back. "Have you talked with Bobbie lately?"

Clark turned his face toward the window. "No. I haven't seen her since we called it off."

"I see. It still bothers you, doesn't it?"

Clark turned back to him and almost snapped at his boss, then remembered that Perry cared about the lives of his employees, not just their written output. "Yes. It bothers me. Mostly because I wish I'd handled it better."

Perry pursed his lips and Clark wondered what personal question he'd ask next. Instead, he smiled and said, "Good work with Cat. I know you coached her, and you did a great job. She'll handle her next big assignment with less guidance and more confidence, and it'll be just as thorough."

"Thanks. Uh, can I get back to work now?"

"Go ahead. Bring me some more headlines!"

Relieved, Clark stood and walked back to his desk. He just thought he'd gotten away with not seeing Bobbie. Leave it to Perry to call him on it. At least he didn't insist that Clark and Bobbie meet and talk about it. That was surely the last thing she needed.

He didn't need the pain it would bring him either.

Perry watched his star reporter carry that weight again. He'd thought that Clark had gotten past the bulk of his grief over losing Lois and had begun to build something with Bobbie Tracey, but all the young man had done was pile a new agony onto the first. Perry didn't know who'd made the call to end it, but he didn't think Clark had or he wouldn't be hurting so much now.

Well, it was up to the old editor to do something. After all, he'd all but pushed Clark into the relationship with Bobbie to begin with, so it behooved him to try to fix it.

It would have to start with a lunch with Bill Henderson.

Perry met Bill at Mike's Diner just after eleven the next morning. They sat down and ordered their meals, then Bill nodded to the two men in his security detail to sit and eat. The two men chose tables on opposite sides of the inspector and the editor, one angled to watch behind Bill and the other to watch behind Perry. There were plenty of bad guys who'd love to strike at both men at the same time.

Bill nodded to Perry. "How's the news business?"

"Oh, it's just fine. You see our banner this morning?"

"The one about the corruption in the city manager's office? Yeah, that was a doozie. The DA's office is gonna be busy for months."

The waiter chose that moment to bring their drinks and a small basket of biscuits. As he walked away, Bill picked one biscuit and held it up in front of Perry. "It looks like—" he pulled his glasses off with his other hand and examined the basket closely, then slid the glasses back on "—they put the biscuits in the basket."

Perry returned a brief moan and took a biscuit of his own. "Save it for your on-air audition tape, Bill. Besides, you're conflating two TV tropes there."

Bill shrugged and took a bite, then washed it down with

a sip of tea. “Thanks for the advice. Do you want to get to the actual reason for our meeting or should we trade quips for a while longer?”

Perry’s eyes flicked to one of Bill’s protection team. “These guys solid?”

“Lamont and Ferguson might as well be wooden Indians in front of a cigar store. To my knowledge, they’ve never admitted to hearing anything I’ve said in front of them.”

“Good. In that case, what are we going to do about Clark Kent?”

Bill’s eyebrows lifted. “What you mean ‘we,’ paleface? He’s your employee.”

“Didn’t you say that Detective Tracey was still moping too?”

“It’s not impeding her work, but yeah, she’s not happy. I don’t think she’s smiled since she won that poker game and lost everything else.”

“Has she told you anything about what happened?”

Bill’s eyes narrowed. “This is a quid pro quo, right? I tell you about Tracey, you tell me about Kent?”

“Yes. I’ll start if you want me to.” Bill nodded. “That boy’s carrying a lot of weight these days,” Perry said. “He thinks it was his fault they split up, that he pushed her too far and put too much pressure on her.”

Bill’s eyes opened wider. “Really? That’s news to me. Bobbie thinks the whole breakup thing was her fault, that she assumed more than was true and that she pushed him too fast.”

Perry almost smiled. “Sounds like a lot of dumb being spread around to me.”

“I agree. Seems to me they’re both worried that the other wasn’t ready to make that move forward.”

“Anything we can do about it?”

“Depends. What did you have in mind?”

“Something that will put them together and get them talking. And it needs to be something they both think is urgent.”

Bill leaned back and crossed his arms. “I have an idea that might work. I think our meals are coming, so let’s toss it back and forth while we chow down.”

“Sounds good to me. Are you and Paula Dolan still an item?”

Bill lifted both eyebrows in apparent surprise. “You’re keeping up with us, too?”

The waiter presented two plates to the men, then placed them on the table. Perry picked up a fork and said, “Alice and I are planning a third honeymoon next year.”

“Tit for tat?”

Perry’s mouth was full so he shrugged.

Bill sighed. “Yes. She wants to get married. I like the idea too. All we have to figure out is where we’ll live and who drives what vehicle.”

Perry smiled, then swallowed. “Good for you. Now, about your idea. I hope we’re both involved.”

Without speaking, Bill narrowed his eyes and nodded.

The benign conspiracy was active once again.

Bobbie’s desk phone rang the following Tuesday just before lunch. “Detective Tracey, ninth precinct.”

“Detective Tracey? Good. This is Perry White of the

Daily Planet. I need to speak with you.”

“Sure, Mr. White. It’s your dime.”

“Why are you treating Clark so badly?”

Her eyes popped open as wide as they could. “Wh-what? Me? Treating Clark badly? What are you talking about?”

“I just got through arguing with him over this. He’s demanding an assignment as an overseas combat correspondent embedded with a platoon in a live-fire zone. And I don’t want to lose one of the best reporters I’ve ever met!”

“He – he *what*?”

“You heard me. He wants to report on a war. And the hotter the better.”

“But – but *why*?”

“He said it was because of you. He can’t stand being in the same city with you anymore. Says he’s got to get away from you no matter what.”

“He – that’s insane!” She leaped to her feet and pounded her desk. “I haven’t seen him or spoken to him in – in months!”

“I know, and he says that’s the problem. He says he can’t stay here and not see you.”

“But – he – that’s – ooh! Idiot! That total idiot!”

“Yep, that’s Clark all right.”

“Where – no – when is he leaving?”

“This afternoon. He said he plans to visit Lois one more time, then fly to Smallville for a few days before joining the unit he’ll be with. Why?”

“Is he there now? The cemetery, I mean!”

“I think so. His flight’s not till four-thirty. Why?”

“Never mind!”

She slammed down the phone and grabbed her jacket. She turned to the detective at the next desk and growled, “Tell the lieutenant I’m gone for the day to bust somebody’s head!”

Cat fidgeted in her chair. She wanted this undercover gig. She could almost taste it. And it would be yet another huge feather in her cap when she brought in the story.

But Clark didn’t like it.

Clark tapped his pencil against the conference room table. “I don’t know, Cat. I still say it sounds really dangerous.”

“No more dangerous than any other undercover assignment. I can pull this off, I know it. And I’ll get the goods on this guy.”

He frowned across the table at her. “I know he’s not a gangster, but he probably is an embezzler, and if he thinks his new office temp is spying on him he might get scared enough to do something stupid. And I don’t want you to get hurt chasing a story we could cover more safely from the outside.”

Before Cat could answer, Jack stuck his head in and said, “Clark, call for you on line two.”

“We’re kinda busy, Jack. Can you take a message?”

“It’s Inspector Henderson. He says he needs to talk to you right now.”

“Fine.” Clark flipped on the speakerphone and punched the button for line two. “Clark Kent here.”

“Kent! What are you doing to my detective?”
He frowned again. “Could you be a little more specific, Inspector?”

“I mean Bobbie Tracey! What are you doing to her?”

Clark sat back and made a face at Cat, who shrugged. Apparently bewildered, he asked, “Bill, what are you talking about?”

“Bobbie Tracey! She says it’s because of you!”

“What’s because of me?”

“Her transfer!”

Clark blinked at Cat and lifted his hands to either side. Cat said, “Inspector, this is Catharine Grant. You’re on speakerphone in our conference room, and Clark doesn’t have any inkling of what you’re talking about. And neither do I.”

Bill snorted through the phone. “Fine! Detective Roberta Tracey came to me first thing this morning to request a transfer to narcotics! She wants to go on a long-term out-of-town deep undercover assignment!”

Clark’s eyes bulged out and his jaw dropped. “What? Why?”

“That’s what I asked her! She said it was because of you!”

“Me? What did I do?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Kent! She said she can’t stay in the same city with you, can’t risk seeing you or talking to you! Says she has to get away!”

“But—”

“I want to know what you did!”

Clark stood abruptly. “I didn’t do anything! I haven’t seen her for weeks! Why would—” he broke off and started again. “Narcotics? Deep undercover? Does she not know how dangerous that is?!”

“Of course she knows! She said she didn’t care about that, she just had to get away!”

“When is she leaving?”

“Tonight or tomorrow morning at the latest. Said she needed to say goodbye to Glen first.”

“You mean now?”

“Yeah. I don’t want to lose her, Kent. She’s one of my best.”

“I know. Gotta go.”

“Wait a min—”

Clark slapped the speakerphone off and turned to Cat. “Tell Perry I’m gone for the day to go beat some sense into someone’s head.”

And he was gone.

Cat watched him zip to the stairway door and disappear through it. Then she grinned. It looked like Clark and Bobbie weren’t through with their own personal life waltz after all.

She stood to tell Perry that her undercover assignment was a go. Perry didn’t have to know about Clark’s reservations.

As she crossed the newsroom, the thought that her decision was so like what Lois would have done made her smile wider.

Bobbie rounded the corner of the Starways where she and Clark had spent so many pleasant Saturday mornings

talking and aimed for the cemetery entrance. The idiot! The complete, utter, moronic dolt! How dare he dive into a war zone and blame her! She’d knock some smarts back into his —

“Bobbie!”

The shout from her left startled her and she spun to face the threat. She was astonished to see Clark coming around the opposite end of the Starways at high speed.

He looked mad. Fine. She could do mad too. They each stopped at the same time about five feet apart and she opened her mouth to yell at him as he opened his and they tried to shout over each other.

“Clark, you idiot! A combat zone? You better not—”

“Narcotics, Bobbie? Are you crazy or—”

“—leave and blame me for—”

“—just stupid? And telling—”

“—driving you away like a coward—”

“—your boss that it’s my fault is—”

“—who has to get his dead girlfriend’s—”

“—moronic and you’re just running away because—”

“—permission to act like a brain-dead—”

“—you’re scared that your dead boyfriend doesn’t care —”

“—fool who—”

“—if you—”

Bobbie watched a stunned expression snap into place on Clark’s face and he shut up. A startling thought slapped her brain and she stopped yelling at the same moment. She tried to review what she’d heard and it didn’t make sense. It sounded like Clark thought she was—

No.

He thought she was planning to do something dangerous and stupid.

She thought he was about to do something stupid and dangerous.

He thought she was running away from him.

She thought he was running away from her.

Neither of them had any such plans. They’d been suckered, both of them. They’d both been fed false narratives designed to make them go nuts over the thought that the other was putting his or her life in deadly danger.

Clark recovered his voice first. “Did – did my boss call you?”

She nodded. “Yes. And my boss called you, didn’t he?”

He lifted his hands and held his breath for a moment, then dropped his arms to the side and exhaled sharply.

“We’ve been played.”

She nodded again. “By a couple of masters.”

“Why do you think they’d do something like that?”

A moment passed as she looked into his face. Whatever was there told her to tell him the truth. “Maybe – maybe because they think we’ve been stupid lately.”

Clark nodded this time. “I guess I’ve given Perry reasons to think that.”

Bobbie looked at her shoes. “And Bill has his reasons too.”

It was silent for a few seconds, then Clark hesitantly said, “Bobbie? Do you think we’ve been stupid?”

She stuck her hands in her jacket pockets and looked off to one side, away from the cemetery. “Maybe. How about

you?”

He chuckled.

She looked back at him, astounded. He thought this was *funny*? That this was – was – some kind of *joke*? This wasn't Gotham City! He didn't have green hair and a white face! She didn't run around in split-colored tights with bells on her pigtails! How could he think—

Then it clicked. He wasn't laughing at her. He was laughing at their situation.

They *had* been stupid. They were even being stupid about being stupid.

And it was time for both of them to get smart.

“Yeah,” she muttered. “I guess it's a little funny.”

He didn't move, but she suddenly felt closer to him. His voice was velvet when he spoke. “Why don't we tell each other about that phone call, the one where neither of us was honest with the other? You tell me what you really meant and I'll do the same.”

She sighed and nodded. “Okay, here goes.” She took a deep breath and began. “I was calling you to offer you an out because I was afraid I'd pushed you into that kiss. I didn't think you'd have touched me if I hadn't all but thrown myself at you, and I didn't want you to feel like I'd pushed Lois aside and trapped you. I was afraid you weren't ready to move on yet.”

He shook his head and smiled. “I was calling you because I was worried that I'd led you on and that you weren't ready. I just knew you were having second and third and fourth thoughts and you were sitting on your couch comparing me to Glen and I was losing badly in every category. I didn't want to push you into something you weren't ready for.”

This time she chuckled. “So we've spent the last two months or so being so noble to each other that we wasted all that time? I bet Glen and Lois are sitting on a cloud together just laughing their wings off right now. Probably dropped their harps on each other's toes, too.”

He laughed and held his hand out to her. “You're probably right. Can we try again?”

She slowly reached out and laced her fingers with his. “I'd really like that. Maybe we can go visit Glen and Lois together?”

“I think that would be a good idea.”

They turned and ambled toward the cemetery entrance together. Then Bobbie stopped them. “Hey, what did Bill tell you about me?”

Clark grinned. “Bill said you were transferring to Narcotics and going deep undercover. I guess he couldn't think of anything more dangerous for you to do.”

She lifted one eyebrow. “Oh, I think your boss won that round. He told me you were joining a platoon in a live fire combat zone as an embedded war correspondent.”

“Wow.” Clark shook his head. “Those two sure are creative.”

“Yeah. If only we could convince them to defect from the Dark Side.”

He laughed and she joined him. It felt good.

She felt like singing, except she knew her fingernails-on-a-blackboard voice would drive him far, far away. So she tilted her head toward the cemetery and said, “Come on,

turkey. Let's go make a couple of long-distance calls.”

“Turkey? Who are you calling a turkey, beanpole?”

“Oh, you're gonna pay for that, Inkster! Just you wait!”

“Hey! You be nice or I'll tattle to Glen on you!”

“Oh, that's a dire threat! I'll tell Lois on you!”

Instead of snarking back, Clark laughed and increased their speed. Bobbie picked up the pace and trotted next to him, laughing with him.

She didn't know how they could have been so stupid for so long. She promised herself it would never happen again.

Kendra Powell stood in the doorway to Starways and smiled. She hadn't seen her favorite customers for quite a while, but it looked like they were okay now.

It hadn't started off that way. She'd almost called 911 before they'd stopped yelling and started talking. First they'd both been angry, really angry. Then they'd both acted embarrassed. Finally they'd held hands and laughed and almost skipped toward the cemetery like a couple of pre-teens, which was kinda weird given their ages and where they were headed, but Kendra supposed it worked for them.

If the day's customer traffic followed its usual pattern, the weekday lunch rush would be winding down by the time they came over for their coffees and pastries. And maybe soon they'd be more than coffee friends.

If that happened, she'd have to see the ring and ooh and ahh over it. Maybe Bobbie would hug her, and maybe she could hug Clark too. And she'd give them a lifetime discount card, good for as long as she worked there and as long as they stayed together.

She was up for a management position this quarter. Maybe she could get this store. It would be nice to watch them build a life together.

Clark slowed their pace as they approached Lois' grave. He turned to Bobbie. “Mind if I go first?”

She startled him when she said, “Yes. I mind a great deal. I have something to say to Lois.”

“Oh.” He thought for a moment, then said, “Okay, I guess I'll go over and talk to Glen while you—”

“No.”

He looked at her face. She wasn't laughing now. In fact, her face had paled slightly.

She squeezed his hand for a moment, then let it go. “I have something to say to her and I want you to hear it.”

He nodded. “Do you want me to stand back here?”

She licked her lips and glanced at Lois' headstone, then shook her head. “I'd rather you kneel beside me. I – I might need the support.”

He nodded as Bobbie moved to Lois' headstone and knelt. He joined her as she wrapped one hand in his and put her other hand on the stone.

Bobbie took a deep breath and let it out, then began.

“Hi, Lois, my name's Bobbie Tracey. I'm a cop.

Detective, actually. I work with Bill Henderson. I know you and he knew each other, because he sure thought highly of you. Told me you drove him nuts, but he respected you and knew you only wanted truth and justice so he really didn't mind so much. He sent me here a little over a year ago to

keep Clark from joining you. And – I think he wanted Clark to keep me from joining Glen.

“Glen’s my late partner. He was – was killed at a traffic stop we both worked. That was just a couple of days after he’d asked me to marry him. I was going to tell him I would but he – I didn’t get the chance. Clark and I – well, we understood each other, at least as far as why we visited these graves regularly. We kept each other alive at first, but – then things changed.

“I don’t know exactly when they changed, but I know I came to care deeply about Clark. I wanted him in my life as a friend. I wanted to know him better. I enjoyed the time we spent talking about you and about Glen, the times we shared laughter and tears, sometimes at the same time. And I – I learned a lot about myself. I learned that my life wasn’t over, that I still had things and people to live for.

“And – somewhere along the line I fell in love with Clark Kent.” She paused, then added, “I hope you don’t think I’m chumpy because of that.”

She stopped and wiped her eyes without looking at him. Clark chuckled softly, then squeezed her hand for assurance and acknowledgement that he’d heard her. “I know you and he were all but engaged. I understand, believe me. It’s hard, desperately hard, to lose the person you’d expected to spend the rest of your life with. And it’s almost impossible to find someone else who’s just as kind, just as loving, just as – as good as the one you lost. I don’t know if Clark thinks he’s found that person, but I’m pretty sure I have.

“I’m so very blessed to have him in my life. I’m so very glad Clark and I found each other. And I haven’t exactly told him yet what I just told you but I wanted you to know. And I promise that if this is something that becomes permanent, like – like I hope it does, I’ll love him for the rest of my life and I’ll take care of him just like you would have. I’ll guard his heart and I’ll watch over him when he’s down and I’ll be the person in his life who loves him the most. And I’ll never be jealous that you loved him first, because if he loved you then you had to be a fantastic person and I wish I’d known you.

“Anyway, that’s it. I think we’re going to visit Glen now. If you see him, give him a heads-up for me.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “Bye for now. I expect I’ll be back before too long. I hope I’ll have good news for you.”

Clark felt Bobbie turn toward him but he couldn’t see her. He’d slumped down as she’d spoken her final words to Lois, and his eyes had turned to flowing streams. He felt her arms slide around his head and her lips as they touched his cheek. He reached out and pulled her to him and sobbed.

“Shh, Clark, it’s all right,” she murmured. “It’s okay. I’ve got you and I won’t let go.” She lifted his face with one hand and gently kissed his lips. “I won’t ever let go.” Her smile threatened to split her face. “I love you, Clark.”

His lungs filled almost to bursting. It was all he could do to whisper, “Oh, Bobbie, I – I – love you too!”

With that, they both burst out in tears and embraced each other.

It seemed like a long time before they wound down.

Bobbie had been concerned that she’d jumped the gun by telling Lois about her love for Clark before she told him. The screwy thing was that she hadn’t planned to say all that, but once she’d started she’d kept going until it was too late to hold back.

She felt Clark fish a handkerchief out of his pocket and dab her face with it. She blubbered a quiet laugh, then took the cloth and returned the favor. She pulled off his glasses to wipe them dry, then she looked up and started to replace them—

And there he was.

Superman. The hero who’d looked distraught and stumbled against a door jamb at that suicide scene a few months ago. The super guy who’d saved so many but hadn’t been able to save the woman he’d intended to marry. The airborne hero who’d watched over her more than once. The incredible man who had let her as far into his life as she’d ever hoped he would.

And he’d just told her that he loved her.

He smiled and took the glasses back and put them on. They really did change the outline of his face, hid his expressive eyes, gave him an aw-shucks demeanor, shielded his special talents and abilities from the world around him. No wonder he’d kept the secret so well for so long.

She glanced at Lois’ grave and wondered if she’d known. Probably. Maybe. If she had, maybe she’d planned to do the same thing Bobbie had just decided to do. She’d wait for him to come clean with her about it. She wouldn’t steal his thunder, not about this, not while their love was so new and tender and fragile.

Life was good. Clark was wonderful. She loved him.

And he loved her.

She wanted to live now, more than she had ever wanted to before.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” she asked.

“What does it mean?” he whispered back.

She leaned close and spoke softly in his ear. “Our parents will have to meet each other and give us joint permission to court.”

He chuckled and touched his forehead to hers. “Oh, I think that won’t be a problem.”

Clark saw Bobbie’s eyes change for a moment, but then she looked at Lois’ headstone again and slowly smiled. Given what he was feeling and what she had to be feeling at this moment, he didn’t bother trying to figure out what epiphany she’d just experienced.

He knew what his epiphany was. He loved Bobbie Tracey and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

And that meant coming clean about his huge secret, the secret with which he’d teased her – no, “tantalized” her – a few months ago. He’d screwed up so badly with Lois by not telling her he was Superman, and Bobbie deserved better from him. Lois had deserved better too, of course, but he couldn’t fix that now. All he could do was learn from the mistakes in his past and take a different path with Bobbie.

After all, they were entertaining the notion of a lifetime together. She absolutely needed to know everything about him that was truly important.

Clark stood and helped Bobbie to her feet. Her eyes

shone brightly and her smile showed him how little dental work she'd needed so far and how wonderful she believed it was that they were together. He would guard her heart and her life with his own and give both for her without a second thought.

And there was no time like the present.

He took her hands in his and said, "Bobbie, we need to talk about something. Can you come with me to my apartment? I promise, all I want to do is talk with you."

She lifted his hands to her cheek. "Talk about the future?"

"Yes. And one other important thing, something that you need to know before we have that future talk."

She chuckled. "Can you give me a hint?"

He smiled and shook his head. "Not right now. But I promise to tell you everything."

Her lips found his knuckles. "That sounds wonderful. Can I make dinner for us tonight? We never did have that second dinner date."

He laughed softly. "Sure, if you still want to. After we have that talk, I mean."

"You might be surprised, Clark. I'm a cop, remember? I've seen just about everything."

"I might surprise you anyway. Or you might surprise me." They shared a grin, then he asked, "Um, did you drive here? I took a taxi."

"My car's just on the other side of the Starways. I'll drive."

They started toward the cemetery exit, still holding hands. Clark decided to tease her a little. "Ah, you do remember where I live, don't you?"

She pressed her lips together to hold in the laugh. "I think I can find it. I have one of those GPS things on my dashboard now, a Tim-Tim. I got the one with a Doctor Who voice, and now it will help me find anything any place. When I arrive at my destination, it makes this horrible whooshing noise and asks me if I want a jelly belly."

He laughed again. "Then lead on, my lady."

She slowed and looked at him as if to say something else, then picked up the pace and all but dragged him to her car. He hoped she'd still be this eager to be with him when she learned about his spandex fetish.

No matter. He refused to hide Superman from her any longer. They'd have no secrets between them. Not ever, not as long as he lived.

Chapter Fourteen

Clark rode to his apartment in Bobbie's car. The short trip was long enough for him to change his mind at least eleven times.

Not about telling her he was Superman. That would be a fixed point in time, an anchor in his new reality, the measure of his absolute trust in her. All that was left to be decided was the manner in which he would tell her.

If that knowledge didn't send her screaming to the exits, he'd try to deal with the ghost of Glen LeCour.

He trusted Bobbie completely. He'd believed her when she'd told him she loved him. And they hadn't made it to Glen's grave. Like the speech Bobbie had given to Lois'

grave, Clark had considered doing something similar at Glen's. He still had to deal with that situation.

I don't need to watch soap operas, thought Clark, *I live in one.*

He took out his keys and opened his front door. Bobbie walked in, still smiling, and said, "Well, at least you're consistent. I don't think you've changed a thing since I last saw this place."

He shrugged. "It works for me, so why would I change it?"

"No reason." She took a moment for a visual scan. "Still clean, too, almost obsessively so. But not too much." She stopped in the middle of the lower area and turned to face him. "Okay, Clark. What is this very important thing you need me to know?"

"Um – yeah. Would – are you thirsty? I have some soft drinks, or I could make some tea, or there's always ice water."

She smiled softly and lifted her hand to him. "Just come over here and tell me. I promise I won't bite you or hit you or go berserk on you."

He worked his mouth, then stepped closer and took her hand. "Bobbie, do you remember that secret I told you about? The big, scary, dangerous one? The one I never told Lois?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes."

Suddenly the words wouldn't come out of his mouth. He tried to blurt it out, but his larynx wouldn't make the sounds. He licked his lips and tried again. Failed again.

Bobbie closed the distance and kissed him softly. She pulled back and said, "It's okay. I won't be mad, I promise. Whatever it is, knowing that secret won't change my love for you. Please believe me."

He looked into her gentle eyes and saw acceptance mixed equally with trust. He believed in her. She believed in him. And it was definitely time for her to know.

More confident now, he stepped back with his head up. "I wasn't sure how to say this to you. I only knew I had to tell you." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then said, "I am Superman."

He waited for her reaction.

She smiled wider.

She smiled?

He tells her his biggest, most terrible secret and she *smiles*?

What's *wrong* with this woman? Does she think I'm *kidding*? Why isn't she accusing me of lying to her, of being two people to her, of not trusting her—

Wait.

Hang on a minute.

Just wait and think. She's not yelling. She's not going berserk. She's not mad. Bobbie smiling does not indicate Bobbie mad.

So why—

Of course. She already knew. Or at least suspected.

He sighed. "I'm thinking my big secret wasn't such a big secret, was it?"

She chuckled. "I've been gathering data on my own for quite a while, watching you and comparing it to what I know about Superman and what I've heard from other cops.

I guess I've had my suspicions for about six or seven months now, but today in the cemetery when you handed me your glasses I saw you. I really saw you." She reached out and cupped his cheek with her hand. "You care so much about others, Clark, that if you weren't already Superman, you'd have to invent him just to open yourself up and use that big heart of yours to help wherever you could."

He nodded. "I have to say that I'm a little – taken aback, I guess, at your lack of reaction."

Her hand left his cheek and tweaked his nose. "I'm a police homicide detective, Clark, and I'm pretty good at my job. Just like you, I gather information, try to assemble it into a coherent whole, and uncover the truth of a situation. The only difference is that you do it primarily to tell the public a story they need to hear, and I do it primarily to put bad guys behind bars."

He smiled. "That's true." Then a sneaky, underhanded, horrible thought cruelly struck down that smile. "What if our separate jobs create a conflict of interest?"

She frowned and tilted her head to one side. "What are you talking about?"

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I've gotten crossways with Metro cops before. As a reporter, I mean. What if I'm involved in a story and, in the interest of informing the public, I print information that endangers a case you're working on? Wouldn't Internal Affairs interview you about your relationship with a reporter? Specifically, the reporter who'd just compromised your case?"

Her head straightened and she moved back slightly. "I see what you mean."

"I don't know how often that would happen, or even if it would, but I think we should discuss it and have some sort of contingency plan ready."

Bobbie lifted one index finger, then shook her head and turned. She walked to the couch and sat down at one end, then crossed her arms and leaned back. "I had the same thought a few months ago, but I dropped it when we – you know. When we got stupid."

"Then you're ahead of me. It didn't occur to me until just now."

She pursed her lips and looked away. "I need to think about this. You've really thrown a curveball at me here."

He sat in the middle of the couch, close enough to touch her but with a few inches of separation. "I'm sorry. I'm sure you and Glen never had issues like this to think about."

She sighed. "I bet you and Lois didn't either."

"No. We had a few problems with the police, though I have to admit that Lois instigated most of them."

Bobbie almost smiled. "I haven't been a detective long enough to butt heads with many reporters, but Bill has." The smile won out. "I seem to remember him complaining fondly about Lois pushing him a time or two on cases she covered."

Clark lifted one eyebrow. "Just one or two?"

She smiled wider. "Maybe a few more than that."

They shared a low chuckle, then sat silent, both thinking, for several minutes. Bobbie got up once to visit the bathroom but came back without speaking.

Finally Clark had had enough. "Okay, this isn't getting

us anywhere. I vote that we table this discussion either until we actually get into a conflict of interest or one of us comes up with a concrete plan for us to discuss. That sound good to you?"

Bobbie frowned for a moment, then nodded. "It sounds like a workable solution. Shake on it?"

Clark grinned. "Sure." They shook hands, then he pulled her close. "We can kiss on it, too."

She chuckled as he touched her lips to his. "I like your debating technique, Clark-if-you-want-to."

His kiss quickly escalated to a level of enthusiasm which she eagerly matched. After a long moment, though, she pulled back two inches and panted, "Before we – we get past – the 'thinking rational thoughts' stage, I – we need to – to talk about – boundaries."

He left off exploring her neckline with his lips and gritted his teeth. "I – I assume you mean – how far we go and when – when we go there."

"Yes." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. He could hear her pulse rate slowing. "We need to – I need to know if we're – if you want to wait or – or not wait. For – for sex, I mean."

Her eyes opened and he smiled at her. "I think we should wait," he said. "Unless you keep attacking me with those intense and wonderful kisses. You'd tempt Superman to push beyond that boundary, you wanton woman you."

She smiled. "You're a big teasing pussycat, Clark. But I know what you mean. There's a part of me that wants to grab your hands and pull you straight to the bedroom." She chuckled. "Don't worry, Intellectual Me is in control now, and the two of us agree that we should wait. Our relationship is weird enough without drowning it in hormones, don't you think?"

"I do." He kissed her gently. "And for my part, I will try very hard not to push you too far." He kissed her again, more tenderly. "But it's difficult. You're so very, very sexy and beautiful."

She let out a shuddering breath, then put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back. With a shaky voice, she said, "I know that's your hormones now. I'm not beautiful. I'm not a dog, I know, but I won't win any beauty contests."

"Even against the other detectives in your precinct?"

She mock-frowned. "Even then. Only two of the other eleven are women, and they're both really good-looking."

"I meant the guys."

She pursed her lips as if holding back a smile. "I was including the men, too. Some of those guys would give you a run for your money in the looks department."

He sighed. "Oh, well, there goes that crown. Maybe I could be Mr. Congeniality."

"I'm sure you could. Oh, and there's another item we need to settle between us."

"And that is?"

"How do we integrate Superman into this relationship?"

Clark sucked his lips into his mouth and gently bit them. "I'm not sure what you mean."

She sighed. "You are Clark Kent. You're a very good man. But you're also Superman. I want to be able to talk to you as Superman without thinking of you as Clark. I need to separate the two identities in my own mind or people

might get the idea that I'm having an affair with a superhero."

He snorted. "Yeah, that would be awkward." He paused for a long moment, then said, "I think that depends, at least partly, on where we decide to set up housekeeping together. Neither of our apartments is really suited to a married couple, not in the long run."

Bobbie shook her head. "We'd better stop. If we keep coming up with things to talk about, we'll never get to the wedding. Oh! I want us to write our own vows, too."

He smiled. "That wasn't random at all, was it?"

"It's something I've wanted to do since I was a little girl. My mom can tell you about the vows I tried to write when I was thirteen and in love with Don Henley of the Eagles."

He couldn't help the laugh that burst out. "Seriously? Don Henley?"

"Hey! He made me want to play drums, sing, and write music!"

"Did you?"

"Nope. Couldn't find the beat, carry a tune, or come up with original melodies. So I moved on to other heroes pretty quickly."

"Okay, we'll write our own vows. I assume that we won't share them until the nuptials?"

"Not one moment before and not one word! Promise me you won't give me any hints."

He raised his hand. "I promise. In fact, I super-promise."

She laughed and wrapped her arms around his chest. "That's good enough for me."

She felt good there, pressed against him. It would be so easy to give her a tiny push to see if she really meant what she'd said about not wanting to wait.

Too easy. And not honest.

He needed to lower the tension level.

"Hey, Bobbie," he whispered, "you never did make dinner for me."

She chuckled and leaned back. "You're right, I didn't. Are you hinting that you'd like for me to do so now?"

"Yes, please. I know it's just mid-afternoon, but I missed lunch thanks to our respective bosses, and I'm starting to get really hungry."

She tilted her head to one side. "Yeah, me too. We'll have to figure out some appropriate revenge for each man soon. But if you'll reluctantly release me, I'll look at your larder and prepare a nice lunch for us."

He reached out and kissed her softly. "Very reluctantly."

Then her stomach growled.

Both of them laughed. "Guess that settles that," Bobbie said. She stood with one fluid motion and held out her hand. "Come on, you can show me where you keep your cooking utensils."

Once in the kitchen, she reached out for the drawer Clark had indicated, then stopped. "Can I mention one more thing that we need to talk about?"

"Sure. I assume it's important."

"It's important to me."

"What is it?"

She paused and swallowed. "Kids."

Clark put the plates down on the table and sighed.

"Yeah. I don't know if a Kryptonian man can have children with a human woman."

He heard her take a package of chicken out of his freezer and start unwrapping it. "And your little swimmers might not be susceptible to a lot of different types of birth control, either. Unless you've done some research on the subject."

He snickered. "No. I can't imagine doing that kind of research, anyway."

Bobbie chuckled back. "It's not that I don't want kids ever, it's just that I'm not sure I want kids right now. I'm happy on the job, and I'd like to get used to living with you before we allow an invasion force to assault our happy home."

He smiled without looking at her. "I hope you're happy with me."

A moment later, he felt her arms wrap around his neck from behind. "I will be happy," she whispered, "because you love me unreservedly. That's the greatest gift a man can give his wife."

He put his hands on hers and gave them a little squeeze. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." She kissed the back of his neck, then slipped back to the kitchen. "Of course, any and all romantic dinners and exotic vacations and expensive presents will not be turned away."

He laughed again. Life with Bobbie would surely be interesting.

Bobbie smiled as she left Clark's apartment early that evening. She smiled the whole time she drove home. She fell asleep that night smiling, hoping her dreams would be at least as good as her reality was.

Before long, Bobbie was back in that foggy dream meadow, strolling slowly across it, wearing a pale blue translucent nightgown. It had been knee-length before, but now it fell just below her hips. And it felt lighter, silkier, almost gossamer. She wondered if that was significant.

The grass was still soft on her feet and there were few background noises. She couldn't see very far, just as before. Then she saw the woman again.

This time, though, Bobbie saw the woman's hands clearly. The woman reached out to her with both hands and said, "You're doing the right thing."

Bobbie took the woman's hands in hers without thinking about it. "I am? What right thing am I doing?"

The woman chuckled and stepped closer, then looked up into Bobbie's eyes. "You know what it is, just like you know who I am." Bobbie shook her head. "Take a good look," the woman said.

Bobbie peered through the mist between them. The woman was smiling. Her dark hair was trimmed back so that it ringed her face. Her lovely dark eyes held a hint of exotic ancestry, and they sparkled despite the lack of light. She was stunningly beautiful.

Bobbie knew she'd seen the woman before – recently, too. But where? There was a name, a name Bobbie knew, caught on her tongue, trying to push past her lips, a name she couldn't quite—

The woman leaned even closer. “Come on, Bobbie, don’t be so chumpy.”

Lois!

“You – you’re Lois! Lois Lane!”

Lois nodded. “Yes. And I know you’ll be a great wife for Clark. Just don’t let him get a big head over being Superman, okay? Treat him like a real man, not like a legendary hero. And remember, he’ll blame himself enough for the ones he doesn’t save. He doesn’t need to obsess over those. Remind him of the ones who are still alive or unhurt because he saved them.”

“But – you mean you don’t – you don’t hate me? For loving Clark?”

“Of course not. I can’t be there for him, but you can. And if Clark Kent has chosen to love you, he thinks you’re more than terrific. Don’t forget, Clark has great taste.”

Bobbie nodded. “Thank you.”

Lois grinned a little wickedly and added, “And he tastes good, too.”

Bobbie felt her mouth work, but before she could speak, she heard another, more familiar voice call her name.

“Bobbie? It’s me. I agree with Lois that you’re doing the right thing. Don’t worry about me.” He chuckled. “And yes, we both dropped our harps. Hers landed on my foot.”

It was Glen. Big, ruggedly handsome, tender Glen.

He stepped closer and she saw that warm, wide, wonderful smile of his. “You need someone to love, *cheriè*, and someone who will love you. I know he’ll treat you right, too. You’ll be terrific together.”

He was close enough to touch, close enough to reach out and grab and pull against her and smother him with kisses—

But she didn’t do any of that. She didn’t seriously consider it. She no longer felt that irresistible urge.

She smiled and nodded. “Thank you, Glen. And thank you, Lois. I’ll be the best wife Clark has ever had.”

One corner of Lois’ mouth twitched. “At least you didn’t say ‘the best wife he could ever have had.’ That would be hubris.”

Bobbie nodded. “I know.” She reached out and took one of Glen’s hands in her left hand, then one of Lois’ in her right. “Will I see either of you again?”

She felt Glen squeeze her hand. “Do you think you’ll need to?”

She took a moment – however long a moment was in a dream – and thought, then shook her head. “I don’t think so. But thank you. Thank you, both of you.”

Glen and Lois softly slid their hands from Bobbie’s and slipped backward into the mist again. “Keep doing the right thing, Bobbie,” Glen whispered.

“She will,” Lois added.

Bobbie tried to watch them both as they melted into the mist but soon lost sight of them. “Goodbye,” she murmured. “And thank you.”

Bobbie awoke slowly and heard birds calling outside her apartment. *Hope that’s a good sign*, she thought. *Maybe I should tell Clark about that dream.*

Or maybe not. She’d wait and see if she needed to tell him about it.

And maybe she’d just hang on to it and remember it as she grew old beside him.

Chapter Fifteen

Clark met Bobbie at Mike’s Diner for lunch the following Wednesday, and he was nervous. He loved Bobbie. He was sure she loved him. He was as certain as he could be that Lois wouldn’t object to their relationship. In fact, he rather thought she’d cheer him on.

It was Glen who bothered him. And how he might feel about Clark horning in on his girl.

He knew his worries about Glen were ridiculous. As much as he’d loved Lois, his relationship with her was in the past. Bobbie’s relationship with Glen was in the past. What he and Bobbie were working on now was a future that conjoined them forever.

After they ordered, Bobbie turned her warm smile to him and asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

He blinked. “Talk about what?”

“About whatever it is that’s bugging you.” She put her hand on his and clasped it gently. “I know you well enough by now to tell.”

He frowned and looked away for a moment, then sighed. “Yeah. I’m kinda wondering if you think – and please don’t misunderstand me, okay? I don’t doubt you in the tiniest little bit. This isn’t about you at all. It’s about me.”

“What I think about you? Is that what you’re asking? I would’ve thought it was pretty obvious by now.”

He turned back and forced a brief smile. “It is. It is blatantly and openly obvious. And let me preface this by saying that I think if Lois could tell me how she feels about you and me, I think she’d stand up and applaud me for daring to love someone as special as you are.”

“Thank you, kind sir.”

“You’re more than welcome. Anyway, what I’m trying not to say, I guess, is that I’m not sure Glen would feel the same way about me. About me being with you, that is.”

Bobbie tilted her head but didn’t speak. “Yeah,” Clark breathed out. “I sometimes get the idea that he’d look at you, look at me, and then say, ‘A reporter, Bobbie? Can’t you do any better than that?’”

She chuckled and squeezed his hand. “I’m going to try out something on you, okay? Something new to me – to us.”

“In public?”

She chortled and shook her head. “No nuptials before the wedding, okay?”

“I thought nuptials were the wedding.”

“Drat. I guess I’m in for a disappointment.”

“I’ll try not to let that happen. Anyway, what new thing do you want to try out?”

She squeezed his hand again and softly said, “Darling.”

He sucked in a breath and squeezed her hand back. “Uh. Yeah.”

“Do you like it?”

“I like it a lot. Much better than ‘Clark-if-you-want-to’ or just ‘Kent!’”

Bobbie chuckled. “You don’t have to pick a pet name for me unless you want to.” She tilted her head to one side

so that her hair fell across one side of her face and almost whispered, “Do you want to?”

He took a breath, then pressed his lips together. “I don’t know. Can I think about it and get back to you?”

“Of course, you doofus. Just don’t make it too cutsie.”

“So ‘Angel of the morning’ is out?”

She shook her head and laughed with him, then said, “Back to Glen. I seriously doubt he’d say anything that dismissive, even if he didn’t know – you know.”

He knew she was referencing Superman. He nodded. “You really think not?”

She looked at their joined hands and put her other hand atop them. “I wasn’t going to tell you about this, but now I think I should.” She looked up at him. “I had a dream the other night after our Big Confession. Glen and Lois were both in it. Both of them smiled and told me to keep doing the right thing.” She grinned at him sideways. “And dream Lois told me you tasted good.”

He snorted. “That does sound like Lois.” He heard someone clear his throat, so he looked up to see their smiling waiter holding a tray with their drinks and salads. Their hands separated and left the table. “Sorry, Carl. And thanks.”

Carl deftly laid the plates down and set the drinks on the table. “No problem, Mr. Kent. It’s just that I have other tables to see about.”

Bobbie smiled at Carl. “You see about the other tables and we’ll make room for the main course.”

Carl nodded. “You’ll love it. Mike’s preparing the sea bass himself. Said he’s glad two of his favorite customers are back in the right restaurant.”

Bobbie picked up a fork. “We are, too. See you again in a few.”

They both attacked their salads. A comfortable quiet covered them, broken only by eating noises. Clark and Bobbie shared smiles between bites but didn’t speak.

Bobbie put her fork in her empty salad bowl and exhaled. “Excellent, as always.”

“I agree. What do you want to talk about while we wait for the fish?”

“I’ve been jotting down ideas about the wedding. You know, when, where, who attends and how many, who officiates, how many attendants, that sort of thing. Oh! And we still have to meet each other’s actual parents! I don’t want to wear an engagement ring until we all get to know one other.”

He nodded. “I understand.” He smiled. “I don’t believe I’ve ever heard of a couple who introduced each significant other to their previous loves’ parents first.”

“It’s working out okay, though, don’t you think?”

“As long as I meet your mother before too much longer.”

She grinned. “And I get to meet your mom and dad soon, too.”

He grinned back. “What about this weekend? Either Saturday or Sunday lunch?”

Her face scrunched in thought for a moment, then she nodded. “I’m good with that, as long as Bill doesn’t have something for me. I’ll check with him and let you know.”

“Great! If you don’t mind flying Superman Budget Air,

I’ll take you out there myself.”

“Hmm. Haven’t flown with Superman before. He won’t drop me, will he?”

“As long as you don’t distract him with your feminine wiles, you’re probably safe.”

“Oh, wow, I don’t know. Isn’t he supposed to be super-handsome?”

“I hope I don’t have competition, Bobbie. I might get angry, and you might not like it if I got angry.”

“I suppose you’d get huge and green and ill-tempered and even more muscular.”

“No. I’d just stand off to one side and pointedly ignore you.”

She laughed. “Okay, I give. Let’s aim for Saturday, okay? Pending my conversation with my boss.”

“Mine too. And I’ll give my folks a heads-up before we leave.”

“Good. Have you told them anything about me?”

“Just the good things.”

“That’s all?”

“It was a very short conversation.”

She showed her teeth in faux pique. “You do know that you’ll pay for that, don’t you?”

He grinned back. “For the rest of our lives together, I hope.”

She had no comeback for that. It was a good thing that Carl brought their entrees at that moment.

The following Saturday, just before eleven-thirty, Clark knocked on Bobbie’s front door. Despite knowing that he was coming, the sound startled her. She’d never been nervous about meeting Clark before.

Might have something to do with meeting his parents, she mused.

She fixed a smile on her face and opened the door. He was dressed in his usual Saturday casual outfit – sneakers, jeans, and golf shirt – and he also wore that smile, the one that lit up any room he entered. She sighed and thought that she could look at his smile for hours. It might delay the meeting with his parents, but she was willing to make the sacrifice.

But he, apparently, was not similarly willing. His hand reached for hers and they came together as if magnetized. “Ready?” he asked.

“Am I dressed okay? Not too casual?”

He chuckled. “You look very nice. And they’ll love you.”

“Sure. Uh, we’re not taking off from here, are we?”

“There’s a hidden alley about two blocks from here. It’s between two warehouses and one end has a corner that blocks the east street. The other end opens across from the back side of Metro Sports Arena. Nobody’s there this time of day.”

“Okay.” She licked her lips and locked her front door behind her.

They found the alley and the corner with ease. Clark looked to either side, then stepped back and said, “One moment, please.”

Then he turned into a Technicolor whirlwind.

Two seconds later, Clark was gone and Superman stood

before her, his arms folded over his chest and his hair slicked back. In a deeper voice than she'd expected, he said, "Are you ready, Detective Tracey?"

She took a deep breath and nodded. "Let's do it."

Bobbie looked around nervously. It was her first time to fly with Clark – no, with Superman. She had to keep his identities separate in her mind but never forget they were the same man.

She wasn't surprised that Clark sometimes referred to his super-self in the third person. Keeping his two identities separate could make a normal person a little bit nuts.

Might make her a little nuts, too.

After a few moments, she dared to look down. It surprised her that she wasn't frightened. Clark – Superman – whatever! The man who loved her held her comfortably close. She felt as safe with him as she did in her own car.

They were at about seven thousand feet, too low for military planes or airliners, and he kept a lookout for civilian craft. He occasionally shifted direction, presumably to avoid airports, radar, or flocks of birds. They were traveling below the speed of sound – he'd told her that traveling above Mach 1 usually wasn't comfortable for his passengers.

She moved her lips close to his ears. "How much longer?"

"About forty minutes. We just passed the confluence of the Ohio, Monongahela, and Allegheny rivers in Pennsylvania. That's where Three Rivers stadium is."

"Go Steelers! Wave the Terrible Towel!"

He laughed. "Please don't say that to my dad just yet. He's a big Chiefs fan."

"I'll be careful."

Bobbie went back to admiring the scenery for a while, then shifted close to his ear again. "I'm glad I made that pit stop back at your apartment."

He looked at her with a worried expression. "Um – you know there aren't any rest areas in the sky, and there are no – er – facilities on this flight."

She laughed. "I'm good. In fact, I'm rather enjoying the flight now."

"Good. I've got to make sure I miss the airports between here and Smallville, so I may not be very entertaining for the rest of our air time."

"No problem. I'll just sight-see. This is a cool perspective."

She smiled and kissed him just in front of his ear and giggled when he swerved off course. "Please don't distract the pilot," he muttered. "It's not safe."

She pouted. "Oh, all right, if you say so. I'll just be quiet and behave myself."

"That'd be a first."

She narrowed her eyes and mock-glared at him for a moment, then settled down to enjoy the rest of the trip.

They came down just inside the Kent's cornfield with a thud. Bobbie looked up at him as he set her down and said, "That was a little bit of a hard landing, wasn't it?"

He lifted one index finger and stepped back, then twirled into a mass of primary colors. Two seconds later,

Clark Kent, wearing a golf shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes, stood before her once again. The sight amazed and thrilled her.

"Sorry for the abrupt touchdown," he said. "There are a couple of cars on the highway that the drive connects to and I didn't want anyone to look out the window at the wrong time."

She adjusted her short sleeves, then pushed her hair back to finger-comb it. "Oh, I understand. I just wish you'd given me a heads-up first."

He assumed a meek posture and ducked his head. "I'll do better next time. I promise."

She held the fake irritation for a few seconds, then slapped him on the shoulder. "Come on. Let's go see your folks."

He took her hand and smiled. "They'll love you, Bobbie, just like I do."

She looked at the house. Her feet might have been encased in sudden cement. "I'm not Lois."

He tugged her closer. Still smiling, he said, "And they don't expect you to be Lois. You are Roberta Lynn Tracey – with an 'e' – and you are unique. No one else is like you." He kissed her on the forehead. "And you can reassure me next weekend when we go see your mother that she doesn't expect me to be Glen."

She smiled back. "I'm looking forward to that. I know Mom will fall in love with you."

"And my parents will fall in love with you." He looked at her feet. "Assuming, of course, that we actually walk over to the house and knock on the back door."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. We'll go in through the servant's entrance."

They started their stroll. "No, no, the back door is the family entrance. I want you to start off right." He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "After all, we're going to be a family before too much longer."

She shuddered. "I hope they don't mind my being a detective. Some parents aren't real keen on their baby marrying a cop."

"They'll love you, Bobbie. You have my promise."

I sure hope so, she thought.

Martha watched through the kitchen window as Clark and the tall woman beside him exchanged soft smiles and meandered across the yard. *Must be Bobbie*, she thought.

Hope that's Bobbie or we've got big problems.

She was almost as tall as Clark. Her reddish-blond hair was cut just above shoulder-length and in a utilitarian style. She wasn't beautiful like Lois had been, but her face was alive and she walked stride-for-stride with him. And she certainly wasn't bad-looking, in a girl-next-door kind of way.

She wore a short-sleeved dark blue shirt, almost a golf shirt, and casual slacks. Her shoes were sneakers, low and practical, and she didn't appear to have on much makeup. Martha wondered if all that meant the woman wasn't vain or if she tried to look intimidating because she was a woman in a man's job.

She'd know very soon.

Martha pulled the door open as the couple stepped up to

the back porch. She smiled and held out her hands. “Clark, come on in! And bring this lovely lady with you! You must be Bobbie. I’m Martha. Please come in.”

Bobbie smiled and nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Kent.”

“No, no, let’s start off on the right foot. I’m Martha and my husband is Jonathan. He’ll be here in a few minutes. He got hung up at the hardware store. Clark knows how Harlan loves to chat about machinery.” Martha took Bobbie’s hand and tugged her toward the living room. “Clark has told us quite a bit about you, Bobbie, and I want to know if he’s being completely honest.”

Bobbie looked a little alarmed as she sat beside Martha on the couch. “Wh – what has Clark told you? About me, I mean.”

“That you’re intelligent, skilled at your job, personable, friendly, fairly even-tempered, basically an optimist with just a mite of understandable cynicism peppered in. According to him, you’re just about ideal.”

Bobbie relaxed a bit. “Oh. I see.” She turned and looked at Clark, who sat in one of the chairs wearing a cat-ate-the-canary smile. “It might be that he’s been editing his portrayal of me just a little bit.”

As innocent as a newborn kitten, Martha asked, “What? Clark, gilding the lily? You mean you’re not the ideal woman for my son?”

Bobbie’s expression flattened and she sat straight upright facing Martha. “On advice of counsel, I decline to respond to that question on the grounds that it might incriminate me.”

Martha held her own expression for a long moment, then chuckled. “You’re good. You’re very good. I’d guess that Clark doesn’t put anything over on you. And thank you for not taking offense.”

Bobbie nodded almost imperiously. “Don’t worry, Martha. I’ve developed a tolerance for teasing. Besides, I think Clark and I will discuss it later.” She looked at Clark again. “I may need a parachute.”

Clark tipped back in the chair and laughed. “You might if you insist on nibbling at my ear in the air.”

Martha laughed as Bobbie turned a lovely shade of reddish-purple.

Bobbie dabbed at her mouth with her napkin and sighed with contentment. “That was probably the best meatloaf I’ve ever had, Martha.”

Martha dimpled. “Thank you, Bobbie. It’s one of Jonathan’s favorites, so I try to make it when I have the time. And I love serving it to folks who haven’t tried it.”

“I’m glad you had the time, Martha,” Jonathan said. “You may have cooked it for Bobbie, but I got to have some too.” He patted his full tummy. “And it was delicious, as usual.”

Bobbie smiled and thought about the openness and acceptance Clark’s parents had displayed since her arrival. Neither of them had mentioned Lois Lane at all, nor had either one hinted that Bobbie might not be a suitable wife for their beloved son. She hadn’t been nearly as nervous as she had been the night she’d met Ellen Lane.

She wondered if they knew where she and Clark had first met.

No matter. She was pleased with their attitude toward her, and she’d believed both of them – especially Martha – when they’d said that they were happy that Clark had found a good woman to love. And they’d been pleasantly surprised to learn that she could cook. Jonathan had offered that now maybe Clark could put some meat on his bones.

They’d all laughed about that.

Jonathan pulled her back to the present when he slid his chair away from the table and said, “I think it’s time to pull out the photo albums and embarrass our son.”

Bobbie giggled. “This should be the highlight of the evening.”

“Not my meatloaf?” mock-wailed Martha.

“More like the eighth and ninth wonders of the world,” Bobbie replied.

Martha pouted for a moment, then smiled. “I’m mollified. I’ll get the pictures.”

Clark sighed. “Fine. Just let me get a blanket to put over my head so no one sees my constant blush.”

They flew back toward Metropolis in the gathering dark and at a much more leisurely pace. Bobbie nestled against Clark’s shoulder and sighed contentedly. “Your mom might be the only cook I’ve ever met who’s better than you. I can’t remember the last time I enjoyed a meal that much.”

He glided to a halt, hovered, and guided her face toward his. The kiss made Bobbie forget she was airborne until she tried to shift her legs. The resulting wobble startled her and she grabbed Clark in a chokehold.

He chuckled. “Sorry about that. But now you know what you do to me when you nibble my ear mid-flight.”

Bobbie caught her breath with an effort. “Fine! I get it now! I’ll keep my distance while we’re airborne!”

Clark gave her a quick peck and resumed his flight. “Did I not assure you that my parents would love you?”

She smiled. “You did. And they certainly seemed to. They were nicer to me than I would have expected.”

“They love you, Bobbie. I just hope your mother likes me half as much as my folks like you.”

“We’ll find out next Saturday at lunch. One o’clock at The Catch of The Day.”

“Your mother likes seafood?”

“Loves it. She’d rather cook and eat a lobster than just about any – Hey!”

Superman suddenly jerked to a halt in the sky between Dayton and Akron. He twisted around and stared at the ground, then dove.

“Bad accident on the Interstate below us. Just happened. Gasoline tanker tipped over on a couple of cars. I’ll drop you off behind the nearest rest stop and come get you when I’m done.”

“No! Take me with you! I’m trained to handle this kind of thing!”

He landed behind an unoccupied tourist stop but didn’t put her down. “Bobbie, I can’t put you in danger. Please don’t ask me that.”

“You’re wasting time, hero!” she growled. “Let’s go!”

The look on his face made her wonder if the decision to go with him was the right one.

He tightened his grip on her and whisked her closer to

the wreck site.

Chapter Sixteen

Clark set Bobbie down about a hundred yards from the wreck in a small grove of trees where there were no cars or rubberneckers. She frowned about it, but she also realized that if anyone saw him carrying her in Ohio, someone would eventually ask who she was and why Superman was transporting a healthy person. As much as she yearned to help, she couldn't afford to risk his identity and she knew it.

Then she realized that she couldn't even let anyone know she was there. Someone, a state trooper or a local cop or an EMT, would ask for her name and how she'd gotten there, and she had no cover story that would stand up to that kind of questioning. There was no reason a Metropolitan detective would be anywhere near a traffic accident in Ohio without a car of some kind. She couldn't help.

She should've stayed at the rest area like Clark had wanted.

It pained her to realize how useless she was at the moment. She had her purse, her ID, and her shield, but no weapon and no jurisdiction. She was as useful as a castrated bull was to a cattle breeder.

She knelt down in the shelter of the woods and watched the arriving police officers take charge of the site. She was close enough to hear the cacophony of shouts for help, screams of fear and pain, the squeal of tires as other drivers and emergency personnel arrived, and the occasional screech of metal on metal as some of the vehicles shifted in the pile and scraped against each other.

Then she saw Superman flying above the carnage.

Bobbie had heard about him, had read about his exploits and adventures, seen news footage of some of his rescues, but she'd never seen Superman in action before first-hand. She watched, utterly spellbound by the spectacle.

Superman circled quickly for a few seconds, apparently checking for any injured people, then swooped down and hovered over the officer closest to the wreck. They spoke for a moment, then he floated to the edge of the mangled stack of vehicles and slowly lifted a car away from the pile. He set that one down on the grassy median as two officers guided the first ambulance on the scene to the car and began working to extract the occupants. Superman turned to lift another car away, and this time he pulled the passenger door open as soon as it settled to the ground.

He stood and waved to another police car skidding to a stop nearby. The two officers inside leaped out and rushed to the damaged car, then gently lifted out an adult and started emergency first aid. Two more ambulances whined into her hearing, one from either direction.

She looked at Superman again – she couldn't call him Clark, not here, not seeing what he was doing, not even in her mind – and saw him blowing on the overturned gasoline carrier. There was fuel splashed all around the big truck, and any spark might turn the site into an explosive conflagration. If that happened, very few of the people involved would survive.

Because he was here, because he was doing everything he could to save lives, people who surely would have died would survive.

He was truly a hero. He deserved the name of Superman.

And she dared to say that she loved him!

Nothing she'd experienced thus far in their relationship had prepared her for the emotional impact of seeing some of the things Superman could do. Live and in full color, yet. He moved damaged cars, froze leaking gasoline, rescued the injured, and didn't break a sweat. She could see that the first responders on the scene were impressed, yet as far as Bobbie could tell, they didn't let it slow them down.

How could she be a wife to a man like that?

The first day she'd met Clark, he'd told her she'd been afraid of disappearing into Glen. Superman would overshadow every aspect of her personality.

If she married Clark, she'd also be Superman's wife. There was nothing she could do or become to equal – or even approximate – Superman. Anything she accomplished would be blotted out by the superhero.

Who would ever see her?

Superman landed beside Lieutenant Brian Shavers of the Ohio state patrol and said, "I think that's the last of the injured who need immediate critical care, Lieutenant. Everyone else can ride in one of the ambulances to a hospital."

Shavers wiped the sweat from his face and nodded. "Thanks, Superman. I know you probably hear this a lot, but you saved a lot of lives today."

Clark winced a little. "I'm just sorry I couldn't save those two in the compact car."

"Those two unfortunates died when the tanker tipped over on them. You would've had to have been escorting that particular tanker on this specific day to save them."

"I'm still going to see their faces for a while."

Shavers sighed. "I'll tell you what I tell my rookies after their first bloody call. Focus on what went right, learn from what went wrong, and do better next time." He appeared to lift his hand to put it on the hero's shoulder, but stopped at the last minute and dropped it awkwardly. "You saved the family in the minivan that got stuck under the other end of the tanker. If you hadn't been here, they might have burned or bled to death. They're alive because of you."

Clark lifted his head, then extended his hand. "Thank you, Lieutenant. I'm glad to have helped, but I hope we don't meet again under similar circumstances."

Shavers smiled wanly. "Me too. You have a good day, now, okay?"

Their hands parted. "You too. I hope the paperwork doesn't snow you under."

They shared a chuckle. "The bane of police work. Take care, Superman."

Clark nodded, then lifted and headed north. Thirty seconds later he turned and made a beeline for the trees where he'd left Bobbie. She was kneeling beside a fallen trunk and leaning against it. He landed behind her, whirled into his Clark clothes, and whispered her name.

She didn't respond.

He touched her shoulder. "Bobbie? Are you okay?"

She nodded silently.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded again.

He duck-walked around her and looked into her eyes. They were full of tears. Her cheeks and her chin were damp and getting damper.

He slowly reached out and pulled her into his arms. She didn't resist, but she also didn't return the embrace. "Bobbie, please, tell me what's going on. Did I do something to make you unhappy?"

She shook her head.

"Are you upset that I left you here?"

She shook her head again.

He lifted her face with his finger. "Please, Bobbie. Tell me why you're upset. I want to help."

She pulled back and buried her face in her hands. "You can't fix this!" she wailed.

"What? Why not?"

"Be-because you – you're Superman!"

Well, that made no sense at all. She was upset, apparently because he was Superman, something she'd known for more than a few days, and now she was just a little bit incoherent. Nothing about her reaction made the slightest bit of sense to him.

All women were baffling. Especially human women.

He put his hands on her wrists and tugged her toward him again. He didn't say anything to her, he just let her lean against him and cry.

After about two minutes she finally wound down and shifted back. He offered her his handkerchief and sat up as she applied it to her face. She offered it back without looking at him.

He waited until she looked up. "I'll take it back if you explain what's wrong."

Bobbie sniffed twice and shook her head. "I – don't know if I can."

Maybe if he tried a nickname. "Look, sweetheart, I—"

"No!" she blurted. "Don't – don't say that."

"Why not?"

"Because you – because you're Superman!"

Clark took a moment to think. When they'd left Smallville, she'd been fine. When he'd left her here out of sight to work the accident, she'd been fine. When he'd come back, she'd been a wreck. Therefore, something happened while he was working on—

Oh, no.

It was Superman.

She was upset because he was Superman.

Had to be. It was the logical conclusion. It was the exact reverse of his relationship with Lois. Lois had fallen for Superman first and only gradually accepted Clark as a potential love interest. Bobbie had only recently found out that he was Superman – she'd come to care for Clark first.

And this was the first time she'd seen him in action up close and personal. His dual identity had finally become real to her. She'd abruptly realized that she'd have to share him with the world, and she didn't want to.

Clark didn't know if he was flattered or irritated.

Didn't matter. He had to reassure her now.

"Bobbie, please listen. Superman doesn't rule my life. I'm Clark Kent. That's who I am. Superman is just what I do sometimes and only when really necessary. I'm not

going to leave you alone all the time."

She turned to him with wide, wet eyes and dropped jaw. "What – what do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"I'm trying to reassure you that I won't be away from you more than necessary after we're married. I don't want you to spend too much time—"

"Married!"

He blinked at her. "Yes, married. You and me." She stared at him. "We're talking about getting married, Bobbie. Remember?" She shook her head slowly. "Yes. Married. To each other."

"But why?" she wailed.

Okay, his being gone as Superman wasn't the problem. But what could it be?

"Because we love each other, Bobbie. I love you."

"How?" she cried out. Then her head fell back into her hands.

How – how what? How much did he love her? In how many ways did he love her? Did she expect him to quote Elisabeth Browning³? This was moving past baffling toward utter confusion and dismay.

"Bobbie, please look at me." She shook her head without moving her hands. "Bobbie." He gently grasped her wrists and pulled her hands down from her face. "Please talk to me. I don't understand what you're trying to say to me. Please tell me what's wrong." Her shoulders shook silently. "I want to help you, but I can't if I don't know what the problem is." No response. "Please, Bobbie. I love you."

Her head snapped up and she barked, "Why!"

His face fell as if he'd been slapped. "Why? You mean why do I love you?"

"Yes! Tell me why!"

Oh, boy. This was a toughie. But he had to try.

Clark took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then said, "I love you, Bobbie. I can't reduce that to a formula or a statement of logic or a biological imperative or a hormone imbalance in my brain. It's enough for me that I love you." He paused, then added, "If I could explain it any better than that, I would. I love you and I want to spend the rest of our lives together. I can't add anything to that."

"But – but you're Superman! I saw you! I saw what you did! You moved those cars and trucks around as easy as I fold my laundry! You saved dozens of lives! There's no fire here be-because of you! This isn't a – a crematorium because of what you did!" She lifted her hands to each side and let them flop down. "I'm nothing, Clark. I'm just a detective. I'm not special. I don't have any connections. How could I possibly help you? What could I do to be of value to – to Superman? How can I be Superman's wife? I can't think of one thing that I could do for you that someone else can't do way better!"

"I can."

She stared at him for a long moment, then sobbed, "What? What can I do that's valuable to you?"

"You can love me."

Her eyes cleared a little, but she didn't smile. More softly, she said, "There are hundreds of women in Metropolis right now who'd sell their souls to sleep with you, to be with you. And every one of them would be more

beautiful than I ever dreamed of being. I bet you could find a few dozen right here in this Ohio rest stop who'd be your willing slave." She wiped her face with one hand. "Why would you choose me to be Superman's wife? Why do you want me to love you?"

Clark gentled his voice as much as he could. He was a writer, a wordsmith – he had to get this one right. His future seemed to depend on it.

"This is very important. I am not Superman. I am Clark Kent. Superman is just a flashy suit I wear to protect Clark Kent and the people I love. I don't want you to be Superman's wife. I want you to be Clark Kent's wife."

"But you don't understand—"

He gently placed his index finger on her lips. "I don't want to be with any other woman. I want to spend my life with you. You keep telling me you're not beautiful, but your heart is and so is your spirit. You're brilliant in so many ways, you're committed to helping people and stopping evil, and you're a terrific cook."

She almost smiled, so he cupped her cheek with one hand. "Bobbie, you've taught me that I can survive just about anything. And if you decide that we can't be a couple, I'll argue with you, tell you that I have a box of rocks that's smarter about us than you, but I can't and won't try to force you to love me. And if the very worst happens between us, if we end this relationship that has so much promise and so much potential for wonder and greatness, it won't kill me. You have helped me see that I'm more important to others than I know."

He leaned close and touched her lips with his. "But without you, my life would be empty. My heart would be alone. Even if I got stupid and started sleeping around with all those willing women you have lined up for me—" she chuckled and glanced away for a moment "—I don't want them. Not any of them. None of them could possibly touch my heart the way you can, the way you do. None of them could hold the other part of my heart in her heart. Not a one of them could give me a part of her heart that would fit with mine. There is no one else in the world I want to travel with on life's pathway."

Her eyes squeezed shut for a moment and she shook her head. "I – I'm afraid."

Clark softly stroked her hand. "Why are you afraid? Can you tell me?"

She sobbed once, then nodded. "I'm afraid I – that I'll disappear into you."

He frowned. "I can't see that happening."

She dashed at her eyes with her free hand. "Because you're you. And I'm just me." She stopped for a breath, then said, "I know you love me. I get that. I think you could do better—"

"No," he broke in. "I couldn't."

She smiled without making eye contact. "I also know that you believe that. But you're – you're Superman. And I don't know if I can be Bobbie Tracey and still be married to Clark Kent who is also Superman. I'm scared I'll lose my identity, whatever it is that makes me who I am, and end up just a – an auxiliary to you. To Superman." She looked up. "I love you, Clark, but I don't want that. I don't think I could take it."

"Neither could I. You're entirely too precious to me to not be you." He paused and captured her other hand again. "I have never treated any woman as my servant or as my meek and mild helper and I'm not starting now. You are Roberta Lynn Tracey just like I'm Clark Jerome Kent, and we're going to be better together than either of us can be separately. You won't disappear into me and I won't disappear into you. Neither one of us is more important than the other. I can't do your job any more than you can do mine."

He brushed at her hair and kissed her forehead. "I need you, Bobbie. And I'd like to think you need me. We will be a team, pulling together in harness, taking up the slack for each other. I'll protect your heart—" he touched one fingertip to her chest "—and you'll protect mine." He waited a moment, then added, "You better not marry Superman, not after all this. You and I still have to pick out rings, remember?"

Bobbie slowly rose up on her knees, put her arms around Clark's neck, and squeezed for all she was worth. She coughed out a sobbing laugh, then put her mouth beside his ear and whispered, "Thank you. I love you."

He wrapped her up in his own arms and breathed a prayer of thankfulness. They were back on track now, and he promised himself that he'd inspect the rails daily – hourly, if necessary – to keep that train rolling forward at its best speed.

Life was good again.

The following week was busy for both Clark and Bobbie and they weren't able to meet physically. They even missed their Starways get-together on Saturday because of their respective jobs. But they did talk on the phone every day, and Clark reassured her in every conversation that he was sure she was The One for him. It took a bit of convincing, but by the time Sunday afternoon rolled around, he was pretty sure she was back on solid ground.

Since Bobbie had the wheels, Clark rode with her to the restaurant to meet Kelly Tracey for lunch. He listened as Bobbie filled him in on her mother's current events.

"You remember I told you she was seeing a guy in the DA's office?"

"The one who wouldn't fix a parking ticket?"

She sighed. "Yeah, him. They aren't seeing each other anymore and it wasn't an amicable ending, so please don't mention him."

"Okay. I don't remember his name, anyway."

"I don't remember if I ever told you. Anyway, she's not seeing anyone at the moment, so it'll just be the three of us."

"I won't say a word."

"Good." She sucked at her lips for a moment, then said, "I also haven't told her about – about us yet."

He nodded slowly. "Okay. Any particular reason?"

She braked at a red light and drummed on the wheel with two fingers. "She really loved Glen. She gave me honeymoon destination suggestions with a twinkle in her eye. All of them had nice places to visit and sights to see if he and I – and I quote – 'found the time to look around.' Glen turned about six shades of red when he heard that."

She chuckled. “He blushed easier than any other cop I’ve ever met.”

“You think she’ll be upset about you and me?”

“I really don’t know. I haven’t told her all that much about you and I don’t want her to scare you off so please be patient with her. She might feel like I’ve been lying to her.”

“I’ll do my best. Will she be offended if I offer to pay for lunch?”

She glanced at him, then returned her attention to the street and accelerated as the light changed. “Yes. She invited us. You can offer to pay one time, then let her have it. To Mom, one offer to pay is being a gentleman, two offers is being a control freak.”

He nodded. “Got it. Can’t have two of those in the same family.”

“Yeah, and – wait a minute! Did you just diss me?”

Clark lifted his hands and shrugged. “Who, me? I’m an innocent little lamb, remember?”

“Uh-huh. We’ll revisit this issue after lunch. One more thing, don’t try too hard to be funny. Mom laughs easily, but she’s not crazy about comedians who are ‘on’ all the time.”

“I will confine my witticisms to your company alone.”

Bobbie flicked on her left turn signal and waited for oncoming traffic to clear. “Remember, I haven’t told her about your part-time job. And I don’t want her to know yet. I want her to meet Clark Kent, the man I’m going to marry, not some exhibitionist circus freak.”

That was interesting. And maybe a little concerning. Maybe she wasn’t as okay with him being Superman as he’d thought.

Instead of voicing that little niggle, he nodded and said, “I’ll behave myself, Bobbie. I promise.”

Bobbie’s mother glided to her feet as Bobbie and Clark approached the table. Bobbie smiled when she saw that her mom was dressed nicely but not formally. Maybe she really was willing to give Clark a fair chance to impress her.

Clark stood back as Bobbie hugged Mom, then took Mom’s hand as Bobbie introduced them. “Thank you for the invitation, Mrs. Tracey,” he said. “I look forward to getting to know you.”

“And I, you, Mr. Kent,” she replied.

He smiled a little. “Please, call me Clark. To me, Mr. Kent is my dad.”

Mom smiled back. “Very well, Clark. In that case, please call me Kelly.”

“Thank you, Kelly,” he said. He held Mom’s chair for her, then held Bobbie’s. She sat to her mother’s right, so Clark took the chair to Mom’s left, across from Bobbie.

As he unwrapped his silverware, Mom said, “I understand that you are a reporter for the Daily Planet, Clark. How long have you been there?”

“Not quite four years. I plan to stay as long as they’ll have me, though.”

Mom smiled again. So far, so good.

“Bobbie has told me a lot about you, Clark, but she neglected to describe your good looks sufficiently. You could be a successful actor if you were to change professions.”

“Thank you, Kelly, but I’ve interviewed enough actors to know that they’re flush with cash if they’re working a steady gig and scrambling for bread and water when they’re not. I prefer consistency in my paychecks.”

“Really? Reporters earn such high salaries as that?”

As Bobbie watched the waiter approach, Clark said, “No, we don’t. At least, I don’t. But I’m not starving, either. I live well within my means and I save a part of every check.”

“Ah. That’s wise of you. But here is our waiter. Are you familiar with the menu, Clark?”

“I’ve been here before, but not often. It’s not my usual lunch fare, especially when I’m working on a story.”

“I see.” Kelly turned to the waiter and said, “Geoffrey, I believe we need another minute or two. Could you come back?”

The waiter nodded. “Of course, madame. May I take your beverage orders now?”

Each of them ordered tea. Clark asked for sweet with no lemon, Kelly for sweet with two lemons, and Bobbie for unsweet with one lemon. When Geoffrey smiled and turned away, Bobbie said, “Mom, I want you to meet Clark’s parents soon. When would be a good time for you?”

Her mom patted her wrist. “My dear, I haven’t passed judgment on this muscular and quite fetching young man yet. Don’t you think he and I should become better acquainted first?”

Bobbie pulled her hand back and scowled. “Evonne and Étienne like him. You should trust their judgment.”

Mom’s face fell. “You – you’ve introduced him to them already?”

“Yes.”

She blinked twice. “You didn’t tell me.”

Bobbie felt an argument trying to start itself. “Mom, I didn’t—”

Clark said, “Bobbie. Please.”

Clark’s gentle voice blocked her emotions from taking over, but she was still upset. “Clark, my mother and I have —”

“Wait. Please.”

She exhaled and slumped in her seat. “Go. You have the floor.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.” He turned to Mom. “Kelly, I’m sorry you feel blindsided. I’m sure that’s not what Bobbie was trying to do. She knows how much you cared about Glen and how you miss him. This whole relationship has been topsy-turvy from the start, and we’ve done a lot of things backward. I took her to dinner with Lois’ family before she—”

“Who?”

It was Clark’s turn to blink. “Lois Lane. She was my reporting partner at the paper. She and I were working on a story and she – she died in my arms.”

Mom’s mouth fell open for a moment, then she reached out and touched his wrist. “Oh, Clark, please forgive me. I should have remembered her. I’m so sorry you lost her.”

“Thank you.”

“Um – may I ask you a personal question? With the caveat that I won’t require an answer.”

Clark’s head tilted to one side, then he nodded. “Feel

free.”

Mom pulled her hand back and looked down at the table. “You and – Lois – were you – romantically involved? With each other, I mean?”

He nodded again. “Yes. I had a ring I was going to give her when that last story fell into our laps. I never had the chance.”

Mom looked up again. Moisture teased at the corners of her eyes. “Then you understand my daughter and her – her situation. You know what she’s been through, at least most of it. And she understands you. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes. We’ve had some long talks about personal responsibility and high-water marks and altered landscapes.”

“Oh. Yes, of course. The flood metaphor. You *do* understand.”

“As well as any other person can, yes, I do.”

“Are you in love with my daughter, Clark?”

He leaned back a little and looked surprised. “You don’t take any prisoners, do you?”

“Please answer my question. I can tell quite easily that Bobbie loves you, and I want her to be happy with a man who loves her back. Are you in love with her?”

Clark smiled and reached for Bobbie’s hand. He looked at the joined fingers, then said, “I am in love with her. I want to marry her. I want us to be together for as long as we both live. I know what a risk it is to love someone that much, but I’m willing to take that risk for Bobbie. She’s more than worth it.”

Mom flicked her hand at her face, then picked up her napkin to do the job right. Then she smiled. “In that case, I want us to have a very nice lunch together. Please, order whatever you want, Clark. I know Bobbie will.”

Bobbie couldn’t let that one go. “Mom,” she mock-warned.

Mom smiled back at her. “Never mind, my dear. I really do want to know Clark well. He’s going to be my son-in-law before too long, isn’t he?”

Bobbie slipped out of Clark’s loose grasp and lunged at her mom. They caught each other and held on for several seconds, then slowly drew apart. Clark cleared his throat and quietly said, “The tea is here. And not a moment too soon. I’m thirsty.”

Mom laughed with Bobbie. They picked up their menus and chose their entrees. Geoffrey smiled and said, “I’ll get these started right away. And I’ll bring back a basket of our famous dinner rolls. We hope you brought your appetites with you.”

As he walked away, Mom said, “Now, Clark, you are a gentleman, so I would expect that you would offer to pick up the check. I will not allow it. I invited the two of you, therefore it is my treat.” She fussed with her napkin and set it in her lap, then said, “It will probably be the last time you’ll get that offer from me.”

Clark nearly spit out the mouthful of tea he’d just taken. Bobbie looked at him and said, “That’s actually a good sign. If she didn’t like you, she’d let you pay. And she’d embarrass you into paying if you didn’t offer.”

“I think I understand,” he said. “Oh, Kelly, I think you have some pictures of Bobbie I need to see.”

“Pictures?” Kelly asked.

“Clark,” Bobbie warned.

“Yes, the ones where she’s a year old and naked on a bearskin rug.”

This time Kelly snorted. She controlled herself with a visible effort, then said, “If the two of you can come to my home one evening this week, I’ll certainly dig them out.”

Bobbie shook her head and dropped her face into her hands, but it was all for show. Clark had already won over her mother, and he’d done it just by being himself.

With her face still hidden, Bobbie smiled. He’d won her over just by being himself. It ought to work on her mom.

Bobbie’s desk phone rang just before twelve-thirty on Monday afternoon. She picked up the phone, hoping it was Clark. “Hello?”

“Hi, lady of my heart. Are you busy tomorrow evening?”

“That’s not when my mom is going to embarrass me with my baby pictures, is it?”

“No, my only love. That’s Wednesday, and you should wear something bright so your blushes don’t show so much.”

She smiled at his phrasing. “Tomorrow evening, huh? Hmm. I’ll have to check my jam-packed social schedule.”

“Oh, please, don’t let me take you away from something truly important.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.” She paused to gauge his reaction, and when he didn’t say anything, she asked, “Assuming I’m free, what is the purpose of your question?”

“I just thought you’d like to go out with me.”

“I see. Are you thinking dinner in an exotic location?”

“As exotic as anything within walking distance of your place. Or mine.”

She felt her eyebrows rise with surprise. “Walking? That kinda limits the possibilities. Any hint as to the occasion?”

“I’ll just tell you straight out. That way you don’t have to guess.”

“Good. I hate guessing games almost as much as I hate bad puns.”

“That description presupposes that there is such a thing as a good pun.”

“Ha-ha, Mr. Word Master. Consequently, I suppose, the word ‘bad’ in my previous description is therefore redundant.” She waited while he chortled. “Anyway, what is the occasion for this gathering? Anything special?”

“It’s simple, really. I just want to spend some quality time with the woman I love.”

His response almost moved her to tears. Having Clark’s love was something she had determined would never be taken for granted. It would always be something she would guard against all threats, whether foreign or domestic.

But he needed an answer. She swallowed hard and said, “Sure, that’s fine with me. Would you rather meet me somewhere? It might save some shoe leather.”

“That’s a good idea. If you’ll call me at my office when you’re ready to leave yours, I’ll give you the address then.”

“Ooh. Mysterious much?”

His tone flattened. “You and my mother giggled over my naked baby pictures after lunch in Smallville. There’s

not much mystery left.”

“You haven’t seen mine yet.”

“I can hardly wait. So you’ll call me tomorrow afternoon?”

She grinned. “Yes, I’ll call. And thank you.” She paused, then almost whispered, “I love you, Clark.”

His sigh echoed down the line. “And I love you too, Bobbie. So long for now.”

“Bye.”

She waited for him to hang up like they were teenagers setting up a meet at the soda shop. When the line went dead, she sighed like that teenager and hung up.

Her gaze floated upward and caught another detective staring at her with a puzzled expression on his face. Her eyes snapped and she growled, “Whaddaya want, Bozeman?”

The young man shook his head. “Nothing. I heard part of your conversation and I – uh – I didn’t understand it, that’s all.”

She stared some more but he didn’t move. After a few seconds, she snapped, “You gonna just stand there all day and hold the floor down?”

“Uh – no, detective, just, uh, just going to the coffee pot. Gotta have my caffeine fix for the afternoon.” He turned on his heel and all but stumbled away.

Bobbie shook her head. She’d have to be careful. The Metro detectives in her precinct were merciless about teasing their own over each other’s personal lives, and she didn’t want to be the latest victim lynched on the grapevine.

Back to work. She still had three open cases on her desk.

Bobbie closed the driver’s door of her car and sighed. Two of her open cases were progressing slowly, but she’d hit a brick wall on the third. Maybe she’d ask Clark if his mystery snitch, the guy with the expensive appetite, could help. She’d accept any assistance that would get Detective Inspector Manning out of her hair.

She drove to the intersection with the address Clark had given her and whistled to herself in surprise. The east-west street was full of high-end clothing stores, small- to medium-sized restaurants, and upscale retailers. The parking garage Clark had suggested showed that it had spaces open, but the prices on the board outside made her blink. Any thief who hit one of these places would be a greedy one. This wasn’t in her precinct, but she was sure the stores had high-end security on both the human and the machine sides.

That was a good chunk of change for a dinner date, she mused. She hoped they weren’t going Dutch tonight.

The pretty but sharp-faced young blonde woman garage attendant gave her a time-stamped ticket, then directed her to level seven of nine because it was the only one with shaded openings. Bobbie glanced at her watch and decided to hurry a bit – Clark was expecting her at the southeast corner in four minutes and he was never late.

She had something to say to him and she didn’t want to complicate it by being late.

The crosswalk signal flicked to a walking stick figure just as she joined the crowd of well-dressed people waiting

to go south across the street. She looked over at her destination and saw Clark walking toward the corner.

Good, she thought, *we’re both on time.*

That megawatt smile of his greeted her and she took his hands in hers as she kissed him briefly. “Hi!” she bubbled. “Where are we eating?”

He chuckled. “Hi yourself. Look, I – I didn’t lie to you, I just had a little bit of a surprise in store.” She lifted her eyebrows and he leaned back slightly. “Easy, Bobbie, I had a reason. I didn’t want you to obsess over this all afternoon.”

One eyebrow lowered as the other rose even higher. “Obsess? Me?”

He did his country-boy foot-shuffle and nodded. “Yeah. I – was kinda hoping we could go ring shopping before dinner.”

She froze for a moment, then grabbed him around the neck and squeezed for all she was worth. Between quick kisses on his cheek and neck and ear, she mumbled, “Yes! Yes! Rings, yes!”

He picked her up and spun her once, then set her down. “Then I’m forgiven for deceiving you?”

“Absolutely! Where do you want to – no. Wait. I – I have to ask you something first.”

His brow creased slightly. “Sure. You know you can ask me anything.”

She took a nervous breath, then said, “I want – I need to apologize for what I said the other day.”

He looked puzzled. “What did you say that requires an apology?”

She hadn’t felt this sheepish since she’d come home with a D in fourth-grade math. “I said – it was when I – you’re not an exhibitionist circus freak and I’m so sorry I even thought it. My only excuse is that – no, not an excuse, I don’t have an excuse. The reason I said it was because I was so nervous about you meeting my mom. I just wanted it to go well and I’m sorry I said it.”

He opened his mouth, then turned and looked around them. Bobbie’s gaze followed his.

There was a small crowd around them, mostly younger men and women, and nearly all of them were smiling at them. A young redheaded woman called out, “Kiss her again, buddy! Whatever she did, she’s sorry for it!”

A man partway opposite the redhead in the semicircle of onlookers chimed in with, “Hey, she’s really cute! If you don’t want to kiss her, I will!”

Most of the rest of the spectators laughed. Clark turned and inclined his head toward them in an abbreviated bow, then said with a smile, “Thank you for your wise counsel. I’ll take it under advisement.” Then he pointed at the kissing volunteer. “No smooches for you, buster.”

The crowd laughed again and began to break up. Clark took Bobbie’s hand in his and led her down the street. “I don’t want you to think that I don’t value what you just said, but I’d prefer not to share it with everyone on the street. And yes, I forgive you. I’d almost forgotten about it.”

“But not completely.”

He glanced her way and smiled. “No. I don’t think I’ve said this to you, but all my life I’ve wanted to live like a normal man, with a job and a family and friends and a

healthy social life. It's really important to me. The only reason the 'circus freak' exists is to give me a chance to use my gifts to benefit others. There's no way I could live like that all the time. I'd go completely nuts."

She gave his hand a squeeze. "Thank you for telling me. I kinda thought so anyway, but it's good to hear it." She jumped ahead and pulled him a little. "Hey, where are we going?"

"I thought we'd stop in at Parker's Jewelers. I know the manager."

"And he owes you a favor, right?"

Clark shrugged. "Maybe. He did say that I should drop by and check out his selection of wedding sets should I ever have the need for any of them."

She stopped and pulled him to her. "Thank you." Then she kissed him gently and tenderly.

When she pulled back, he whispered, "Are we trying to draw another crowd?"

She laughed. "That wasn't my intention. Hey, isn't that Parker's right behind you?"

He turned with a flourish. "It is! Shall we enter and peruse their selection of jewelry to celebrate and demonstrate our love?"

She grabbed his jacket lapel and pulled him toward the door. "Come on, you walking ad copy machine. I want the perfect ring set and you have to help me find it."

He pretended to stumble. "I do?"

"You'd better help. We'll be wearing them for the rest of our lives."

As Bobbie pushed through the door, she realized what she'd just said and stopped breathing for two steps. But she got herself under control as Clark waved to a man she assumed was the store manager.

She smiled. They were picking out wedding rings. It meant that the wedding was just around the corner.

She could hardly wait.

Chapter Seventeen

Just four months after Bobbie and Clark reconciled, on a certain early autumn Saturday morning at eleven-forty, Clark sat in the groom's changing room of the Metro police chapel and leaned back on the couch. He wore the requisite shirt, pants, shoes and socks, but not the tie or the cummerbund or the cufflinks or the coat. His hair was a bit messy and his glasses needed cleaning.

Just an hour and twenty minutes more, beginning at one o'clock that afternoon, he'd give up his personal freedom forever.

He laughed softly and shook his head. He couldn't wait.

He thought about Lois and how he'd loved her so deeply and how she'd lost her life protecting his parents. He knew he'd been complicit in her death, but he also knew he hadn't intended it. Nor had he come up with the dumb idea in the first place. His memories of her would never leave him, but now he had peace instead of pain, comfort instead of torture. And he had a bright future before him, a life with a woman who loved him and understood him.

He smiled and closed his eyes. He tried to envision Lois standing before him, trying to hear what she might say to him. He wondered if she'd be happy for him, sad that he

wasn't marrying her, upset that he'd moved on, or maybe something else.

Nothing. He couldn't envision her at all. And maybe that was a good thing.

The door opened and Clark looked up to see Jimmy Olsen step into the room. The younger man grinned at him and said, "Hey, CK, you're here early. That mean you're really ready to get this done?"

Clark smiled back. "Not really. I mean, I'm ready to get married, but I'm not here because I can't wait. Wanda and Lucy ordered me not to walk the halls. They didn't want me to see the bride before the ceremony."

Jimmy nodded sagely. "Got it. Hey, you think Detective Ybarra will let me call her Felicia today?"

"Sure. Just don't ask her for a date at the same time or she might arrest you."

The two friends laughed a bit harder than the joke warranted. Jimmy wound down and said, "You know, I think the tension is getting to me. And I'm having trouble talking to Wanda. How well do you know her?"

"Bobbie's told me about her, but I didn't meet her until last Thursday night at the rehearsal. She seems nice. A little intense, but nice."

"Yeah. Intense may be a diplomatic way of describing her."

"She's a firefighter, Jimmy. She's had to compete against men for years, and a lot of them wouldn't give her the chance because she's a woman. Bobbie told me she thinks she has to be twice as good as any one of her coworkers to get half the respect they get just because they're guys."

"I know, man, but this is her best bud's wedding! You'd think she'd turn it down a notch or two."

Clark shook his head. "Maybe, maybe not, but that's not my problem. All I have to do is stand, turn ninety degrees to my left, hold hands with Bobbie, put a ring on her finger, get a ring from her, say a few words to her, let her say some words to me. Then I kiss her, sign the we-got-married-legal part of the license, then we go get changed for the reception and sneak out early for the honeymoon."

Jimmy snickered. "I guess when you put it that way, it doesn't sound so hard."

"It's not. It's just the rest of our lives together. No pressure at all."

Bobbie walked into the bride's changing room at twelve-oh-three and startled herself by almost slamming the door. Wanda and Lucy both jumped and turned, then relaxed as they recognized her.

"Hey, girlfriend," Wanda drawled, "settle yourself down right now. You got that man hog-tied and down, all you need to do now is wait for the judges' scores."

Lucy mock-frowned at her. "Is everything a rodeo metaphor with you?"

"Hey, I been a cowgirl 'bout all my life. No reason to change now."

Bobbie smirked at her. "Is that how you keep all those calendar-quality men in line?"

"Got to do something. With a last name like Dallas, they kinda expect it of me anyhow. And I'd hate to disappoint all

them hunky hose-draggers.”

Lucy put her hands on her hips and huffed. “Okay, Wanda, are you a cowgirl or a firefighter? Which is it?”

Wanda drew herself up to her full five feet and four-point-five inches. “Young lady,” she said in a cultured Midwestern accent, “I am not constrained by any artificial delimiters you might wish to place upon me, either personally or professionally. I am both cowhand and firefighter, depending upon the situation in which I discover myself. Additionally, I am the maid of honor in my best friend’s wedding, and I will thank you not to cast aspersions either upon myself or upon my friend by either direct imputation or indirect association with myself in any of my manifested occupations.”

Bobbie hid a grin, remembering other times when Wanda had said similar things to other people, some of whom had really ticked her off. Lucy stared at Wanda for a long moment, then said, “You *had* to have memorized that speech. No way you did that off the cuff.”

Wanda reverted to a relaxed smile. “Of course it’s memorized. I’m not stupid, but that’s too much to come off the top of my head. But I can’t tell you how many times I’ve used that or something like it since I came here. Some Yankees just can’t understand that you can be a Texan and be smart at the same time.”

Lucy frowned and put her hands on her hips. “Clark’s not like that. He’ll accept you as you appear to be until you do something to alter his perception.”

Bobbie smacked Lucy on the arm lightly. “Hey! He’s my groom! I get to defend him, not you!”

“Yeah, well, he’s my adopted brother, and you better be good to him or Mom and I will find you and – and do something really irritating!”

Bobbie and Wanda laughed together. Lucy joined in quickly, then Bobbie asked, “Where’s Felicia? I thought she’d be here already.”

“She is,” Lucy said. “She just wanted to triple-check with the pianist and make sure he plays ‘Baby Elephant Walk’⁴ for the bride’s entrance.”

Bobbie stared for a second, then exhaled sharply. “If you’re not kidding I’ll arrest the guy and tell him you identified him as a Mafia hit man.”

Lucy grinned evilly. “He’s gonna play ‘Linus and Lucy’⁵ for the bridal party’s exit, too.”

Wanda grabbed her stomach and leaned against the wall. When she recovered control of her breathing, she sputtered, “You two – might as well be sisters!”

Bobbie shook her head. “I take it back, Lucy. I won’t arrest the piano player. I’ll just handcuff you to the second urinal in the men’s room and leave you there. Totally naked. Then – *after* a suitable amount of time – I’ll arrest you for indecent exposure and inciting a laugh riot in a bathroom.”

Lucy laughed as Wanda, unable to breathe, stumbled to a chair and flopped into it. “Okay, Bobbie, I give up,” Lucy told her. “You’re the meanest one in the family.”

Instead of laughing with her, Bobbie’s face blanked out, then turned a whiter shade of pale for a few seconds. Her knees wobbled, and Wanda grabbed her arm to hold her upright. “Hey, girlfriend! Don’t you dare punk out on us! Neither of us is walking down that aisle to marry Clark!

Your name’s the one on the license!”

Bobbie took a deep breath then swallowed hard. “Wow. I’m okay. I think.”

Lucy stood and moved to Bobbie’s other side. “What happened? You were laughing and joking and all of a sudden you nearly passed out. What gives?”

Bobbie took a step backward and sat down. “I – I just now realized that Clark and I will be a family together. It – I don’t think I’ve ever thought about it quite like that before. I mean, I already knew he’ll be part of my family and I’ll be part of his, but – wow. We’re gonna be a family. Just the two of us.” She smiled wide. “And now that I have, I think I really like it. Yeah, I do like it.” She stood and stretched. “I like it a lot. A whole lot, even.”

They silently stood together for a long moment, just smiling and thinking, until the door flew open again and Detective Felicia Ybarra burst in. “Ay! You three just standing there chattering like *pollos locas* and not even dressed yet! *¡Caramba!* The bride must be dressed *muy pronto!*” Felicia laid her dress, still in the plastic sleeve from the dry cleaners, across a wingback chair and stomped to the trio. “*¡Ahora!* We must begin now or Clark will decide you are not worth the wait, *mujer muy alta!*”

Bobbie walked to the hanging bag with her dress while unbuttoning her blouse. “What’s with the Latina fury, Felicia? Why are you suddenly talking all West Side Story?”

Felicia unzipped Bobbie’s dress bag and started pulling things out. “I was just channeling my maternal grandmother. She was really a lot worse at my big sister’s wedding a couple of years ago.”

Bobbie kicked off her shoes and slipped out of her blouse and slacks. “Okay. But I’ll get you back for that ‘tall woman’ crack.”

“Not to mention the ‘crazy chickens’ thing,” Wanda muttered.

“Hey, at least her hair is done,” Lucy retorted. “That’s one less thing to worry about.”

“Enough!” Bobbie barked. “No more useless chatter. Felicia’s right, we need to get a move on.” She stared at her bridal party for a moment, then snapped, “Why are you just standing there? Get to work!”

The three women expressed various levels of put-on offense, then went to work dressing Bobbie. As Lucy handed the stockings to Wanda and checked the bride’s shoes for scuff marks, she growled, “Slave driver,” at Bobbie.

Bobbie only smiled and lifted her head imperiously, then raised her arms to the front so her servants could fit their mistress with her chosen garment.

Clark glanced at his watch. Twenty minutes to go. Jimmy buffed his shoes once more. Best man Pete Ross stared into the mirror and tied his tie for the third time. Ryan Barnes stood beside him and frowned as he ran a brush through his hair.

“Hey, Pete,” Ryan hissed, “how’s my hair?”

Pete elbowed him away from the mirror. “Lucy will forget to breathe when she sees you in that monkey suit, okay? Just remember that this is Clark’s day, not ours. Let

him be the handsome one for once.”

“For once?” Clark asked. “I’ll have you know that Bobbie thinks I’m better looking than Brad Pitt.”

“Maybe so,” Jimmy snarked, “but what does Angelina Jolie think?”

Ryan snorted once. “She probably thinks you could beat Brad at arm wrestling.”

Pete turned to him and asked, “Yeah, but could he beat Angelina?”

“That’s enough, guys,” Clark growled. “I don’t care about anything right now except the wedding.”

Pete lifted an eyebrow at his friend. “You don’t care about the honeymoon?”

Jimmy laughed. “CK has his laser focus on right now. He’ll care about one thing at a time. Saves wear and tear on his mind.”

Clark grinned. “Right now, I’m focusing on remembering my vows.”

“We know what yours are. What’s Bobbie gonna say?”

“I don’t know, Ryan. We agreed to let the other hear them for the first time during the ceremony.”

“I bet you’ll choke up when you hear hers, CK.”

Clark shook his head at Jimmy. “I just hope she likes what I have to say to her.”

Pete stopped and looked straight at the best friend of his youth, his expression as serious as Clark had ever seen it. “Your words are from your heart, Clark. She loves you, and she’ll love whatever words you want to say even if you’re too emotional to actually say them.”

Ryan nodded. “Amen, bro.”

Clark closed his eyes for a long moment and silently thanked the Lord for such good friends as these. Having them was better than owning all the riches of the world.

It was fourteen minutes before the scheduled start of the ceremony, and Bobbie stood before the full-length mirror, spellbound by her reflection. She’d always known this dress was perfect for her, and that while she knew she was no great beauty, none of the men she’d dated had ever hinted that she might exhibit a slight canine heritage. But she’d never expected to be so – so – utterly *gorgeous*.

The white dress ended just below her knees and billowed slightly at the hem, as if a plastic hoop frame hid below the white cottony fabric. The waist was tapered and emphasized her height without making her look like a giant. The bodice curved around her breasts, emphasizing their presence without making them the focal point of her appearance. She showed a slight cleavage without making her look like a stripper entering a bachelor party. The low collar framed her neck and shoulders as if they were a sculpture in the Met Museum of Art. The headpiece supported a woven lace covering that ran from temple to temple behind her head and decorously draped halfway down her neck.

Her face – her beautiful, smiling face, with soft cosmetic touches that looked so very natural that it looked like bare skin – was uncovered. Even her jawline, which she’d always disliked as too square, looked soft and rounded. And her hair – the girls had lightly brushed and pinned and fussed and cheered over the hairdresser’s best

efforts, then had somehow made it even better – glowed as she imagined Eve’s hair had glowed when she and Adam had first met.

Bobbie almost forgot to breathe. She was nervous, afraid that if she moved she’d spoil the illusion and disappoint Clark. She thought wildly that everyone should come in here and see her and they could exchange vows right here and she wouldn’t move until the license was signed so Clark wouldn’t see how plain she really was and —

Wanda touched her shoulder and Bobbie started. “Hey, girlfriend,” Wanda whispered, “you’re about to marry the guy who you insisted is the best guy in the world. You walk in there looking like that and he’ll forget his name, his best friend, his job, and how to put one foot in front of the other. I guarantee you he’ll know for a fact that you’re the most beautiful woman who’s ever lived.”

Bobbie pulled in a deep breath and saw how the dress shifted over and around her abdomen but maintained the illusion that she had a beautiful body. “Yeah,” Bobbie said. “I’m gonna tell myself that until he realizes the truth.”

Just then a gentle knock sounded at the door. Felicia cracked it, then pulled it open long enough to reach out and tug Bobbie’s mother into the room. Felicia smiled at her. “Most beautiful mother of the most beautiful bride ever, please come and speak to your daughter. Warn her that all men will crush her spirit and waste her life in making endless children with her and force her to wash his feet every night.”

Kelly Tracey smiled and patted Felicia on the cheek. “You are still the most contrary *señorita* I’ve ever met, young lady. Now the three of you go hold off any more visitors while I tell my daughter how proud of her we all are.”

Felicia, Lucy, and Wanda filed out of the room giggling. Kelly locked the door and leaned against it for a long moment. Then she took a deep breath and turned around. Her smile made Bobbie believe her father’s stories, that she was the most beautiful girl he’d ever seen.

“Let me look at you, honey.” Kelly shook her head. “You are so beautiful. I – you’re amazing!”

Bobbie smiled shyly. “It’s the dress and the hair. I’ll never look like this again.”

Kelly chuckled. “Not the dress, not the hair. It’s you.” She sighed. “I wish your father could see you. He’d cry at how lovely you are right now.”

“Mom, I really don’t think I’m all—”

“Hush. Clark is waiting for you. He’ll see you and know you’re the most beautiful woman his eyes have ever beheld. And he’ll love you if you look like this or if you’re coming off a twenty-hour stakeout all sweaty and nasty and funky. Or anything in between.”

Bobbie’s smile grew. “Nice contrast. And I happen to believe you. I doubt he’ll ever change.”

“If he does change, I’m sure it’ll be for the better and not the worse.” Kelly crossed her hands in front of her and sighed. “I mean it, honey, you’re probably the most beautiful bride in the world.”

“I’ve seen your wedding pictures, Mom. You were beyond stunning.”

“That’s because I was marrying a man I loved. You’re marrying a man you love, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am.”

“Then he won’t see anyone but you because your love for him makes you the most beautiful woman in the building. The minister will probably have to punch him on the arm to get his attention for the ceremony.” She smiled warmly. “Like our preacher did to your dad. I’m not sure he was breathing at the time.”

Bobbie’s eyes teared up again. “Oh, Momma, thank you! I really want to be beautiful for Clark.”

Kelly plucked a tissue from the box on the table beside the door and dabbed at her daughter’s eyes. “You are beautiful, Honey, I promise. You’ll make every other woman out there look like a Halloween hag.”

Bobbie laughed softly. “I don’t know about that. You look really nice today. Um – you didn’t come alone, did you?”

“Are you asking me if I have invited a close male friend to accompany me?”

“Trying to be sneaky about it, but yeah, I am.”

Kelly smiled. “There is a man sitting beside me. Your Uncle Westley flew in from Ottawa to be here. And no, he did not bring your aunt Cecelia. She decided not to see her brother’s only daughter get married.”

Bobbie’s face fell a little. “Are they still separated?”

“Honey, this is neither the time nor the place to talk about this.”

“Please, Mom! I’m asking for my own peace of mind.”

Kelly sighed. “Wes said that he told her that he really wanted her to come with him, but he also said that he’d come even if she didn’t. He said that Cecelia threatened to file for divorce if he came to your wedding. And before you ask, he doesn’t know if she’s actually filed.”

“Poor guy. I can’t imagine getting that upset with Clark.”

“She’s always been jealous of me, honey, you know that. And you also know that there has never been any reason for her to be jealous. Nothing untoward has ever occurred between your father’s brother and me, and it never will.”

“Yeah, but you’re her Lois Lane and you’re alive.”

The abrupt declaration startled Bobbie and she wondered who’d said it. Then she realized that she had. “Oh, boy,” she breathed.

Kelly gently took Bobbie’s hands in hers and looked directly into her daughter’s face. “I know who Lois Lane was and what she meant to Clark. I want you to remember two things from now on. Will you do that?”

Bobbie pulled in a sharp breath and nodded. “What are they?”

“First thing. The only competition you have with Lois is in Clark’s memory, and from what I’ve seen he’s handling that as well as he possibly could. He will always remember her.

“But that blade cuts both ways. He’s competing with your memory of Glen, and—”

“Mom, no! Clark and I have talked about this! I don’t compare him to Glen and he doesn’t compare me to Lois!”

“I know. Neither of you consciously make that

comparison. But you’ll always have that in the back of your mind, that Glen and Lois are still hanging around. So will Clark. If you both love each other and treat each other right, though, those memories will become gentle mists, and the thing you’ll each remember best are the smiles and the laughter. You’ll make that happen if you and Clark make your own smile times and laugh times together.”

Bobbie relaxed and closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them and asked, “What’s the second thing?”

Kelly smiled and softly kissed her daughter on the cheek. “That you be happy. You’ll have tough times, hard times, days when nothing goes right, days when Clark irritates you just by breathing, days when you’d almost rather hit him with a club than put your arms around him. But that will pass. Remember that your feelings are perfectly valid, perfectly normal, and the absolute worst thing to build your life on. Feelings change from day to day. Real love doesn’t because it’s a set of attitudes and actions. Love isn’t a feeling – love creates that feeling. As much love as you feel for Clark right now, the feelings won’t last.”

Kelly sighed. “I loved your father more than any other person in this world, except maybe you. And I still love him. But I decided a long time ago that missing him wouldn’t stop me from living my life. Don’t let your past hurts keep you from your life.”

Bobbie lowered her eyes. “Did you – no. I’m sorry I didn’t learn from your example. You didn’t disintegrate when Dad died.”

“I didn’t let you see the times I came close. But I kept on living because I knew that people were depending on me. And I’ve learned that love is not a finite quantity, that I’m allowed to love another man if I so choose.”

Bobbie smiled back at her mother. “Is that what you’re doing with Uncle Wes?”

Kelly tilted her head and frowned a little. “Maybe. And maybe I just like being around him. He’s a good man, and there’s no reason I can’t be just friends with a good man.”

“Okay, Mom, I hear you. I’ll love Clark and he’ll love me and we’ll be deliriously happy together even when we don’t feel deliriously happy.”

Her mother laughed. “That’s the spirit! Now come on, it’s almost time for you to take his breath away.”

Bobbie’s eyebrow shot up. “Not for a few more hours, actually.”

Instead of acting scandalized, Kelly surprised Bobbie by smiling whimsically. “You will, Bobbie. And he’ll take yours away, too.” Her eyebrows rose. “You may have to breathe for each other. I hope your CPR certificates are up to date.”

Jonathan knocked on the door to the groom’s dressing room at ten minutes before one. It was tradition that the groom’s father impart some words of wisdom to the son just before the wedding. He wondered for a moment what men in times past had told their sons. His own father had been too emotional to say much to him, even though Jonathan knew the man had held more than what he did say in his heart.

He wished he knew exactly what to say. Maybe then he

could give Clark something worthwhile.

The door opened and Pete Ross's smile greeted him. "Come on in, Mr. Kent. Clark's ready for you to tell him how the cow ate the cabbage."

"I sure hope you're not calling my bride-to-be a cow," Clark called out.

Jimmy turned and snarked, "Okay, how the beaver chewed the wood."

"Now you're criticizing her dental health."

Ryan sighed and looked up. "We can't win this one, guys. Maybe Clark's father can straighten him out."

Jonathan held up one hand to forestall any more nervous humor. "Okay, fellas, time to leave me alone with my son. Whatever wisdom I have to impart to my son, I don't need an audience, especially you three reprobates."

Ryan smiled and gave Clark a thumbs-up. Pete put his hand on Clark's shoulder and squeezed for a moment. Jimmy nodded and said, "See you in a few." Then they all trooped out to the hallway and took up guard stations in front of the doorway.

Jonathan shut the door and turned to his son. "You have some really good friends there."

Clark nodded. "I know. Wouldn't trade 'em for a new pickup truck, either."

Jonathan grinned. "Or even a good used one."

"No."

Jonathan sighed and stood before his son. "You may be the best-looking groom I've ever seen. I bet Bobbie will get dizzy when she spots you standing there."

"I just hope I'm still conscious."

Jonathan put his hand on Clark's shoulder. "I wish I had some really deep and wise things to tell you, son. I don't. All I can tell you is that if you really love Bobbie – and I have no doubt that you do – the two of you can overcome all the challenges you'll face."

Clark returned the gesture. "Thanks, Dad. And thank you for taking Bobbie into your heart the way you have."

"You love her. She loves you. She's a good person and she knows exactly what she's doing. I'd have to say that I'm glad she's taken your mother and me into her heart."

"She has. She thinks the world of you two."

Jonathan chuckled. "This may be the first wedding ever where there are two sets of in-laws, what with Ellen Lane and Étienne and Evonne LeCour attending. And those folks may be more French than Metropolitan, but they're fine people."

"They think pretty highly of you, too."

Jonathan smiled and took a deep breath. "Well. Are we ready to get this dog and pony show started?"

Clark's face lit up and he bounced like a happy second grader. "I wanna be the pony!"

Jonathan laughed. "Now you're the one calling your bride a dog. Shame on you!"

Étienne LeCour stood beside the closed door to the police chapel's auditorium with a warm smile on his face. He accepted Kelly's handoff of Bobbie's arm with old world grace and nodded as she took her place at the door beside Clark's boss so the man could escort her to her seat. Then he looked over at Bobbie and quietly asked, "You are

certain you wish for me to give you away in the place of your father?"

"Yes. He can't be here, but you can, and you're just about the best man here today. After Clark, anyway. I can't imagine my wedding without you and Evonne."

"It seems odd to me to be here with you, but Ellen and Lucy Lane are also here, as are Clark's parents. I spoke at length with Jonathan yesterday, and I see the source of Clark's excellent manners and his good sense. Evonne said much the same thing about the women in Clark's life this morning after her dinner with Ellen, Martha, and Kelly."

She smiled and looked straight ahead. "I can't cry now. I'll ruin my makeup. I have to be beautiful for Clark."

"No, *cherie*, you do not. You are already beautiful to him. He sees not only your very fine face but also your very fine heart. And that is why he loves you."

Bobbie squeezed her eyes shut and sniffed. She would not cry. Not yet.

Her expression of joy would have to wait just a few more minutes.

From the front of the chapel, Clark watched Kelly Tracey walk down the aisle, escorted by a smiling Perry White. Kelly smiled and sat beside Evonne LeCour, and the two women sniffled and smiled and clasped hands in what Clark interpreted as mutual support. He nodded as he saw his mother Martha, followed by his proud-to-bursting father, walk with her hand in Inspector William Henderson's elbow. Bill handed Martha in next to Jonathan, then stood and looked directly into Clark's eyes.

Clark wasn't sure, but – did Bill Henderson just wink at him?

Didn't matter. He was getting married today.

The back door opened and the pianist smoothly segued from Beethoven's haunting "Moonlight Sonata" to Wagner's traditional bridal entrance music, "Processional." As he softly rolled the first notes, Felicia Ybarra slipped in. Draped by her bridesmaid's dress and not by uniform, Clark nodded and acknowledged that Jimmy had good taste. Her dark complexion was accented by her ice-blue dress, and her smile was almost shy.

He caught her glancing at Jimmy more than once. Maybe his friend had an outside chance of a date with the lovely and very professional burglary detective.

Next in was Lucy Lane. He heard Ryan sigh as he saw her. And Clark couldn't blame him. In her dress, with her hair in a style Clark didn't recognize and couldn't have described on a bet, she looked adorable. She was the closest thing to a sister Clark had, and he refused to describe her as "beautiful," even in his mind.

Especially when Ryan was so stunned he was surely speechless.

The door opened and Bobbie's striking bridesmaid, the diminutive but stout Wanda Dallas, stepped in. Clark heard a gasp from behind him, knowing it was Pete Ross. Clark hid a smile, knowing that unless Pete wanted to follow Wanda back to San Antonio, he had little to no shot at dating her.

And that wasn't likely, but it wasn't impossible, either. It might depend on whether or not Wanda encouraged him

at all.

Then the pianist rolled the dominant seventh chord and pounded three octaves of “C” notes. Police Chaplain Preston McKenzie lifted his hands, palms up, and the crowded congregation rose. Clark glanced at the people standing by their seats and wondered how that many well-wishers had crammed themselves into that small chapel.

Then Bobbie came through the door.

Clark forgot to breathe.

She looked – she was—

He didn’t have the words. He’d never have the words.

Bobbie was beautiful, gorgeous, stunning, exquisite, magnificent – and all that didn’t do her justice. Her hair, her face, her smile, her dress – which she had zealously kept him from seeing – all made her the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

Bobbie had every woman in the world, any woman who’d ever lived or would live, beaten by a mile and lapped twice.

He felt Pete punch him in the back. That and Pete’s whispered, “Inhale, buddy,” reminded him that he had to take in some air or he’d never be able to recite his vows.

He’d labored long and hard on those vows. He hoped she’d like them.

Bobbie looked up and saw him. Saw Clark. Saw his eyes nearly bulge out of their sockets and his jaw drop open. She almost giggled as she visualized someone reaching into his mouth and flicking his uvula, that little flap of tissue hanging down at the back of his throat. She could almost hear it ringing like a church bell tolling for vespers. Suppressing the giggles generated by that image kept her from crying.

She stopped and gave Martha a long-stemmed rose, then turned and gave one to her own mother. Next, she handed another rose to Evonne LeCour, then the fourth rose to Ellen Lane. Bobbie straightened and looked up again and almost froze.

Clark had the most joyful, most terrified expression on his face that she could imagine. And it mirrored her mixed moods perfectly.

It also gave her the last bit of courage she needed to step up beside him.

In her heels, her eyes were almost level with his. He half-turned to face her, then took her left hand in his. She barely felt Wanda reach around and almost yank the bouquet away, and she heard the chuckle in the congregation as if it played on a radio in the next building. When Chaplain McKenzie asked the congregation to be seated, he might as well have been on Mars for all the attention she paid him.

A hand reached out and pulled her in a quarter-turn to face McKenzie. At the same time, another hand grabbed Clark’s arm and turned him to face in the same direction. She wondered for a moment what was so funny, then she noticed the chaplain’s mouth was moving and she forced herself to listen. This might be important.

“—in the bonds of holy matrimony. Roberta Lynn Tracey and Clark Jerome Kent have each agreed to wed one another, to bind themselves each to the other for life and for

love. Should anyone have any cause, just or otherwise, to object to this union, speak now and risk both imprisonment and scathing editorials or shut the forever up.”

The congregation laughed aloud at that. Various snorts and chortles issued from the bridal party and the groomsmen. While everyone settled down, Bobbie whispered from the side of her mouth, “Was that your surprise?”

“No,” Clark whispered back. “I had no idea.”

“Good.”

Clark waited until it was almost quiet, then stage-whispered, “Was that your surprise?”

More laughter ensued, this time led by Chaplain McKenzie. Bobbie made sure Clark was watching her – then she rolled her eyes.

The chaplain lifted his hand and called out, “Okay, folks, my bad, sorry, can we get on with the wedding now? I’m sure these two are ready to proceed.” He looked at Clark, then at Bobbie, and asked, “You are, aren’t you?”

They both nodded.

“Very well.” He lifted his wedding manual again and read.

“Marriage is an important part of our society, even today. Many question the need for a piece of paper to say that two people are married, since divorce occurs so often. But marriage is still important. It signifies that two people are prepared to participate in the life of the community as a single unit, that they are willing to put each other’s needs before their own, that they have vowed to love the other person for the rest of their lives.

“And the couple who marries does so before the secular authorities – hence the need for a license – and, in this case, a religious authority, myself, as pastor of this chapel. They are proclaiming their love for each other and their commitment to a life of ideal togetherness, blissful peace, and perfect harmony.”

The pastor paused and looked out over the congregation. “You are invited to chuckle over the deliberate irony of the concept of a peaceful and completely harmonious marriage between a police detective and an investigative reporter.”

They did.

McKenzie smiled and continued. “I trust these two intelligent, driven, professional young people to work out their inevitable differences with patience and a focus on the issues, not on the other person. Every couple has disagreements, arguments, fights, and the ones who truly love each other stay together and work out the problem. Not only have they said the three magic words – ‘I love you’ – they’ve both said the eight magic words – ‘I’m sorry. I was wrong. Please forgive me.’ Almost nothing can stand against a couple who agree to submit to each other in this way.”

McKenzie smiled and looked from Bobbie to Clark as he said, “I have every confidence that Clark and Roberta will do exactly that.”

Many heads nodded. Many mouths made humming agreement sounds. Two or three even said “Amen” aloud.

The pastor nodded. “Let me read a brief passage from the book of Ecclesiastes, chapter four, beginning in verse

eight.”

There is a person without a companion, without even a son or brother, and though there is no end to all his struggles, his eyes are still not content with riches. “So who am I struggling for,” he asks, “and depriving myself from good?” This too is futile and a miserable task.

Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts. For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up. Also, if two lie down together, they can keep warm; but how can one person alone keep warm? And if someone overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken. ⁶

He looked from Clark to Bobbie and nodded. “I trust that these words will represent the quality of Clark and Roberta’s life together.”

McKenzie waited for their simultaneous nods of agreement, then he smiled again. “Both Roberta and Clark have written their own vows, and they would like to present them at this time. However, they would like to present the rings at the same time, and since Roberta has requested to be first, we’ll hear her vows now. You don’t mind, do you, Clark?”

Clark smiled. “It’s bad luck for me to go first, Pastor. Trust me on this.”

Another chuckle made the rounds. McKenzie nodded and turned to Wanda. “Do you have the groom’s ring?”

Wanda lifted her hand and let the pastor take it from her palm. He lifted the ring and said, “Roberta, please take this ring, and as you make your vows to your groom, please place it on the third finger of his left hand.”

Bobbie took the ring and turned to face Clark. It was now or never.

She took a deep breath and tugged the index card out of her sleeve.

Chapter 18

With a glance at the index card in her palm and a quick squeeze of Clark’s left hand, Bobbie smiled and began.

“A little more than two years ago, I thought my life was over. I’d lost what I thought was my best chance at love and my only real chance at happiness with another person. I couldn’t understand how my heart could still beat, how I could still breathe, how I could stand the pain and loss and loneliness.

“Then I met you.”

She paused and sniffed. “You were hurting too. You understood my pain. You showed me that a person could take the worst hits life could throw at you without them killing you and keep putting one foot in front of the other, keep moving forward through life, keep on keeping on. You helped me see that no matter how badly I’d been hurt, I wasn’t unique, that others had suffered blows as terrible as mine and had survived, even thrived. You showed me how to look past my heart’s agony and – and begin to heal.”

She paused and reached for a tissue but stopped when Clark offered her his pocket handkerchief. Her smile was so big she could hardly talk. “See?” she adlibbed. “You’re always there for me.”

A soft murmur of laughter passed through the

congregation. Wanda put her hand on Bobbie’s elbow and whispered, “You’re doing fine, girlfriend. Almost done.”

Bobbie nodded, then sniffed and dabbed at her eyes. “We held each other up through some really hard times. We each shed a lot of tears on each other’s shoulders, and we laughed together even more. And I learned that no matter how difficult life is, the sun keeps on shining and the world keeps on turning, and – with the right incentive – hearts can heal from the most terrible injuries.”

She put out her right hand, the one holding his ring, tucked the card into the fingers of her left hand, and put the ring on the tip of the third finger of Clark’s left hand. “I know that I’ve healed. And you’ve done so much for me that I could never tell it all.” She turned his hand over, palm down, and said, “Clark Jerome Kent, I place this ring on your finger because I love you. I want you to be my husband. I want to be your wife. I want us to be an ‘us’ for the rest of our lives together.”

She slid the ring the rest of the way to the base of the finger, then lifted his hand to her mouth and kissed his knuckles. Clark’s sigh might have collapsed her knees had Wanda not come to her rescue once again and held her elbow tightly.

Pastor McKenzie nodded as Bobbie straightened and slid the index card back into her sleeve. “I think it’s your turn, Clark,” the chaplain said.

Without prompting, Pete held his hand out so the pastor could take the bride’s ring and give it to Clark. Clark took it, then reached for his inside coat pocket.

Before he drew out the folded paper with his vows on it, though, he decided he didn’t need the hard copy. He reached out and took Bobbie’s right hand, then put it over his left – beside his ring – and gently pressed down with his right hand.

He smiled. He couldn’t help it. Bobbie stood before him, a vision of loveliness from the pages of legend, more beautiful than any beauty pageant contestant who’d ever lived. The makeup around her eyes was slightly blurred from unshed tears, but instead of detracting from her appearance it just made him even more – more of whatever he was feeling.

He stood still, smiling, drinking in the wonder of her beauty and her love for him, until Pete punched him in the kidney again and quietly growled, “We ain’t got all week, Kent.”

Bobbie heard it and snorted. Her shoulders shook with suppressed laughter, and the folks in front who heard it also laughed quietly. Clark decided it was time to deliver his speech.

“Bobbie.” He paused and closed his eyes to make sure he had a good handle on himself, then he looked at her and continued. “When we first met, my heart was just about frozen solid. I had trouble making myself get up in the morning, making myself go to work, talk to people, accept help, do anything more than just drift and stumble through life.

“Then – then I met you.

“I wish I could say that I’ve loved you ever since you knocked me down on the grass—” Bobbie’s eyes widened

but her smile stayed despite the reprise of the congregation's soft laughter "—but that's not how it happened. I was thinking about not going on, not putting in the effort to keep on living. But you made me realize that I wasn't as alone as I'd thought I was. You helped me see that there was still life all around me, life still there waiting to be lived, and as much heartache as I'd experienced, I wasn't unique. You showed me I could still do what I was meant to do. I could still help others, still push for right, still be a force for good. You helped save my life. For all of that, I cannot possibly thank you enough.

"But you went beyond that. It took a while – quite a while, actually – but you let me fall in love with you. And beyond all reason, beyond all hope, beyond all good sense —" he paused as Bobbie chuckled again "—you fell in love with me. It's hard for me to believe it sometimes, but I rely on you and on your love daily. I can't say you're my reason for living, but I can say you are my reason for smiling."

He reached out and took her left hand with his right, the hand holding her ring. "I pray that it will always be so. Roberta Lynn Tracey – that's 'Tracey' with an 'e' – I now place this ring on your left hand as a token of my love and lifelong commitment to you. All that I have is yours. All that I am will love you as long as my heart beats. I love you."

Clark turned her left hand palm down with his left hand and slid the ring onto her third finger with no muss or fuss. Without prompting from Pastor McKenzie, and with their hands still clasped, they leaned toward each other.

Their lips met. They held the kiss for three of Clark's powerful heartbeats. Then they slowly parted.

Even their breathing was intertwined.

After a long moment, Pastor McKenzie lifted his hands and called out, "Ladies and gentlemen, may I present to you, Mr. Clark Kent and Mrs. Roberta Tracey Kent."

As the pianist began the traditional recessional, the one by Richard Wagner that everyone expected – not "Linus and Lucy" or "Baby Elephant Walk" as had been threatened – Wanda watched Clark and Bobbie link arms and all but sprint down the aisle. When the happy couple was even with the third to last row, Pete Ross lifted his arm and offered it to her. She smiled and linked with him, then they stepped down the aisle together.

Pete muttered, "That's the most laughter I've ever heard at a wedding."

"Me too," Wanda whispered. "Think they'll make it?"

Pete smiled. "You kidding? Those two will outlive every marriage since Adam and Eve. I don't think they could love each other more than they do right now."

Wanda chuckled. "You know they waited, right?"

Pete nodded. "I don't know how they did it, but yeah, Clark told me yesterday. I imagine the reception will be kinda short."

Wanda laughed aloud. "I talked to Bobbie yesterday. I know it will. And she showed me a couple of the nighties she's taking on the honeymoon."

"Think she'll look good in them?"

Wanda gave him her best "you're such a dumb male" look. "I don't think she's going to wear them for long. She

told me both of them look great puddled on the carpet."

Pete blushed a little and Wanda smiled. It was good to be around a man who could be embarrassed a little, especially when discussing her best friend's sex life, however obliquely. Firefighters tended to have few personal spaces between them.

Pete pushed through the doors without looking at Wanda. "In that case," he muttered, "we ought to get to the reception as soon as we can. They probably won't be there for long."

Wanda shrugged. "They're going to change into travel clothes first – in separate rooms, just to be safe – so I give them forty minutes once they get there, just long enough to share cake and punch and mingle a little."

Pete looked at Wanda's arm, which was still lodged firmly in his. "In that case, my lady, let us proceed thither ourselves. We can try to outshine the bride and groom."

Wanda hugged Pete's arm and chortled. "No chance of that, bud. Still, you're not a complete loss as far as escorts go."

"Thank you." He blinked once. "I think. Ah – do you have dinner plans this evening?"

"Not really. I think Lucy and Felicia are planning something. Why?"

"Just wondering if you – if you'd care to accompany me."

She stopped and turned them to face each other. "Why, Mr. Ross, are you asking me for a date?"

His expression was a cross between hopeful and scared. "Yes. No strings, no expectations, just dinner between friends. Or if Felicia and Lucy want to get both the guys and gals together for dinner, we could go with them."

She slowly smiled. "That's about the nicest dinner invite I've gotten lately. I would be pleased to go on this date with you, whether with the other couples or just by ourselves."

She could see him relax. Then he said, "I wonder if we should invite Clark and Bobbie?"

Wanda grinned crookedly and shook her head. "They're going to be living on love for at least a couple of days, maybe more. They might come up for air by Tuesday afternoon. Maybe."

Pete laughed with her, then turned and looked at the door to the reception room. "I hope they're really happy together."

The thought hit her harder than she might have expected. "Me too," she whispered. Then she took a deep breath and said, "Come on, let's go face the madding crowd."

He nodded. "Nice reference. Thomas Grey, right? Something about a church graveyard, I think."

"Very good. You win a kewpie doll."

As he pushed on the door, he drawled, "Aw, come on, Wanda, you're much cuter than that."

Instead of reacting angrily at the indirect compliment, she reveled in it, then looked around at all the people and said, "If every couple here loved each other like Bobbie and Clark do, there'd never be another divorce."

She looked into Pete's eyes and saw something there, something she wasn't sure she liked seeing. Then he blinked and lifted his free hand and gestured at the table.

“Shall we fetch ourselves some cake and punch?”

She blinked, too. “Sure, I could go for a high-calorie snack right about now.”

Wanda followed him to the table, thinking that, upon further reflection, whatever she’d seen in Pete’s eyes was something she also wasn’t sure she’d dislike seeing again.

Maybe she should rethink her don’t-need-a-man-in-my-life policy.

Later that afternoon, just after three-thirty, Clark and Bobbie walked together hand-in-hand to the honeymoon suite of the Metropolis Marriott Hotel, already reserved for them. The Vietnamese-American bellhop with the name “Dat” on his badge opened the door for them and pushed the cart with their luggage in, then held the door for them.

Bobbie started to enter, but Clark stopped her. “Hang on, there’s something I need to do first.”

Puzzled, Bobbie asked, “What’s that?”

He grinned and lifted her off her feet, then carried her into the room and set her down beside the bed. “My groomal responsibility is to make sure you get here safely.”

She smiled and tucked her head in close to him. “There’s no such word as groomal.”

“Sure there is. You had a bridal party behind you at the wedding, I had a groomal party behind me. Don’t be chumpy.”

She slapped him lightly on the chest. “You big doofus.” She laughed, then realized Dat was still there. “Hi,” she said. “I think we can handle it from here.”

He nodded. “I’m sure you can, ma’am. Or I can unpack for you if you like.”

She shook her head. “No. We can handle that part.”

“As you wish, ma’am. I’ll leave you to your unpacking.”

She opened her purse to tip him, but the young man stopped her. “Not necessary, ma’am. All gratuities have already been provided. You folks have a lot of people who love you both.”

Bobbie’s mouth opened, but before she spoke, Clark stepped in and said, “Thank you, Dat. Please pass on our thanks to everyone.”

Dat saluted. “I will. Y’all have a good stay. And don’t forget to dial for room service if you get hungry.” With that, he turned and strode out of the room. Clark followed and secured all the locks.

He turned around and smiled shyly. “Do you – ah – do you want to change first? Or should I?”

She lifted her hands. “C’mere first. There’s something I need to say to you.”

His voice turned husky. “I thought you already said it. Your vows just about killed me, they were so amazing.”

It was her turn to smile. “Thank you, my wonderful darling.” She clasped hands with him. “I want to say this one thing right now so I’ll never need to think about it again.” She stopped and took a breath, then kissed his hands again. “I have to confess something to you. I still miss Glen, just a tiny, tiny little bit. There’s a teensy, minuscule part of my mind that’s thinking that this should have been Glen here with me instead of you.”

Bobbie gently guided Clark’s hands to her waist. “But if

he and I had married, I probably never would have come to know you, to know your incredible heart, your wonderful mind, your brilliance, your commitment to truth and justice, your unfailing selflessness. I’ll never forget Glen. But I will also never regret meeting you, falling in love with you, and marrying you. He is where I was, and it was a good place.” She pulled him to her and kissed him softly. “But you are where I am now, and it’s an even better place.” Her arms slipped around his neck and she pulled him close. “I will always love you, my darling husband.”

Wow.

Clark felt like crying again.

But he couldn’t, not now, not when Bobbie had just opened every part of her heart to him. He had to tell her how he felt, way down deep where he lived.

After a long embrace, he gently moved her back. With his hands still on her waist, he said, “I think I understand. And it’s because there’s a tiny, minuscule molecule of my brain that wants to say that Lois should be here with me right now. I won’t ever completely forget her, either, because she was such an overwhelmingly important part of my life for two years. And I learned how much a man could love a woman by loving her.

“But she’s not here. You are. I think you’re right, if either Glen or Lois had lived, there’s no way we’d be here right now. But that’s not reality. You are my reality. You are my wife. You are the love of my life. You are the woman I want to spend all of my life loving. I don’t think I could love you this deeply if I hadn’t already known how to love deeply. And I wouldn’t change that reality for anything or anyone.”

Bobbie’s eyes filled again, and this time they overflowed. Clark felt dampness on his cheeks too, and they leaned together as if they were opposite magnetic poles. Their lips met and sparks flew.

Clark pulled his wife as close as he could, thinking that clothes were overrated.

Bobbie disengaged her mouth from his and moved it to his ear. “Clark?” she breathed.

“Yes?” he grunted.

“Do you really want me to wear a sexy nightgown?”

His hand moved to the base of her spine. “Not for long.” She sighed. “Me neither.”

“You’re suggesting that we can – uh – skip the preliminaries?”

Her hands moved to his belt buckle and started unfastening it. “Altogether.”

Hours later, when Clark thought to look, he saw their clothing scattered hither and yon across the floor, all but covering the side of the room beside the bed. *Looks like our laundry basket threw up*, he thought.

Then he thought, *It really will be our laundry basket. Boy, that sounds great.*

Then Bobbie put her hand on his chest and smiled. “You’ve worn me out, you beast,” she said. “I need some sleep, and this very solid and very beautiful mass under my hand is what I want as a pillow.”

He lay back and stretched out his arms. “Then please

make use of me.”

A pixie expression appeared on her face. “I thought I already had.”

They chuckled wearily together. “Then please, make additional use of me.”

She nestled down in his embrace, her bottom arm tucked under her and her upper arm across his ample chest. “Thank you. Good night, my forever love.”

He brushed her hair back and kissed her sleepy eyes. “Good night, my forever lady.”

“Mmm,” she hummed. “I hope you don’t get tired of hearing me tell you that I love you.”

Her face lifted toward his and he kissed her on the lips, then both of them slipped back into position. “I think you’ve exhausted me too, my lovely bride. And that’s quite a feat, although I’d appreciate it if you don’t repeat that. But I will never tire of hearing you tell me you love me.”

“Good. I plan to say it a lot.”

“And I plan to say it right back to you at least as often as you say it.”

She exhaled and made a “huuh” sound as if she were too tired to laugh. “Good night, my love,” she whispered, “good night.”

He stroked her hair, then kissed the top of her head. “Sleep well, my beautiful, beautiful lady.”

She sighed and relaxed against him. In moments, her breathing evened and she slipped into a gentle slumber.

Clark shook his head. *All this from a mugging in a cemetery*, he mused.

As he drifted off, he thought he should leave a thank-you bouquet on Lois’ grave soon. He knew she’d understand.

Just as he knew Bobbie would understand. And he’d smile and stand beside her when she did the same at Glen’s grave.

Their future couldn’t look any brighter.

=* The End *=

=* And The Beginning *=

Epilogue

Herbert George Wells watched the final frames of the video recording of Clark and Bobbie’s wedding ceremony once more and sighed. His taller companion looked over his shoulder and clucked his tongue.

“Oh, come now, George, this is the best outcome of all the possibilities and you know it. Two very nice people will spend their long lives together instead of dying early and alone and unfulfilled, and they will save a great many lives. Uncounted good things will occur because of them and their children. Despite a few bumps in the road, they’re happily married, at least for now, and we know they will deal adequately with the adversity that comes to everyone. Your Utopia is back on schedule and Superman is going to be active for decades, as will his descendants. Why are you still sad?”

“Oh, I suppose it’s because Lois will not be Clark’s wife in this universe. I will miss her greatly. And I still cannot understand why I was not able to effect a change in her fate.”

The man gave him a crooked smile. “No one can save everyone every time, George. We both know that.”

“I’ve been able to save them both a number of times.”

“Yes, but all those other times you were setting right someone else’s meddling. Repairing a timeline is not the same thing as altering one.”

“Even if my machine refused to go to the point of Lois’ death, yours surely could have. One of us could have saved her.”

“I’m sorry, George, but no, I couldn’t have,” the man said, not unkindly. “Her death was a fixed point in time, old boy, at least in this branch of reality. You know about those.”

Wells sighed again. “I have some familiarity with them, yes. I still do not like them.”

The taller man grinned impishly and strode toward the anachronistic blue box in Wells’ garden. “That’s a bit like expressing a negative opinion of trees in general, don’t you think? Fixed points in any time line are like old-growth forests on uninhabited planets, part of the local reality. Just be satisfied with what you were able to accomplish. Neither of us can repair everything to our liking. Nor do either of us want giant bats eating everything in existence.”

Before Wells could answer, a striking young woman with long wavy reddish-blond locks opened the door and all but lunged out of the blue box. “Will you two come on? Just shake hands and agree that you got very lucky this time. I’ve got a procedure scheduled in two hours and I have to make sure the patient is ready. We were only supposed to be here for fifteen minutes at most!”

The tall man crossed his arms and mock-frowned at her. “The Tardis is a time machine, Grace. You cannot be late with me at the controls.”

Grace returned a look familiar to Wells that said she didn’t believe or trust him on that subject. Wells stifled a chuckle.

The tall man ran a hand through his own curly coif and stepped toward Grace. “Very well, my love, since you’re in a hurry.” He turned to Wells. “Are you coming, George?”

Wells shook his head. “Not this time. Our rendezvous schedule is at an end, I fear. I must return to my home base. The Temporal Watchers are somewhat upset with me over this incident.”

“They’re going to take you to task over this?” The taller man rolled his eyes and adjusted his expensive lapels. “Surely they have better things to do with their time.”

Grace stomped her foot once. “Do you want me to drive? Get a move on!” She turned as if to reenter the box, then stopped and glared past her shoulder at the man. “And quit making stupid puns or I’ll have Bobbie arrest you!”

The man blinked twice, then sighed. “My apologies, my dear. That one was not intentional on my part.”

This, of course, was a continuation of a long-running faux argument between the two, an argument in which Wells had no desire to participate. “Intentional pun or not,” Wells put in, “we all have other obligations which must be met, and we must all depart this timeline. I hope we meet again, hopefully under less dire circumstances.” He bowed slightly. “I have greatly enjoyed our time together, sir.”

The man smiled and returned the bow. “Farewell, good sir. I look forward to working with you once again.”

“And I, you. Take care of yourself. And do take good

care of the lovely Dr. Holloway.”

The dashing Doctor winked. “I shall allow her to continue taking good care of me.”

With a jaunty wave, he followed his companion into the blue box. After a few moments, the light on top flashed, the box made a grinding noise not unlike an asthmatic Velociraptor, then it slowly faded from existence.

Wells smiled. He’d give the enigmatic Doctor a good deal of the credit for a successful outcome in his report. The man’s idea to use the Maldraxian REM Sleep Sublimator on the editor and the police inspector the night before Clark and Bobbie’s first meeting had been quite good. Almost genius, in fact. Wells had to admit that it was much better than his idea to use it on Clark to influence his choices and attitudes. After all, the machine could not force anyone to do anything, only suggest possibilities within the subconscious mind. Give one a little nudge, as Dr. Holloway had said with a smile.

Those two uses were the only times they’d used the odd contraption, save for the one time Wells had “borrowed” it and used it on Clark the night after he met Bobbie. And the single application the Doctor had made to Bobbie’s thoughts two nights later, even though he had been somewhat vexed at Wells at the time for “borrowing” the Sublimator without permission.

Although, come to think of it, there had never been a satisfactory explanation of the self-described madman’s timely arrival, nor of his willing, even enthusiastic, cooperation. Or why he’d had the difficult-to-obtain Maldraxian device so close at hand. Or how he’d known of the projected extinguishing of Utopia in this timeline before it had the opportunity to begin.

It was especially curious that the Doctor had firmly believed – and had convinced Wells – that bringing Clark and Bobbie together was the best possible course of action, despite several far less promising options that would not have involved anything near the level of suggestion and manipulation they had employed. Nor would those other options have required Wells and the Doctor to – as Grace had phrased it – “fiddle” with two separate lives.

He had never understood an overheard comment the Doctor had made to Grace, at the beginning of their partnership, that he owed Bobbie something from a kindness she’d done him a long time ago. And it seemed that he’d never understand. It was something of a blow to Wells’ ego to be all but upstaged by the man.

Nevertheless, the episode had eventually been completed with satisfactory results, and that, Wells mused, was the most important thing. This series of events had ended well.

As well as they could have, at least.

Wells sighed again. He’d go visit the home dimension’s Lois and Clark. Just to check in on them, of course. And, he admitted, to cheer himself up a bit.

4 Baby Elephant Walk

5 Linus and Lucy

6 *The Holy Bible: Holman Christian standard version.* (2009). (Ecc.4:7–12). Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers.

THE END

1 Fizzbin

2 Dragon Poker

3 Browning poem.