

That One Great Love

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Rated PG

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Summary: Clark Kent and Lois Lane were meant to be together. But what if each of them loved someone else before they met? An alternate beginning to this great love story.

This is a rewrite of the Pilot episode, and much of the dialogue has been borrowed from that ninety-minute (without commercials) series premiere. However, there are some significant changes to it, along with one very significant change to the basic premise of Lois' history. And while it's not WHAM-worthy, it is a doozy of a change. There is also a huge dollop of angst in Clark's past in this story, and it impacts his behavior and attitudes toward Lois in what I hope is a surprising and believable manner.

Much well-deserved credit goes to Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the creators of Superman; to Deborah Joy Levine, credited with the development of the series we write and read to perpetuate, and who is also credited with writing and co-producing the Pilot episode; and to both Teri Hatcher and Dean Cain, who gave faces and voices to the characters we all enjoy so very much.

I'd also like to credit Carol Malo for the inspiration for this story and its title. It grew out of a comment she made in feedback to a story where Clark had a serious relationship with someone other than Lois.

And a well-deserved shout-out goes to four of the best beta readers on the planet — Carol M, DsDragon, Elisabeth, and Iolanthealias. Anything that's positive in this story has been greatly enhanced by these four brilliant people. Y'all did a fantastic job!

While this story has some heart-wrenching moments, I can assure the gentle readers that the toys are put back in the box at the end — slightly bent, with a few changes, but no permanent damage.

Chapter One

Lois leaned in closer to hear what was going on in her boss' office. Yet another happy dreamer was applying for a job as reporter for the Daily Planet, and Lois' scripted mini-drama with Perry to discourage said dreamer was about to hit center stage.

"Mating rituals of the knob-tailed gecko?"

Lois grinned at Perry's tone. He was really giving this applicant a hard time, and she didn't catch the man's reply.

But she heard Perry's response. "I'm sorry, son, but I just don't have a spot open for you right now."

That was her cue. She pushed the door open and began her pre-planned verbal assault. As generally scripted, Perry managed to stem the flow long enough to introduce the tall man with the plastic-framed glasses and shaggy hair to her.

"Clark Kent, this is Lois Lane, the best investigative reporter in this city, best one this paper has ever had. Say, Lois, have you turned in that mood piece on the 42nd Street Theater demolition yet?"

She'd been waiting to deliver her next line for nearly an hour, ever since she'd glimpsed the man wandering hopefully into the editor's office. "Sorry, Perry, I just wasn't in the mood."

Perry played his part perfectly. "Not in the mood?"

Doggone it, Lois, that theater is historic! The Barrymores played there, both Junior and Senior! Tennessee Williams directed one of his own plays on that stage! It's coming down tomorrow morning and I need that article for — "

"I'm on the EPRAD story, Chief. I've got a great lead." And then she was out the door.

The details of their little play varied, but it always worked. It always discouraged the ones with no chance, the ones with stars in their eyes and no shot at lasting at a major news organization like the Daily Planet. This made three — no, four men and two women in the last five months who'd walked in off the street with high school newspaper stories in the clip file or dreamers with some vague idea of working for the best paper on the East coast. All of them had been overwhelmed by their first impression of Mad Dog Lane and had never darkened Perry's doorsill again.

She glanced at the framed picture above her workstation and felt the familiar double jolt of loneliness and loss once again. Her mother continued to insist that she'd eventually get over his death and learn to love again. Other people had told her that the hurt and the emptiness would lessen in time, and indeed it had. But she was beginning to think that the hole in her heart would never be filled again.

She sighed and forced herself to focus on her assignments. The theater story was a straightforward history piece, the review of the mayor's latest budget proposal was unremarkable and would require little effort, and the EPRAD story driven by Samuel Platt's rants of sabotage in the space program would occupy a large block of her time for the next several days. There was no slot in her day to schedule crying time about being the youngest widow ever to work for the Daily Planet. And she had work to do, work which would keep her heart from aching quite so badly.

At least it would distract her from the pain.

It was impossible. It simply didn't happen.

But it had.

She couldn't believe it.

He'd scooped her.

No one scooped her!

This was totally unacceptable! No one in the city — no one in the entire state! — had beaten Lois Lane to a byline since she'd first put her fingers to a keyboard in Metropolis! Second rule, no one else got there first! Yet this — this hack from Nowheresville, a man who hadn't had any single mailing address for any six-month period of his adult life since his college graduation, had covered her assignment, presented his story to Perry, and actually gotten hired!

And then Jimmy Olsen had had the nerve to pronounce Kent's article "Smooth," to which the disgusted Lois had replied, "Sure, if you like that kind of thing!"

Obviously Perry loved it. "I admire initiative in a reporter, young man. It's a necessary attribute, and you've got it in spades." The editor held out his hand to the young man. "Welcome to the Daily Planet, Kent."

The rookie smiled like he'd just won the lottery and floated out of the office on a cloud. Lois waited for Jimmy to leave so he could set up the new kid in the various systems at the paper, then she lit into her boss. "Perry, he stole my story! That was my assignment! You can't let him get away with that!"

"Now hold on, Lois. He didn't know that. He thought you'd blown it off, remember? As far as he knew it was wide open. And your story wasn't bad, but his — man! He

lit up the paper with that prose!”

“Oh, yeah, all that touchy-feely kind of garbage! I heard it, remember? He’s no investigator! He doesn’t belong here!”

“He can learn.”

“From whom? Who has time to show a rookie like him where the vending machines are, much less how to be a reporter for the Daily Planet?”

“You can teach him.”

“What — you mean — oh, no, no, no-no-no-no-no! Perry, you can’t do that to me!”

“Why not? You’ve needed a partner for quite a while now, someone you can show the ropes to and help you with legwork.”

“We’ve got a research department for legwork!”

“You need a partner to help you with some of your stories.”

“What? No! If I need help there’s Jimmy or Myerson or Eduardo or — ”

Perry lifted an index finger and paused for a moment. “Listen to me, Lois! You’re too reckless. You need some responsibility to give you a reason to slow down a little.”

“Slow down? Are you nuts? I don’t need — ”

“Stop it!” Perry leaned forward and stared into her eyes. “You’re working yourself too hard. I don’t think you need time off, but you do need to back off a bit. Ever since Claude went to Africa and — ”

“No!” She spun around and all but ran to the door, but this time she stopped herself before she flung it open and sprinted across the news floor to cry in the restroom.

She felt Perry’s comforting hand rest on her shoulder. “I know how hard it is to face this, honey. Alice has been gone for four years now, and sometimes I still turn around in the kitchen or in the living room and expect her to be standing there with that sweet smile on her face.” He gently turned her to face him. “I can tell you that it gets easier as time goes on. I can’t tell you that it gets better.”

She sniffed and tried to smile up at him. “Th-that’s — not very comforting, you know. Aren’t you supposed to tell me that — that I’ll find someone else someday?”

He sighed deeply. “Maybe you will, maybe you won’t. I don’t know. All I know is that I haven’t, not yet.”

His pain — old and comfortable as it was — still stung him, still cut him deeply, and she knew she hadn’t made him feel any better. “I’m sorry, Perry. I didn’t — I didn’t mean — ”

“Now, now, never mind that. Just tell this broken-down old editor that you’ll work with Kent and show him the ropes.”

“Okay,” she sighed. A tissue from Perry appeared in her hand and she wiped her eyes with it. “Thanks. Okay, I’ll work with Kent. As long as he doesn’t slow me down too much, that is.”

Perry grinned at her. “I think that young man might surprise you. He’s already surprised me, and this is just his first day.”

She wasn’t quite ready to face the new kid, not with damp eyes and damaged makeup. So a quick trip to the ladies’ lounge was in order.

She opened her makeup case and looked into the mirror, but she didn’t see herself. All that was in her mind was that Claude had given her that makeup case for their six-month anniversary. It had been one of the last presents he’d given her.

The next thought that hit her was that he was gone. It felt just like it always felt, as if she were hearing the news for the first time. She left her purse and makeup case on the counter in front of the mirror and stumbled through the door to the entry foyer and onto the couch near the entrance.

And just like always, a scene surged out of the reservoir of her memory and overwhelmed her.

She lurched up out of a sound, silent, and dreamless sleep. She thought she’d heard a noise. Her hand drifted to the other side of the bed —

He wasn’t there. And the sheet was cold. This wasn’t a quick trip to the bathroom.

Silently, she slipped a T-shirt and sweat pants over bare skin and picked up the baseball bat leaning against the wall between the nightstand and the bed. Perry would have yelled at her if he had known what she was doing, but he wasn’t here.

And, apparently, neither was Claude.

Had she heard an intruder, or was her new-found lover raiding the refrigerator? Or had Claude simply slipped out into the night and left her alone? Whatever it was that she’d heard, she needed to investigate the sound.

She held the bat at ready and cat-footed from the bedroom to the living room. The slender strands of the city lights sneaking in revealed no damage, no missing valuables, no misplaced furniture, no creeping prowler.

Only a man slumped on the couch.

“Claude?” she whispered. “Is that you?”

The man only slumped lower on the couch and emitted a sound somewhere between a groan and a sob. Lois crept closer and lowered the bat. “Mister, I’m going to whack you with this baseball bat unless you prove to me that you’re Claude Rochambeau.”

The man snorted, but without any humor. “It is I, chérie. There is no need to — to ‘whack’ me with your bat.”

The bat slipped from her hands and leaned against the end table. “Claude? What’s wrong? Why are you out here?” She clicked on the end table lamp and sat beside him.

There were tear tracks on his cheeks and his eyes were still damp. She gently took his clenched hands in hers. “Claude? Honey, what’s the matter?”

He pulled his hands away from her and covered his face with them. “The matter? The matter is that I am a thief and a fool.”

Her first thought was that he was confessing to living a double life of some kind, but that didn’t make sense. The man was too busy to work as hard as he did during the day and live some kind of secret life at night. “I don’t understand. What are you talking about?”

He reached under his jacket and pulled out a folder. “This. This is what I am talking about.”

She took the folder and opened it. Her story stared back at her, the story that would make her reputation on the Daily Planet and make Perry White respect her abilities as an investigator as well as her skill as a writer. “Claude? Why do you have my folder? This is the story I’m going to give Perry in the morning. The one I — ”

The penny dropped. This was the story she’d bragged to Claude about the night before, as they’d laid in bed together wrapped in each other’s arms, his skin warm against hers —

No! She couldn’t think about that right now. She had to find out what he was doing with her story.

“Claude?” she began softly. “I want you to tell me why you have this folder, and I need for you to tell me the whole truth.”

He sat up and took a deep breath. “Yes. Yes, I will tell you the entire truth, though it shall reveal me to be a cad and a bounder.”

She waited while he composed himself.

“Lois, my — no, I have not the right to address you in such a manner, or in any manner at all. I must tell you that I am not an honest man. I invited you to share dinner with me tonight because you are a beautiful woman, and I accompanied you to your apartment because I did indeed hope to be allowed to — to share your bed. But I did not plan for you to tell me of your story. And I did not plan to steal your story and claim it as my own.

“But that is what I have almost done. I left you and dressed after you fell asleep, then I found the folder in your briefcase and placed it under my coat. But I — I could not do such a terrible thing to you! You are too young, too beautiful, too talented, too innocent for me to ruin in such a selfish and criminal manner.”

He ran his hands through his hair and sighed. “And now you must report my actions to Monsieur the editor Perry White. He will be angry with me — with just cause — and perhaps he will release me from my employment. If he does so, it will be no less than I deserve.”

He stood and took a step toward the door, then stopped and half-turned to her. “Lois, I cannot tell you how sorry I am to have betrayed you. You are the most beautiful woman I have ever held in my arms, the most intelligent, the most — “ He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. “No. I will no longer flatter you. I have not the right.”

He walked slowly toward the front door. “I will leave now. Should the office gossips wag their tongues about us, I shall tell them that I was not good enough for you, that you overwhelmed me with your love and crushed me. I will tell them that your heart was too big for me, that I am not man enough to fill it.” He sighed. “And that, at least, would be the truth.” He stopped beside the door and turned back to her.

And she slammed her arms around him and held on for dear life. “Don’t go! Please don’t go! I won’t let you!”

He gently tried to disengage her. “Lois, please, I am not worthy — ”

“Then why are you still here?”

He froze in place. “What is it that you mean?”

“Claude, if you’re such a horrible man, if you’re so terrible, why didn’t you leave already? Why did you tell me all about your plans? Why did you give me back the story? And why are you volunteering to be the bad guy?”

“I — it is what I deserve — ”

“No! No, it isn’t! Please, darling, don’t go! Please stay with me!”

His hands cupped her face. “What did you call me?”

Her eyes began to water and she looked into his face. “I said — please, darling, stay with me.”

He let out a shuddering breath. “Lois, my — my love. I am not worthy — ”

One hand covered his lips while the other gripped his shirt. “Let me be the judge of your worth to me, my darling.”

Three months later they were married.
Seven months after that he was dead.

The tears came again and she slumped to one side. She heard the flush in the next room and water running in the sink and then she heard the door open, but she couldn’t lift her eyes to see who was there. She put her head down on the couch and tried to smother her sobs in the cushions, hoping that whoever saw her would simply pass by and leave her to her agony.

But that didn’t happen. A moment later she felt familiar hands on her shoulders. “Lois! Oh, honey! Come on, sit up. Here, use this towel.”

It wasn’t some random female passing by. It was her best friend at the Planet, and Lois was lucky to know her.

She took the cloth from Cat’s hands and pressed it to her eyes. She felt the other woman’s hand stroke her hair, then tug her into an embrace as Cat knelt beside the couch to offer whatever comfort she could.

As always, Lois eventually ran dry. The analytical part of her mind told her that this crying jag was shorter than the one before and that there had been a longer gap of not crying over Claude than before the last episode. The other part of her mind, the part that was connected to her heart and still desperately missed the man who’d promised to love her for the rest of his life, kicked the analytical part to the curb once again and told it to shut up and let her wallow in the jagged security of her pain.

But she didn’t want to wallow. Eight months was long enough to wallow. She could miss her husband without breaking down in the middle of the day. Enough was enough.

She sat up and tried to smile at Cat. “Thanks. I’m sorry for — ”

“Don’t be. That’s what friends are for. And don’t worry about your face; it’s not that bad. Besides, I can’t have you looking sexier than me. I’m not sure I could handle the competition.”

They shared a quiet laugh, then Cat asked, “Hey, who’s the new tight end in the office?”

Lois fought back a smile. “Why don’t you throw your usual forward pass and find out?”

Cat chuckled. “I will if you don’t have him running too many deep patterns for you. Perry told me that he’s your new partner and that you get to show him around.”

Lois sighed and stood, then made her way to the mirror and her abandoned makeup kit. “Yes, I get to babysit the new kid. Lucky me.”

Cat hugged her across the shoulders. “Well, if you get bored with him, just let me know. I’ll take him off your hands.” She frowned in mock concentration. “In fact, I think I’ll go introduce myself to him now, find out if he needs a guide to the big city.”

Despite her emotional state, Lois laughed openly. “Are you kidding? That hayseed farm boy? I’ll bet you a dollar right now that he falls into an open manhole his first week here.”

Her face repaired and her emotions under control, Lois exited the lounge and made her way to her desk where she knew Clark would be waiting for her. She watched Cat try to hook her claws into him, and then she was pleasantly surprised to see him skitter away with more grace than she would have suspected he had.

Then someone called out, “Hey! On the TV! The shuttle’s on fire!”

Horried, Lois stared at the screen along with the rest of the newsroom crew. “I knew there was something to

Platt's story!" she muttered to Perry. "I just knew it!"

"Now, Lois, just because one madman's prediction came true doesn't mean that there's a conspiracy to sabotage the entire space program."

"But with more than a hundred colonists going up in the next launch, are you willing to take that chance?"

Perry didn't speak, but she read his answer in his eyes. She had a story to cover. And she was sure it was a certified Kerth winner.

If only Claude were here to —

No. No dwelling on what might have been. Focus on what was. Focus on what was in front of her and get the story. It was the only way to get through the day.

"I need a task force, Perry. I can't cover this story alone."

"You can have Jimmy."

"Chief, we're talking about the space program. Jimmy's too young."

"Okay, take Kent."

"Kent?" The impulse to say 'yes' was surprisingly strong, but she forced it back. "No! He's greener than grass! I need someone with some experience!"

"He's better than you think he is, Lois."

"Still no." She folded her arms and paced. "What about Myerson?"

"He's busy."

"Burns?"

"Budapest."

"Nelson."

"He's on vacation in Jamaica. Use Kent."

"Forget Kent."

"Uh-uh. Kent is a good man."

"He's a hack from Smallville! Even I couldn't make that name up."

"Kent — or nobody."

For a moment she felt like the rabbit who'd convinced the fox to throw him into the briar patch — which was where he wanted to be — by insisting that it was the last place he wanted to go. "Fine! Don't ever let anyone say I'm not a team player."

As she stalked out of Perry's office, trying to act as if she'd been forced into drinking stale drain cleaner, she wagged her fingers in her new partner's direction. "Come on, Kent, let's go. I have an interview and you get to watch and learn."

He caught up with her just short of the steps to the elevator. "Right," he said. "I'll follow your lead."

"You bet you will, rookie. Let's hit it."

Clark nodded. "Mind if I ask where're we going?"

"To interview Samuel Platt. He's convinced that the Messenger was sabotaged. I'll brief you on the way." She stopped and turned to face him. "And let's get something straight. I didn't work my buns off to become an investigative reporter for the Daily Planet just to baby-sit some hack from Nowheresville." She started off again, then turned on him once more. "And another thing. You're not working with me, you're working for me. I call the shots. I ask the questions. You're low man. I'm top banana. That's the way I like it. Comprene?"

A flicker of amusement crossed his face and he appeared to think about saying something, then he apparently reconsidered. "You're in charge. I understand completely."

"Good." She started off yet again and they stepped into

an empty elevator. "And I'm driving."

At this, he chuckled. "Got it."

They made the journey to Lois' Jeep in silence. As she put the key in the ignition, Clark put his hand on hers and said, "May I tell you something? Just this once, and I'll never mention it again."

She nodded warily. "Sure, go ahead."

He removed his hand and looked away, then spoke softly. "Perry told me about your — your husband. He also told me that I'd better not hurt you in any way or he'd yank my head off and put it someplace it wasn't appropriate for anyone's head to be. So if I do or say anything you think is personally inappropriate, please let me know and I'll apologize immediately. Sometimes I let my sense of humor run ahead of my judgment, but I promise you in advance that I don't ever intend to be mean or thoughtless." He turned and caught her gaze. "Besides, I like my head where it is."

Lois didn't know whether to be angry or amused, so she settled for a sharp nod. "Fine. You get out of line and I'll knock you down and sit on you."

His starlight smile broke free. "I was right."

"Huh? Right about what?"

"You do like to be on top."

She tried to be angry for a moment, but for some reason her fury refused to ignite. She settled for rolling her eyes and grunting. "Don't push me, Kent. You are way out of your league."

He didn't say anything, but his smile was eloquent enough for her.

Wow.

In the space of just two days, I'd gone from hopeless rejected job seeker to rookie reporter for the Daily Planet. And I was working with the great Lois Lane! Hopefully I'd also be learning from the best instead of just running errands and doing legwork for her.

But it didn't matter. I'd made it! I'd gotten hired!

Although I felt bad about stealing Lois' story — even though, technically, I hadn't stolen anything since I thought she'd refused the assignment — I thought that particular piece was one of my best. Perry White loved it, and instead of buying it (which I'd really hoped he would), he hired me and printed it! I might as well have been in heaven at that point. I wasn't sure how things could get better.

And then it got better. He partnered me with Lois Lane. Beautiful to the point of being stunning, powerful, intuitive, aggressive, and somehow tender all at the same time, she scared me. Even with all of my special abilities, I wasn't sure I could keep up with her. I was going to have to stay on my toes.

And even though I knew she didn't want anyone watching over her, I was going to try to do that, too. My new boss had given me a very short and intense lecture about Lois being a fairly new widow and that I wasn't to try anything with her. I agreed, because I didn't want to mess up this chance in any way, and because I didn't think I was ready for anything like that yet.

Yet there was something which appealed to me about Lois on a very personal level. She was certainly tough, and she was the last woman I'd pick to need help defending herself, but she still had an air of fragility about her, as if her tight control was far more tenuous than she was willing to admit, even to herself. When I told her what Perry had said to me and that I promised to behave myself, I meant it,

and I hoped that she'd accept me as I was despite her situation.

When she didn't blow up at my "on top" joke, I knew I was in good with her as long as I didn't make a career out of pushing the humor envelope. I couldn't wait until I said something intentionally funny and she actually laughed at it. Even though I hadn't heard it yet, I just knew her laugh was lilting and musical.

She was trouble with a capital 'T' but I didn't care. I was living my dream, and maybe — just maybe — this time I could put down some real roots and build a home for myself. And maybe, somewhere in this huge city, there was a woman who would love me in spite of my differences, a woman whom I could respect and trust and love. I thought I'd found her years ago in Rachel, but I'd been wrong. I'd looked for her all over the world since then and hadn't found anyone who could come close to my ideal. And now I had the chance to do nearly everything I'd always wanted to do with my life.

All I had to do was survive my initiation to big-city reporting with Lois Lane.

Sometimes being invulnerable is a very useful thing.

Chapter Two

The pair of reporters picked their way through the trash in the hallway and cautiously approached the apartment door. Lois noticed Clark's deliberate and cautious approach, but she also noted that he positioned himself between her and any possible threat. He'd been the first one to step over the sleeping wino in the building's doorway, and he'd handed Lois across the man with both prudence and alacrity. He'd also slapped his shoes on the bare concrete floor to frighten the rats away from her.

The guy was turning out to be a real Boy Scout. Not that she minded, especially given where they were at the moment. Of course, she couldn't let him see how much she appreciated his care and concern. It wouldn't be professional.

Platt's door was unlatched when Lois knocked. As it swung aside, she called for Dr. Platt and slowly made her way into the apartment.

The apartment itself should have been condemned, she thought, not just the building, even before she met its sole occupant. The middle-aged man jumped up from a table with a crowbar in his hand and ran from them as if afraid of their very presence.

"Don't!" he called out. "Don't — don't come any closer! You don't — I'll — I'll call the — the police!"

Clark stopped in the doorway behind her as if guarding their path of retreat. Lois stepped forward and lifted empty hands to the frightened man. "Dr. Platt? We're not here to hurt you. We're from the Daily Planet."

"You — you're — reporters?"

Behind her, she heard the door close. Clark stepped up beside her and softly said, "Yes. You said something about the Messenger being sabotaged?"

Platt seemed to relax slightly. "Yes — yes, I did. Do you have the proof?"

Lois frowned at him. "What proof, Dr. Platt?"

"My report! I submitted my report and then — after that they — don't you have my report?"

"No, we don't. Can you tell us —"

"Oh!" Platt burst out. "It was — yes — it was the — the drugs they gave me! That's why they said I was crazy! Wouldn't you be? They drugged me after I submitted my

report to Dr. Baines."

"Do you still think the Messenger was sabotaged?"

"Of course! Why else would it just blow up on the launching pad?"

"But how could that happen?" asked Lois. "With all the security on the project, how could any sabotage have taken place? Unless — the orders came from higher up?"

Platt's eyes widened alarmingly and he nodded. "Yes! You see, under extreme low temperature conditions, the particle isolators were in danger of shutting down. That would cause an explosive reaction with the rocket fuel. So, in order to prevent this, we installed heating devices. But when I broke into one of the off-limit labs, I discovered that the heating devices had been replaced by coolant systems!"

Clark's head lifted like a pointer scenting a bird. "To freeze the ion particles?"

Despite herself, Lois was impressed. She hadn't followed any of Platt's techno-babble, but Clark obviously had. "Of course!" exclaimed Platt. "And then the fumes — and then the Messenger would blow up! I mean, it's all in my report."

"What report?" asked Clark.

Platt lunged past Lois toward a cluttered table. "The report I gave to Dr. Baines!"

Clark anticipated her next question. "Do you have a copy of that report, Dr. Platt?"

The ragged, twitchy man pointed both index fingers at Kent. "Ha! What kind of scientist would I be if I didn't keep copies of my published documents?"

Kent wasn't following her lead, he was asking questions she would have asked if he'd waited half a second. But she held herself back from correcting him. Doing that would probably spook Platt even worse than he already was. She could always slap Kent down later.

Lois watched with increasing trepidation as he grabbed scraps of paper from a bookshelf, from behind a stuffed fish on the wall, from inside a tennis shoe, and she tried to slow down his frantic efforts. "Maybe we could send someone by later to pick up a copy of the report."

Then she noticed the one clean item on the table — a framed photo of a smiling Platt beside a young girl in a cheerleader's uniform and a woman around his age standing on the other side of the girl. She lifted a snapshot of the same trio which was wedged into the front of the frame, but this photo showed the same girl seated in a wheelchair.

"My wife," muttered Dr. Platt. Lois noticed that he suddenly sounded calmer and more in control. "We planned to live together on the Prometheus."

"Where's your family now?"

"Gone. They left when I — well — it's all for the best."

Lois couldn't help but feel his pain. She fought the sudden impulse to hug the man and tell him that she'd make everything right for him. Instead, she asked, "Dr. Platt, who would want to sabotage Space Station Prometheus?"

Platt shook his head. "I don't know. See, the microgravity laboratory in the Prometheus could be the key for curing hundreds of diseases here on Earth. In a zero-gravity environment, we can actually separate the proteins that form viruses. And so many children with crippling diseases —" He stopped and waved his hands aimlessly. "My daughter —" Lois could hear the heartbreak in his voice, see it in his eyes. "We could cure them," he finished.

Again Lois beat down the urge to offer him comfort. Instead, she glanced over her shoulder to Clark and said, "I think you and I should pay Dr. Baines a visit."

Clark nodded to her, then said, “We’ll be back in touch soon, Dr. Platt. In the meantime, can you organize your notes for us? Keep in mind that we’re not rocket scientists.”

His soft corn-fed grin seemed to loosen Platt up even more. “Yes,” the man responded, “I’ll do that. I’ll — I can have an outline for you by tonight if you want. If you need something more formal, maybe — maybe the full report the day after tomorrow?”

Lois nodded. “We’ll come back tonight for the outline, if that’s okay, Doctor.” She glanced at Clark for affirmation, and he nodded.

Then he grinned again. “And this time we’ll bring a pizza. Do you like pepperoni?”

Platt chuckled. “Who doesn’t? Can you make it deep dish? That’s my favorite, and I can’t get anyone to deliver here.”

I snapped my seat belt closed as Lois started the Jeep and lurched away from the curb. “I’m not surprised no pizza places deliver here,” I said. “This is a pretty nasty part of town.”

Lois dodged an older woman pushing a shopping cart full of aluminum cans. “I’m surprised the utilities are still on,” she answered.

“Maybe he’s tapping into someone else’s power and water. He is a scientist, you know.”

“Yeah. Hey, you’ve got some science background too, don’t you? You followed that bit about the ion particles, and I barely recognized that he was speaking English.”

“Just from a layman’s point of view. I understood the basics of what he was talking about, but I couldn’t have followed his math unless he’d walked me through it very slowly.”

“I’m still impressed, Clark.” She favored me with a sideways smile. It felt warm even from across the front seat. “Maybe this partnership won’t be a total burden after all.”

I chuckled. “Thanks, Lois. That may be the nicest thing you’ve said to me so far.”

“I hope you focus on the scientific aspect of the story when we talk to Dr. Baines instead of the personal aspects. She’s — well, she’s fairly attractive. If you like icy blondes.”

That was an interesting and revealing tidbit from her. “You’ve met the good doctor?”

Lois shook her head. “I’ve seen her on TV a few times, once at a news conference a few weeks ago, that’s all. She smiles pretty for the cameras. She’s a photogenic face for the space program.”

“Isn’t she qualified to do her job?”

“That depends on what job you’re talking about.”

I nodded but didn’t speak for a long moment. As Lois stopped for a traffic light, I decided to ask, “What do you think about Dr. Platt? Is he on the level, is he crazy, or is he somewhere in between?”

She frowned and didn’t answer at first, then she said, “I think there’s something to his story. Did you see his face when I picked up the picture of his family?”

“Yes. I heard his voice, too. He sounded like a man with a broken heart.”

She snapped a pointed glance at me, then quickly faced forward again. “How would you know that, Kent? You’re not old enough to have had your heart broken that badly.”

I almost said, Yes I am, but then I reconsidered at the last moment. I wasn’t ready to tell her about Rachel.

But I had to tell her something, and it had to be true. “He reminds me of my Aunt Sadie when she talks about Uncle Ben. I was about seven when Ben died in a car wreck, and Sadie still has his picture on her mantle and beside her bed. Ben was my dad’s brother, and we took Sadie into our home for several months after the funeral. To this day she can’t talk about Ben without getting misty-eyed.”

“I guess — “ Lois’ voice cut out for a moment, then she cleared her throat. “I guess you know about it. At least, you know second-hand.”

“Yep.”

Neither of us spoke again until she parked the Jeep in the EPRAD visitor’s lot.

I didn’t want her to know how I knew how she felt. She was carrying enough pain as it was.

Lois forced herself into “reporter mode” before they met Antoinette Baines, and it turned out to be the right choice. Baines stonewalled them about Platt, about the report he claimed to have sent her about the cold ion particle thingy, about the destroyed shuttle, and anything else — until Clark smiled at her and asked so very nicely. Baines’ “I’ll see what I can do” made Lois grind her teeth at the woman and her weakness for Kent’s down-home charm.

“She seemed nice,” offered Clark as they walked toward the Jeep.

“Of course she did! A pretty young blonde with a nice smile and sharp clothes and you all but trip over your tongue!”

“Come on now, you can’t condemn her for being attractive.”

“Not her, you! You can’t tell me you weren’t pulling back your shoulders and holding your stomach in like any typical male would!”

“Trust me, Lois, I’m not your typical male.”

“Really? Could you tell she was lying? Could you tell she was hiding information from us? Could you tell that she’d rather stick her hand in a blender than give us the access we need?”

“Hey, take it easy, okay? We’re on the same side here.”

They were on the same side, she reminded herself. She resumed stomping toward the Jeep and considered why she was so upset.

After a moment, she reluctantly admitted that she wasn’t angry at Clark so much as she was still pricked by his description of Platt as broken-hearted. She’d seen it right away, but she hadn’t expected Clark to pick up on it so quickly. It bothered her that a green rookie had noticed something so subtle as easily as she had.

His comment broke in on her thoughts. “I knew she was lying.”

She stopped for a moment, then reached for her keys and unlocked the driver’s door. “How could you tell?”

He shrugged. “When I was in Virginia a couple of years ago, I went through the FBI’s interrogation course. They teach you to look for the subject to try to distract you either by changing the subject or calling attention to something they’re doing, to watch the amount of eye contact they make with you, if it’s not enough or too much, to pay attention to their body language and the way they smile or don’t smile, that kind of thing. Nearly everything Dr. Baines did tells me she was hiding something important from us.”

She hit the ‘unlock’ button on the armrest and slid

behind the wheel as he opened the passenger door. “You saw all that?”

“Uh-huh. You did too, even if you weren’t consciously aware of it. You’ve got very good instincts for digging out the truth.”

She didn’t know whether he was trying to pacify her or was paying her a sincere compliment, so she let it pass. “We’ve got to get Platt’s outline and take it back to the office. If he’s really on to something, we should be able to tell from that.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. Let’s go, partner.”

Lois hid it, but she felt a surge of warm pleasure when he called her ‘partner.’ Maybe this really would work out after all.

Lois sat back in her chair and pulled her hair back with her hands. “Clark, can you come over here for a minute?” She waited until he stood beside her desk, then said, “I really can’t follow this thing. I don’t know if this outline is useful or not. It’s just too technical for me. What do you think?”

He frowned at the paper on her desk and swiveled it toward him. “I think we have something, but I don’t know what. I can grasp just enough to believe that I want to know more about this report.”

“Okay.” She let out a deep sigh. “Let’s see if we can do better with Platt’s full report, assuming that he can put it together for us, and assuming we can understand it.”

Before Clark could respond, Jimmy jogged past and said, “Lois, call for you on line three.”

“Got it.”

Clark nodded and stood, then called to Jimmy. Lois tuned out the rest of their conversation as she picked up the phone, trusting Clark to fill her in if she needed to know what they were talking about.

“This is Lois Lane.”

“Lois! This is Mitchell.”

“Hi, Mitchell. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“No need to be sarcastic. Well, maybe there is. I’m going to have to cancel.”

For a moment she didn’t know what he was talking about. Then it hit her — the White Orchid Ball was tonight. “Cancel? You mean the Ball? Tonight? You’re cancelling on me now?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, really! But I think I’m coming down with something.”

No. He wasn’t backing out on her now! She wasn’t Cat Grant, she had to have an escort! “Can’t you take something for — for whatever it is you’ve got?”

“You know I can’t handle antihistamines, Lois. They put me to sleep for hours and hours. I’m really sorry, but if it’s just sniffles now, by tomorrow it could be pneumonia or the flu or bronchitis or a sinus infection or —”

“Okay! I got it. You’re sick and can’t go.”

“I’m really sorry. I hope you’re not too mad.”

“No, Mitchell, I’m not mad,” she lied. “If you’ve got the sniffles, then you’ve got the sniffles. I understand. It could lead to complications.”

“Thanks, Lois. Should I call you and reschedule some time? After I get better?”

“No! I mean, don’t worry about it. I’ll call you.”

She hung up harder than she had to. Blast it! Why did Mitchell have to cancel? He was her fall-back escort, the guy who looked okay in a suit or a tux and kept the drunks and casual pick-up artists away just by being with her. And

if she had to dodge groping hands and amorous VIPs at the most important social event of the year, she might not be able to get close enough to Lex Luthor to corner him and get him to agree to an interview. And she’d been angling for a one-on-one with him for months. Who could replace Mitchell at this late hour?

She glanced up and saw Clark paging through a phone directory and sighed. He wasn’t a total loss as a partner, at least not so far, so maybe he’d be okay as an escort. Did she want to risk letting him get that close to her in a social environment?

Then she reminded herself that it wouldn’t be a date. A date? With the hayseed from Kansas via Borneo and Madagascar and other points all over the globe? No. She’d make it clear that it was just business.

The decision made, she stood and marched to his desk. “I don’t suppose that you own a tuxedo?”

He looked at her with a totally innocent expression. “I could get one, I guess. Um — why?”

Okay, he had good hearing. He’d obviously heard her side of the conversation with Mitchell — not that her side had been all that quiet — and now he was putting two and two together. “Oh, well, the man that I was going to Lex Luthor’s ball with has the flu.”

He sat there like a bump on a log. A log in a small pond called Smallville. Like a big ugly frog on a bump on a log in a small pond called Smallville.

Then he drawled, “Yes?”

“Well, I was just wondering if you wanted to —”

She waited for him to respond, but he just lifted his eyebrows as if waiting for her to continue, like he didn’t know what she was talking about. But no. Nobody was that dense. He was deliberately making this hard on her. His smug half-smile bugged her and she spun away, then turned back. “Look, do you want to take his place or not?”

He gave a half-shrug. “Thanks, Lois, but I thought I’d go to bed early tonight.”

She couldn’t believe her ears! “Are you crazy? This is THE social event of the season! Everyone who is anyone is gonna be there and you want to go to bed early?”

He stood and put one hand in his pocket, then frowned in apparent comprehension. “So — is this — a date?”

She couldn’t let him get away with that one. “Date? Oh, you mean like in Kansas where you meet my parents and then you try to give me a hickey in the vacant lot behind the Dairy Freeze?” She let out a fake chuckle, then gave him a low-power Mad Dog Lane glare. “No, this is not a date! This is business! I am gonna land the first one-on-one Lex Luthor interview if it kills me!”

He pointed a finger in the air and shook it in her general direction. “Okay.”

His sudden surrender threw her off-guard for a moment, but Mad Dog Lane recovered quickly. “Good. I’ll see you at your place.” She turned to go, then spun back. “At nine.” He nodded. “Be ready.”

“Um, Lois?” he asked. “Would it be okay if I met you at the entrance? My hotel room isn’t really all that nice, and I wouldn’t want you to get your clothes dirty.”

She frowned for a moment, then nodded. “That works for me. But be on time! I don’t want to have to wait for you. And don’t get wet! The forecast is for thunderstorms this evening.”

“Of course,” he agreed. “I’ll be there on time. And I’ll be dry.”

“Good.” She turned and stalked away, trying for

nonchalant but not quite making it that far. At least — she hoped — she didn't appear relieved that he'd agreed to go with her.

Maybe this won't be so bad after all. At least Kent didn't seem like a hypochondriac like Mitchell. And he'd look good walking next to her, too, even if he didn't know his way around the city yet. Eye candy was better than an empty arm.

She allowed herself to picture him in a tux. He'll probably make a better escort than Mitchell, too, she mused. He'll certainly be a better looking one.

The part of her heart which was loyal to Claude's memory chided her for her consideration of Clark's physical attributes. But only for a moment — then that part of her agreed with all the other parts of her that Clark was indeed a good-looking man.

Which meant that she had to look good too, if only to keep the balance in their partnership. And that was what was important to her.

Wasn't it?

Chapter Three

Lois detached herself from Clark by the front door and left him with Jimmy, who immediately began gushing over both Lex Luthor's professional accomplishments and the man himself. She drifted purposefully through the other partygoers, aiming to get close to the room's main staircase by the time Luthor hit the bottom step.

He wasn't going to get away this time.

The gathering storm outside stepped up its tempo, and the resulting lightning sent creepy highlights across the dance floor. She looked up just as the great man himself started down the staircase, glad-handing the people he passed as if he were running for office.

Maybe he really is campaigning for something, she thought. Maybe he needs some positive press. But if that were true, why? What was he planning? And was he planning to unveil it here, tonight, at the White Orchid Ball?

It was the first time she'd seen him in the flesh, and his impact exceeded his carefully posed publicity shots. Lois judged him to be just under six feet tall and around a hundred seventy pounds, although if his shoulders were real and not just jacket padding he might be as much as fifteen pounds heavier. His curly brown hair was perfectly brushed and sprayed for maximum effect. Most of the women he spoke to on his way down the stairs smiled wider than necessary for mere politeness, and she was sure that at least one of them barely stifled a giggle.

The man didn't look in her direction until she called out, "Lex Luthor!" His reaction was further dramatized by the flash of lightning which cast his face in momentary highlights which reminded Lois of old silent horror movies.

Luthor stopped in mid-sentence and turned to look at her. She knew she looked good with her hair up, and it matched her gown for elegance. Still, his gaze seemed to assess her net worth in two seconds and only then look at her as a woman.

"Lois Lane, Daily Planet." She knew it sounded like a challenge, but she felt that this man would respond better to that approach than to something feminine and seductive. "Why haven't you returned my phone calls?"

A slick smile appeared on his face as he glided closer and took her hand. "I assure you, Ms. Lane, I will not make that mistake again."

His kiss felt cold on her knuckles, but she didn't know if his lips were chilled or her hands were too cool to feel his touch. The White Orchid Ball was no place to conduct an interview, but maybe — just maybe — she could parlay this greeting into a one-on-one with him.

As long as it didn't kill her, that is.

Luthor took her in his arms as the orchestra — a full twenty-piece orchestra, mind you, not just a string quartet or a jazz trio — began playing something for the slow dancers in the crowd. As he turned her around with his first step, she looked over his shoulder and saw her partner standing next to Jimmy across the crowded room — but he looked as if he were almost seven feet tall! Two turns later, she looked across the room again, but this time Kent appeared at his normal height.

Was he jumping up to keep track of her? Or had he been standing on something she couldn't see for the moment?

She pushed Kent out of her mind. It didn't matter. The interview with Luthor was the most important thing at the moment, the only thing that mattered. It was time to strike.

"I hope you'll forgive me for being so bold — "

"But boldness is a trait I find very attractive in a woman, Ms. Lane."

She smiled what she hoped was a flattered smile and chuckled. "Well — thank you. Anyway, Mr. Luthor, I — "

"Lex," he corrected her as he lifted her arm for a quick turn.

"Lex," she smiled back.

The thought slipped into her mind that despite his handsome appearance and refined manner, he wasn't as good-looking as Claude had been.

And not as good-looking as her new partner, either.

Stunned, she almost stopped in place for a moment, then smoothly resumed their dance. Where had that crazy thought come from? And why was she comparing Lex Luthor to Clark Kent? What did Kent have that Luthor didn't have in spades?

Integrity and honesty, she answered herself.

She shoved that thought as far away as she could. She didn't know anything personal about Lex — as he'd invited her to call him — and she didn't know enough about Clark to make that call about him. After all, they'd only known each other for a couple of days.

She saw his lips move but didn't hear the words. She shook herself out of her momentary funk and said, "I apologize. I was — woolgathering."

He frowned in what she took to be mock annoyance. "I hadn't thought that I was so uninteresting, especially to a reporter."

"No! No, not at all, I assure you. I was just — just thinking about my husband — my late husband. You remind me of him — a little."

It wasn't a complete lie, she told herself. He doesn't have to know how poorly he came out in that comparison.

Luthor stopped for a moment and stepped back slightly. "I apologize if I've caused you any discomfort. Please forgive me."

He seemed so sincere that she almost reevaluated her impression of him. But then the real reason she was here popped back into her mind. "There's nothing to forgive. You couldn't have done it on purpose."

"Still, if my presence makes you uncomfortable — "

It did, but she couldn't tell him that. "No, please! Let's continue. The dance, I mean."

He nodded suavely and pulled her back into his

embrace. Give him points for boldness, she mused.

Time to get down to brass tacks. “I know you’re hesitant to give interviews — ”

“Well, you can understand a man in my position. I wouldn’t want to be — misinterpreted.”

There was no way to misinterpret the leer in his eyes and his forward lean against her chest. It was almost as if he were trying to hypnotize her.

He let her slip back a few inches, to a distance where she could breathe without rubbing against him. “I have had one or two bad experiences with the media,” he continued.

She smiled confidently. “But not with me.”

He leaned closer and spoke almost seductively. “So why don’t we make it — “ here the lightning cooperated with a bright flash which lit up the room, and the accompanying crash of thunder made her listen closer for his next word as he caressed her cheek with his own “ — dinner?”

Bad idea, Lois! screamed her personal red alert siren. Bad idea! Don’t get sucked in!

Before she could respond, an unassuming tenor voice overrode the sound of the orchestra. “Mind if I cut in?”

She took a deep breath. “Um — Lex, this is Clark Kent. Clark works at the Planet. With me. In — in the newsroom.”

Wow, she thought, that didn’t sound too junior high school, did it?

Lex quickly shook Clark’s hand and took hers again. His adoring gaze was for her alone. “Later.”

And he walked away.

Lois took a deep breath as Clark put his arms around her and resumed the dance, but without trying to pull her inside his cummerbund. “I don’t know whether to thank you or slug you, Clark.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “I was kind of hoping for the former.”

She pursed her lips. “Okay, thanks for the rescue, but it took me a year to get this close to that man.”

He tugged her to him as Luthor had done and gave her a hooded, almost smoky look. “What, this close?”

Too close. She was too close to him. Her position reminded her of when she’d danced with Claude and how much she’d enjoyed it. But she found, to her surprise, that dancing with Clark wasn’t the hardship she thought it would be.

Clark didn’t feel like Claude, but he didn’t feel like Luthor, either. Lex had felt hard and almost unyielding. Clark’s body was firm too, but there was a gentleness in his embrace that the other man lacked, that he couldn’t have bought if he’d liquidated his entire fortune. Lex had tried to bend her the way he wanted her to go, but Clark simply molded himself to fit against her. He was willing to accommodate her, not force her to accommodate him.

It felt — good.

But she didn’t need to be this close to him, not now. She pulled back a little and smiled. “I would have thought that square dancing was more your style.”

“Actually, I learned from a Nigerian princess who’d studied ballroom dancing in England.”

Now that sounded like a snow job. “Really?”

He held her gaze and softly responded, “Really.”

Still too close. She was having trouble focusing on the story. “She did a good job with you.” She gave him a ‘come along’ motion with her eyes and turned away.

“Lois, where are you going?”

She knew he’d follow her. Somehow she knew that he’d

do just about anything she asked him to do. He was just that nice a guy.

Too nice for what she was about to do.

The door had to be Luthor’s private office. And if he’d left anything in plain sight — or maybe not quite in plain sight — which would help her identify the real Lex Luthor, she’d find it.

“Lois! What are you doing?”

She ignored Clark’s agitated whisper and began scanning the huge desk in front of the French doors leading to the balcony. “I’m being a reporter. You should try it some time.”

She scooted across the office — my apartment isn’t much bigger than this one room, she admitted to herself — and closed the double doors leading to a hallway designed to accommodate a Roman chariot. Whoever this guy really was, he didn’t hide his light under a bushel.

“Lois, you can’t — you shouldn’t — ”

Poor Clark. Being a nice guy from the breadbasket of America, he couldn’t know how a real reporter worked. Instead of answering, she opened a second set of double doors — correction, she thought, my apartment would fit in here very nicely with lots of closet space — and slipped into the adjoining room. He leaned in behind her and drew a breath as if to protest once again, but she forestalled him. “Just look around! See if you find anything suspicious.”

She gave the second room a quick scan. Nuts. There didn’t seem to be anything in this room either, and her “looking for the ladies’ room” excuse wouldn’t buy them much more time. She was about to reenter the front room when she heard Clark calmly say, “Macedonian,” as if he were describing a shoelace.

Then Lex said, “Belonged to Alexander the Great.” His voice was tight and intense.

Oh, great, she thought, they’re going to have some kind of peeing contest in there. What a time for Kent to open up his testosterone valve!

She peeked into the room and saw Lex holding a short sword close to Clark’s throat. She didn’t dare just burst in — one or both of them could get badly hurt if she were to startle them.

Her breath stalled in her lungs as Lex allowed the sword to drift away from Clark. He said, “A brilliant tactician.” He backed up and moved toward the center of the room. “Alexander’s strategy was simple — always seize the high ground.”

The tableau held for a few seconds or hours, she wasn’t sure which, then Lex relaxed, smiled, reversed the sword, and offered it to Clark. “It was with this sword that he defeated — ”

“Darius the Third,” Clark interrupted as he lifted the sword to examine it, “and was proclaimed king of Asia.”

Lex stiffened again, then said, “You surprise me, Mr. Kent. I’m not often surprised.”

It was time to break up the contest before they decided to reenact Alexander’s final battle with Darius. With her best sheepish smile plastered in place and the lightning dancing around the building again, she stepped into the room and said, “I hope you don’t mind us poking around. You have a beautiful home, Lex.”

What the hey, he’d tried to flatter her, so returning the favor felt appropriate to her. It seemed to defuse the situation when she inhaled and lifted her chest slightly, then gazed adoringly into his eyes. Clark took the opportunity to

replace the sword in its mounting.

Lex relaxed and gestured toward the balcony. “Have you seen the view from here?”

She led the two men — two men who, she sensed, would never be more than icily polite to each other — onto the balcony. Shielded from the downpour by the small roof, they stood looking out over the inundated cityscape.

“The tallest building in Metropolis,” bragged the owner. Lex moved in front of her and pointed down at the buildings below. “I must confess,” he gloated, “that I love the fact that everyone in the city has to look up in order to see me.”

Lois wasn’t impressed by his boast, and judging by the lack of response from her partner, neither was Clark. Thwarted, Lex said, “Well, let’s get back to the party. I think you’ll find that my announcement will interest you.”

Lois was silent as she drove me back to my crappy hotel. Luthor’s announcement about his space station project was indeed a stunner, but it was in keeping with what I’d already known about him and what I’d learned that night. When he’d pointed that sword at me, I wasn’t sure whether or not he’d try to impale me with it, and that wouldn’t have done either of us any good.

Would’ve ruined a valuable antique sword, too.

His boast about having the entire city look up to him bothered me, so much so that I finally asked Lois about it.

“Yeah,” she said, “it bugs me too. I’m not comfortable with one man having that much power and influence over Metropolis, much less Earth’s entire space program.” She shifted in the driver’s seat and flexed her fingers on the wheel. “He’s the third richest man in the world, yet he’s not content.”

She pulled over to the curb in front of my hotel and stopped. “I’ve met a couple of people like him on my travels,” I said. “One of them was a warlord in a small Third World country and the other was a Chinese politician. They were both extremely dangerous.”

“What happened to them?”

I sighed. “As far as I know, the warlord is still grabbing for power and land and people, still fighting against other warlords in his area and against his nation’s legitimate government. The politician was arrested for corruption and executed by the Chinese government about three months after I met him.”

“Typical Communist efficiency. They hate to look weak or indecisive.”

“That description would probably fit our host tonight as well.”

She nodded and looked at the dashboard clock. “It’s pretty late, but I’d like to get started on what little we have on the Messenger story tomorrow morning. Be in the office by nine, and be ready to work hard.”

“Will do. Thanks for the lift.”

I opened the door — the rain had finally eased off — and leaned out, but Lois put her hand on my arm and stopped me. “Clark? I just — thank you for being there with me tonight.”

I smiled. “You’re welcome. I don’t know how much help I was, though.”

She smiled back, and I thought the moon had broken through the clouds. “More than you know, I think. Anyway, I’ll see you at nine in the morning. Oh, bring in something for breakfast, will you? Bagels and cream cheese and some Starways coffee.”

“Will do. Any specific flavors of anything you’ve requested?”

Her smile twisted into real amusement. “Surprise me.”

I nodded and got out. She pulled away as soon as I shut the door, and I never thought to ask her how much she’d be contributing to our make-do breakfast.

Or was this part of the rookie hazing?

It didn’t matter. I’d figure out a way to surprise her.

They went over the limited information they had on the Messenger disaster four times before Lois threw up her hands and called a halt. “That’s all I have right now, Clark, I just can’t look at this stuff again! And it’s not even lunchtime yet!”

Clark sighed. “Okay, then, let’s take a break. Better yet, why don’t we take a swing at something else? Maybe if we go away from this for a while it’ll gel in our minds.”

She frowned at him. She didn’t want to stop working on it, but it was obvious that they were at a dead end. They needed more information, something new, something to kick-start the old reporting engine.

Just then the phone rang. “Lois Lane, Daily Planet.”

“Ms. Lane? This is Samuel Platt. My report is ready for you. Just send someone down to my place to pick it up.”

“Thank you, Dr. Platt. Shall I send a pizza along too?”

Platt laughed. “That’s okay, Ms. Lane. I still have some left from the last one. Besides, I have to watch my girlish figure.”

She chuckled in response. “In that case, we’ll see you again very soon. Bye.” She put down the phone and turned to Clark. “That was Platt. He’s got the full report ready.”

“Good. Shall we repair to milady’s chariot and sally forth?”

She gave him a wry frown. “We’ll either send someone or go ourselves. First I need to meet Jimmy.”

“Jimmy? Why?”

Lois stood and pulled on her overcoat. “I sent him back to watch the truck with Messenger wreckage inside. If they did anything funny with it, I wanted to know.”

“Where’s he meeting you?”

She glanced at her watch. “Whoops! He should be waiting for me on the far corner of Spenser Drive and Hawk Avenue, across from the fire station, unless he got hung up somewhere. Come on.”

They rode the elevator down together. “Oh, Clark, I didn’t tell you earlier how good those bagels were. I like that raspberry cream cheese. Where’d you find it?”

He blinked as if he’d been caught with his hand in a cookie jar. “Oh, uh, it was some little deli not far from here. I ran in and out so fast I didn’t even look at the name of it.”

“Well, I hope you can find it again.” The elevator car dinged and the doors slid open to carry them to the ground floor. They strode down the street together scanning for the young Mr. Olsen, but Lois spotted him first. “Oh, good, there’s Jimmy.”

Jimmy didn’t wait for them to come to him. “Oh, man, Lois, am I glad to see you! Dr. Baines had the wreckage loaded in that truck but you know that but you don’t know that they moved the truck to a hangar about half a mile west and somebody saw me and yelled at me and ran after me but I got away and I’ve been watching for someone tailing me but I don’t think they followed me here and —”

Lois grabbed his arm and pulled down. “Jimmy! Stop and take a breath, okay? We don’t want you to pass out.”

Jimmy took her advice literally and inhaled deeply

before letting it out slowly. “Thanks. I was getting dizzy. Anyway, there wasn’t anyone else around from any media outlet, and the move wasn’t on the daily press release, so I think they’re trying to hide something from us.”

Lois nodded. “I think you’re right. Jimmy, you go get that report from Platt. And take a copy of it over to your buddies in Star Labs. I think we’re going to need their help decoding it.” She turned to her partner as Jimmy vanished on his errands. “Clark, let’s go back to the office. I need to check on a few things before we go back out to EPRAD and confront the lovely and talented Dr. Antoinette Baines.”

“Sounds like a plan to — what’s that over there?”

She snapped up her gaze in time to see a jet of steam erupt from an open manhole which was surrounded by warning signs. Something had certainly happened — the steam jet also tossed up small rocks and clods of dirt and a few small chunks of asphalt. Someone shouted, “Hey! There’s a man down there! The sewer tunnel collapsed and he’s trapped! Help! We need help!”

She ran forward and elbowed her way to a good view of the manhole, ignoring the protests of the people she shoved aside. Suddenly a man’s sagging head appeared, followed by his chest — held up by a pair of strong hands under the man’s armpits — and the other workers grabbed him and dragged him the rest of the way up.

Who had rescued him? Was there another man down in the sewer? If so, he didn’t appear in the manhole. Was there a danger of another collapse? She needed to ask some questions.

The man who’d been rescued coughed several times, then looked up at her, pointed, and called out, “That — that man! He pulled me out! That man — cough-cough — that man saved me! He — he pulled me out!” Then he leaned back and seemed to pass out.

Standing beside her, Clark lifted one arm and said, “He’s delirious!”

“Obviously,” she agreed. Then she looked at his clothing. “Clark! What happened to you? You’re a mess! Did you throw yourself under a garbage truck or what?”

He turned back to her and gave her that caught-in-the-act face again. “Well — I — I — ”

“Never mind! We’re busy. But from now on, do what I do, bring a change of clothes to work.”

I knew my dad would have been mad. He would have cautioned me to be careful, to keep my ‘special abilities’ a secret, to keep myself from being caught and dissected like a frog. The refrain was permanently embedded in my brain, I’d heard it so many times.

I wished I could hear him say it to me just once more. But that wasn’t possible.

As I followed Lois onto the newsroom floor, I was distracted by someone purring in my direction. “Good morning, handsome.”

I turned to see Cat Grant slinking seductively toward me. “Oh, hi, Cat. If you’ll excuse me — ”

She grabbed my lapel and stopped me. “No, I don’t think I will excuse you,” she said with a pouty smile. “I’ve asked you to have dinner with me two times. And that’s two times more than I’ve ever had to ask any man to do — anything.”

The last thing I wanted at that moment was any kind of idea of what Cat might be willing to ask any man to do for her. “I’m sorry — I’ve been really swamped, what with this Messenger thing that Lois and I are working on — ”

I tried to turn away but she snagged my tie to hold me in place. At that moment she resembled a cougar with its next meal almost under its claws. “Poor Lois,” she said. “All work and — well, she hasn’t had much fun lately.”

She started straightening my tie, even though it didn’t need it. At least, it hadn’t until she’d grabbed it. “Um — yeah. If I could take a rain check on that dinner?”

She leaned her head to one side and gave me one of the best smoky looks I’ve ever seen outside a Bogie and Bacall movie. “Sure. But — ” she leaned in and tapped my nose, then whispered, “don’t wait too long.”

It was time to escape. I smiled and said, “Okay,” and then backed away as she let my tie slip through her fingers. Then I turned and walked toward the conference room as quickly as my rookie dignity would allow.

I couldn’t help but hear her say, “Oomph! I love it when they play hard to get.”

Oh, great, now I had the Planet’s resident man-eater after me. And since she and Lois seemed to be friends, I wondered how that would affect our partnership.

Nothing like a little pressure to make the day more interesting.

Chapter Four

As Clark opened the conference room door, Lois decided to give him a little verbal goose. “Catnapping?” she asked.

He paused for a moment, then shut the door. Not quite the reaction she was hoping for, although she admitted to herself that she wasn’t sure what reaction she wanted to see. “No, actually,” he drawled. “But I would like to ask you a personal question. If that’s okay with you, of course.”

She frowned at him for a moment, then nodded. “Sure. As long as you understand that I’m not required to answer it.”

“Fair enough.” He shed his still-dusty coat and sat down beside the table. “I’d like to ask you about your relationship with Cat Grant. You and she seem like good friends, and I don’t want to seem like I’m getting between the two of you.”

“Oh.” He’s attracted to Cat, she thought with a surprising pang. Of course, who wouldn’t be? She’s young, talented, attractive — make that hot as a bottle rocket — and she’s all but tackling him in the newsroom. On top of that, she was the best gossip columnist in the state for a reason. And there were dozens of rich and powerful and influential men who’d all but drop to their knees panting for a momentary smile from her, hoping for an hour in bed with her.

But Lois couldn’t say anything bad about Cat Grant, not after everything she’d done, not after she’d been the best friend Lois had had since junior high. Besides, Clark deserved to know just how fine a woman he was interested in.

“When my husband — Claude — left for the Congo before he — on his last trip, Cat took me out for a good time to get my mind off his not being here. We had a great time together and she kind of took it upon herself to keep me from missing him too much. And we got to know each other pretty well.” Lois grinned at a memory. “She took me on my first trip to Chippendales.”

Clark almost suppressed a snort of laughter. “You? Around all those men with their — their — ”

“I think the phrase you’re looking for is ‘well-toned hard bodies?’”

“More like ‘yards of skin glistening under the lights.’”

They chuckled together, then Lois picked up her pencil and played with it for a moment before continuing. “Then when the police — when they came to the office to — they came right here to the newsroom — to tell me — to tell me that —”

She fought back the tears and took a deep breath. “Cat took me home with her and put me to bed at her place. She fed me soup and talked to me and held me when I cried and she helped me get dressed for the — for Claude’s memorial service and she — she just about saved my life. And she’s one of the best people I know.”

She squeezed Clark’s hand, then realized that she hadn’t noticed when he’d put his hand on hers. The contact was surprisingly comforting. “Anyway — she’s honest and hard-working and she’ll go to the utmost for you if she thinks you’re worth it.”

“Thank you.” He paused, then asked, “So, basically she’s harmless?”

Lois laughed out loud and wiped her eyes with the fingertips of her free hand. “Oh, no! I never said she was harmless. If you go out with her, you’ll find out that she’s high maintenance and she loves to party. And if she sets her sights on a man, she gets him. I’ve never known anyone to turn her down. In fact, she usually has to sift through her party invitations for the best escort anywhere. She’s quite the social butterfly and she’s always in demand.”

He nodded and released her other hand. She was surprised again, this time to find that she missed his touch. “Thank you. That’s good to know.”

She sniffed and shifted in her chair. “Yeah. Hey, we need to get back to work here.” She picked up a list of names and phone numbers. “I must have called fifty former EPRAD employees who knew or worked with Platt, and I can’t get any of them to give me the time of day. It sounds like a cover-up of some kind to me.”

Clark nodded. “They won’t say anything, either good or bad about him?”

“Not a word. I say the name ‘Platt’ and they close up like a maximum security cell. They’re not talking.” She leaned back in her chair and took a big sip of coffee from her favorite mug, the one with ‘The Best Man For The Job Is A Woman’ stenciled around the front. “Maybe there’s nothing to talk about.”

“But you don’t think that’s true, do you?”

Lois frowned and rubbed her face. “No, I don’t, but we can’t make a story out of what I believe. Perry’s going to demand hard facts and reliable sources.”

“So — what do we do now?”

“Well, first we try to make sense of Platt’s report, assuming that what he gives Jimmy is in any way coherent. Then we try to prove that Baines actually got a copy of the report, then we try to find any written evidence that Platt found cooling devices and Baines ignored it — “She broke off with a sigh. “I hope you didn’t make any dinner plans for tonight.”

He folded his arms on the divider and gave her a smooth and criminally sexy smile. “I am all yours, Lois.”

They’d been at it since Jimmy had returned with a shoebox full of Platt’s scribbles three hours earlier. Lois had all but ordered him to stay, but Jimmy had pleaded the need to take copies of everything he had to Star Labs and a desperate need for sleep. The two reporters tackled the mess with determination but little confidence. Lois knew that she

didn’t have the science background to make sense of the mass of confusion in front of them, but she hoped Clark could bring some order from the chaos Jimmy had delivered.

But it was too much for either of them. Lois threw the handful of sticky notes, page fragments, pieces of cardboard, and crumpled napkins on her desk. “This is crazy! Nothing matches, nothing’s dated, there’s no index, no table of contents, nothing! If I had turned in something like this for my master’s thesis, my professor would have giggled maniacally and set fire to it.” She stretched her arms forward to loosen some of the tension in her back. “We’ll never make sense of this.”

“Too bad Platt didn’t number them in some way,” Clark supplied.

“I think I just said that, Clark.” She flopped backwards in her chair and put her hands on her stomach. “I’m so hungry I could eat these notes.” She sent a glare toward her new partner for emphasis. “Without ketchup.”

He smiled that megawatt smile and stood. “Let me go get something for us to nosh on. I know a little Chinese place.” He grabbed his jacket and followed his feet to the elevators. “Be back in a few.”

“But you didn’t ask me what I wanted!”

“I’ll bring back an assortment,” he called.

He was gone before she could tell him that he’d better either bring some bring kung pao chicken or not come back.

Great, she mused. Now I’ll have to make do with his idea of Chinese cuisine. And how could he have found a good Chinese place so soon? He couldn’t have been in the city for a week yet.

But he’d done a good job with Platt, she admitted to herself. The scientist had been wound so tight Lois had thought he’d been about to snap like an over-tuned banjo string, yet Clark had calmed him and gotten something close to a coherent tale from him, along with the promise of a copy of his full report.

Of course, that didn’t mean anything at this point. Baines had told them that Platt had been fired for setting fire to one of the labs, that he’d turned to drugs and booze when his family had left him, that he’d torpedoed a brilliant career with his paranoia and wild accusations. That combination would send anyone over the edge.

Her fatigue got to her for a moment and she decided with a sigh that Platt was a nutcase. There wasn’t any story here. They were wasting their time.

Yet something inside her said that yes, there was a story there, but it was still so diaphanous and vague that she couldn’t see its form, couldn’t touch its edges. She could, however, feel it. Maybe Platt was crazy. Maybe the shuttle disaster really was an accident. Maybe Dr. Antoinette Baines was as pure as the driven snow and she was doing her dead level best to keep EPRAD’s space station on track.

And maybe it was a huge story, one which she’d only glimpsed from far above through the fog of confusion thrown up by the conspirators, whoever they were.

If she was right, if this was indeed a huge story, then she’d get it. She’d dig it out and make it sing, never mind the mixed metaphors. And with Clark’s touchy-feely talents to add to her hard-nosed determination and refusal to back away from the truth, they’d force the story to take shape. It would stand up on the page and —

“Here you go.”

Clark’s voice and the round wooden containers being plunked down on her desk startled her out of her half-

reverie. She opened the closest one and inhaled. “That smells great. And it’s still hot!” She picked up an egg roll and bit into it. “Mmm! Wow! That may be the best thing I’ve ever put in my mouth.”

Clark snorted as he sat down beside the desk. She glanced up and saw a half-smile threatening to spread over his entire face. “Go stick your head under a cold water faucet, Kent. That was not an invitation for you to flirt with me.”

He opened another container to reveal the kung pao chicken she’d hoped he’d bring back. “I never considered it for a moment.”

Yeah, right, she thought, but didn’t say it. Then she decided the wonderful food in front of her required her complete and total focus.

Could he actually be as much a Boy Scout as he appeared? Was anybody that nice?

She’d never met anyone that nice before. But maybe — just maybe — she finally had.

They leaned back in their chairs at the same time. Lois released a contented sigh, then covered a burp with her hand. “Sorry. But that really was terrific. You’ll have to show me where this place is. The only writing on the containers is Chinese, and I don’t read pictographs.”

“They aren’t called pictographs,” he said with a smile. “A better term would be sinograph, the prefix ‘sino-’ meaning from China and — ”

“Fine! Thank you, Mr. Experienced World Traveler! I still can’t read them and I still don’t know where this place is and I still want you to show me.”

He hesitated for a moment, then said, “Sure, I’ll show it to you. When we’re both ready.”

When we’re both ready? Could that comment have been any more cryptic?

She dismissed it from her mind and cracked open her fortune cookie. “Oh, good, this is written in Chinese, too.”

He took it from her fingers and examined it. “Oh, no, don’t tell me you that you read — ”

“A good horse is like a member of the family,” he quoted.

He handed the slip of paper back to her. “I hate that,” she said. “That is not a fortune.”

He chuckled at her mild agitation, then locked eyes with her. He’s really trying to get in good with me, thought Lois. And he’s doing pretty well, too.

She had to break the moment. She bit off a piece of her cookie and said, “You really are a strange one, Clark Kent.”

It worked, but only partly. He still held her gaze as he responded, “Am I?”

“Yeah, you are. But I think I’ve got you figured out.”

There was that smile again. “Really?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Didn’t take you very long.”

“Well, it’s my business — looking beyond the external.”

A phone rang in the background. Someone answered and began a conversation. A fax machine hummed from somewhere across the room. Someone else carrying a thick folder trotted from one office to another.

But all Lois could see was Clark’s smiling face swelling in her line of vision. He was young and handsome and strong and talented and ambitious and courteous and she didn’t dare let this go on any longer or she might drown in those delicious chocolate eyes.

She forced herself to take a metaphorical step back and said, “Don’t fall for me, farm boy. I don’t have time for it.” It wasn’t easy, but she made herself stand up. “Come on. Let’s go find Platt. Maybe he can help us make some sense of this stuff.” She strode forcefully across the newsroom floor, grateful that Kent couldn’t hear how hard her heart was beating, nor could he see her flushed face. She headed for the ladies’ room and called over her shoulder to him, “I’m making a pit stop now. No way I’m using Platt’s bathroom.”

His chortle followed her until it was cut off by the closing door. The cold water she splashed on her face and some martial arts deep breathing helped her settle down. She had to be on the lookout for moments like that, moments where she’d be vulnerable to his down-home Kansas charm and gentle good looks. She couldn’t afford to be vulnerable. Not now. And especially not to him.

I didn’t listen to her in the bathroom — my mother would have boxed my ears if she’d thought that I’d even consider it — but I could tell that her heart rate had been elevated and her blood pressure had been above normal when she’d stood up. I only wished I could tell if she were reacting to me in a positive sense or if she felt like I was putting pressure on her.

She was beautiful, strong, determined, talented, accomplished, and yet also tender in surprising ways. She missed her husband, of course, which was completely normal. If she hadn’t missed him so much, I doubt that I would have been so attracted to her. But I thought it might be about time for her to come out of the deep grieving stage and be open to another relationship. If she decided to take up with someone like Lex Luthor, though, I didn’t know what I would do. I didn’t know what I could do. All I had on him was my reaction and my first impressions, and while they’d served me well in the past, I couldn’t very well intrude in someone else’s personal life on that basis.

And I couldn’t sit around gazing at her like a star-struck teen, either. That had to stop right now. Yeah, she was very easy to look at, but she didn’t need the aggravation of me being some sappy groupie guy. I couldn’t very well function as her partner if that was the basis of our relationship.

And every time I even considered that it might be nice to be involved with Lois, Rachel’s face would float into my mind. The way that had ended had pretty much burned me out on any kind of romance, no matter how impressive the girl was.

Still — Lois was the first woman I’d met since Rachel who made me think about romance. With my special abilities, I could tell that she was attracted to me on several levels, and I was attracted right back. Would it be right to think about Lois when Rachel’s memory still haunted me? Was it possible for me to let go of the past and let myself care about Lois? Or should we keep our relationship on a strict, professional level?

Personal involvement brought all kinds of risks. I’d be risking my job as a reporter, my future with the Planet, my reputation, and most of all, my heart. And I wasn’t ready for that level of risk. I wasn’t sure I’d ever be ready for that. There was too much potential for pain and suffering for me. Not again.

I made a decision. I was going to be more business-like, less personal, less desperately eager to make her smile — even if her smile would light up all of the Smallville annual

corn festival by itself. She didn't need a clingy skirt-chaser wanna-be boyfriend, she needed a reporter beside her. And I would be that guy for her.

It was the right decision — but somehow I didn't think it was going to be at all easy.

I picked up Platt's notes and stuffed them back into the cardboard box. The box itself had seen better days, just like Platt. I hoped he could help us make sense of them.

I also hoped that the condition of the bedraggled box didn't portend anything about Samuel Platt himself.

This time Lois didn't wait for Clark to lead her into the building. She slid her shoes on the floor as she approached the doorway — which, this time, thankfully, was completely clear of sleeping drunks — to warn the rats that she was coming. She just assumed that they'd get out of her way rather than get squished.

Platt's door was open — odd, given his extreme paranoia. She slowed as she stepped closer and heard an intermittent crackling sound. Something wasn't right.

Suddenly Clark was in front of her, holding the box containing Platt's notes in one hand and the other away from his body as if ready to take on an assailant. He led her through the door, but she slipped past him as soon as he was in the room. She wanted — no, she needed to see what was creating those flashes of light on the ceiling and the far wall.

"Lois, wait, let me go first —"

"Don't be silly, I've seen it all, war, crime, famine, nothing bothers me."

She tried to switch on the overhead light but nothing happened. There was a tattered old easy chair facing the far wall, and a flickering yellow bulb hung over it. A man's feet were visible from the back of the chair, but they appeared to be sitting in a bowl in front of the chair.

"Dr. Platt? Dr. Platt, is that you?"

She stepped forward and the Boy Scout grabbed her upper arm. "Wait, Lois! Please!"

He'd set the box down somewhere. "You're not my bodyguard, Clark. Let me go."

"I think it's dangerous."

She pulled out of his grasp. "I promise I'll be careful."

A wire hung down from one side of the chair. Electric blue arcs skittered up and down the wire as if searching for an escape. Lois and Clark slowly stepped around the chair to see Platt's feet sitting in a bowl of water on the floor. A wire lay in the water where his feet were soaking, and his hands gripping another thick wire with the insulation removed. Electricity snapped and crackled around the water and along the wires.

Platt's eyes were closed and his face seemed to be frozen shut, as if the electricity had caused his facial muscles to spasm all at once. There had been no peace at the moment of his death.

Oh, yeah, she'd seen it all and nothing bothered her. Sure, Lois, she thought, you can look at anything and not be upset. You've seen dead men before, some of them in far worse shape than Platt. Doesn't matter that you'd known this one personally, that you'd felt his pain, that you'd hoped he'd come back from the brink of the abyss and be happy again, that you wanted him to make it back because it meant there might be hope for you. He's dead and now there was no hope for him beyond a well-attended funeral.

She still turned and buried her face in Clark's firm chest and let him hold her shoulders while she controlled her gag

reflex. Some fearless reporter she was.

She turned to look at Platt's face once more. The thing that stuck in her mind was that he'd never get to see his daughter walk again.

It wasn't reasonable. Even if nothing he'd claimed about the space program were true, he had certainly loved his family. Lois knew that as well as she knew her sister Lucy would raid her closet for party clothes before the month was out. It looked like the kind of suicide a scientist would inflict on himself, but it wasn't. Platt may have been a few bricks shy of a load, but he'd never kill himself.

Someone had killed him and tried to make it look like suicide. That could mean only one thing, that Platt had been telling the truth — or at least a large part of the truth — about the Messenger disaster. They'd been close to finding out just what had and what hadn't happened with those ion particles and their role in the shuttle's destruction.

But someone had killed their best lead. Someone had taken the life of a man whose only loves were his family and scientific truth. Someone was trying to keep them from learning what had destroyed EPRAD's shuttle and killed several brave men and women. Someone was trying to keep the truth from her. Someone had just convinced her that there was a huge story just waiting to be uncovered, someone who was willing to kill to keep the public from hearing it.

Someone had just made a huge mistake.

Because now she was truly angry. And when Mad Dog Lane was on the trail, the bad guys always lost.

Chapter Five

I stood back against the wall and watched the police process the scene. Despite the grim circumstances, it was a pleasure to watch Lois work over Detective Inspector Bill Henderson. The two of them obviously had some kind of history, even though Lois was intent on challenging everything Henderson said about Platt's death.

"Suicide? Are you nuts, Henderson? No way!"

The policeman walked around her to look at Platt's body still sitting in the chair. "He's tried it before, Lane. No sign of forced entry, no sign of a struggle, nobody saw anyone come in or out of this dump —"

"But we were on the verge of proving that his theory — that something he was working on was right and there's just no way that —"

An older uniformed officer turned his back on Lois and walked in my direction, saying, "Hey, if the man's gonna barbeque himself he oughta use sauce."

I shouldn't have said anything. I should have stayed in the background. I should have remained an observer, not a participant. But before I could stop myself, I stepped forward and faced the uniformed cop and said, "The man's name was Samuel Platt." I was so mad that I barely kept my fingers from poking through the cop's chest. "He was a brilliant scientist, someone who cared about other people. Under the circumstances, I don't believe that kind of humor is appropriate."

It must have shaken the cop a little. He stuttered an apology and moved around me without touching me.

Lois stepped closer and asked, "You okay?"

I wasn't okay. Platt was dead and I couldn't escape the feeling that we could have — that I could have prevented it somehow. "We should have known. We should have protected him."

"How, Clark? What should we have done different?"

I knew I was upset and not thinking clearly. “I don’t know. But we should have done something.”

She touched my elbow softly, and I was surprised to feel some comfort in her gesture. “Look, I understand how you feel — really, I do — but all we can do now is try to prove him right.” She glanced at her watch. “It’s five-thirty now. Why don’t you try to get some sleep? I’ll come by for you about nine.”

I nodded. “Okay. Nine it is.”

“Do you want me to drop you off?”

She needed sleep more than I did, and going that far out of her way to take me back to my roach trap wouldn’t help her a bit. “No, that’s okay. I’ll get one of these sensitive officers to give me a ride home.”

She smiled and patted my shoulder. “Don’t worry, Clark. We’ll find out who did this and we’ll make sure justice is done.”

I looked into her flashing eyes and believed every word she was saying. I nodded and said, “I’ll see you later.”

The dream came back to haunt me again.

It began the same way every time. The sun was low on the horizon and the town was settling down for a lazy summer evening. I was locking the front door to the Smallville Post when the police car screamed past me and slid to a stop outside the town’s only bank. I pulled down my glasses and looked inside the bank building and saw three very frightened gunmen holding two people hostage. One of them was Maisie Reynolds, the lady who ran the diner just three blocks down from the bank. She’d probably been dropping off her daily cash deposit.

The other hostage was Rachel Harris, the girl to whom I was engaged.

I’d taken Rachel to my senior prom when Lana had backed out at the last minute, and we’d gotten along way better than I’d expected. I even ended up having a good time, so we kept on dating off and on that summer. When we both enrolled at Kansas State, me working on a journalism degree and Rachel on law enforcement, we just got closer and closer.

Sometimes I’d felt guilty because I’d always sensed that she was more serious about me than I was about her, but I never thought that was a real reason for us to stop dating. There wasn’t another girl in town or on campus who I wanted to be with, not after Lana had gotten married before the summer was over, and Rachel had always insisted that she never wanted to date anyone else. Eventually the entire town decided that we were meant for each other, that we’d get married after we graduated, and that we’d both work in Smallville. Rachel would become a sheriff’s deputy and work with her father, and I’d be available to work part-time on my parents’ farm in between the few days I needed to spend at the Smallville Post.

And it seemed to work out just like that. Mike Evans, the Post’s senior editor, decided to retire and hired me to replace him. The county hired Rachel and she aced the state courses and started patrolling with her dad.

Life was — not good, really, just not bad. We spent most of our free time together, and she’d helped me a lot when my father had had his last heart attack in the spring of our junior year. She’d helped Mom put the funeral together and had sat up with both of us and had let both of us cry on her shoulders. And she’d let some of her schoolwork slide so she could help me keep up with my own classes. She’d even asked her dad for a couple of suggestions when Mom

decided to lease out the farm land instead of trying to work it on her own.

She was just such a good person and such an integral part of my life that I couldn’t imagine not having her around. There was a real comfort level in loving Rachel and letting her love me. I finally felt like I was part of the community, that people no longer cared that I’d been adopted, that no one cared that I was supposed to have been an illegitimate child. Rachel loved me no matter where she thought I’d come from.

The dream always skipped all that and went right to the hard part.

Just like it had happened in real life, I turned around and ran as fast as I could without arousing suspicion down the nearby alley to the back door of the bank. I peered in and saw the policeman outside with his pistol drawn, yelling at the gunmen to surrender.

Sometimes the details varied from the way it actually went down. This time, I silently opened the back door and slipped inside, making sure no one saw or heard me. I worked my way toward the front of the bank as quietly as I could. I reached out for the legs of the nearest gunman to yank him to the floor and —

And the officer outside the bank opened fire, I never learned why. Maybe he thought the gunman he could see was about to shoot one of the hostages and he didn’t know about the other two. Maybe he just panicked. But ultimately it didn’t matter why it happened, just what happened.

The first gunman fell to the floor without a sound, I swept the feet out from under the man in front of me and knocked him out, and the third man pulled the trigger on his AK-47 and sprayed the lobby with bullets. He was scared and hopped up on PCP and he was a lousy shot. Out of a thirty-round magazine, only two rounds hit any target.

Those two bullets hit Rachel, one in her back and the other in her right lower leg. The doctors saved her life, but her permanent injuries ensured that she would never be able to be a police officer again. Her lifelong dream was gone in a second.

I visited her in the hospital and at home, but it was never the same between us. She pulled away from me both physically and emotionally, and we drifted apart despite my best efforts to keep us together. She insisted that it was her fault, not mine, that we’d never be together. She told me that I’d be famous one day, that I’d accomplish great things, and she refused to let me chain myself to a crippled wife who’d just hold me back. And that it wasn’t my fault that we couldn’t be together, nor was it my fault that she wasn’t a whole woman any more.

But it was my fault. And I knew it, even if she didn’t. If I’d used my powers openly, I could have disarmed and captured all three gunmen in less than a second. No one would have gotten hurt. My father’s mantra not to reveal my special talents and be dissected like a frog in a lab rang hollow, like a brass bell in a huge cathedral which had never known a human presence. It should have ended differently, no matter what secrets I might have revealed. Rachel’s injuries were my responsibility, my fault, and I’d left town and run all over the world trying to outdistance my guilt and shame.

But I couldn’t outrun the dream no matter how far I went or how often I moved. I’d called my mother at least twice every week since then, and I’d flown back to the farm several times for the occasional dinner and several short visits, but I’d never spent the night and I’d never gone into

town. I'd never returned to the scene of my greatest failure.

I just couldn't face the people I'd failed.

I woke up in a cold sweat and fell from the ceiling to the floor. As I sat there trying to slow down my breathing, I decided I needed to call my mom. We hadn't spoken for a few days and I needed to hear her voice. I just hoped she wasn't already in her studio, working on yet another piece for her upcoming Metropolis show. I needed for her to tell me once more that I really wasn't guilty of Rachel's disability. She always managed to talk me down from the ledge.

I took a deep breath and decided to call her just as soon as I took a shower. I didn't perspire often, but when I did, for some reason I smelled just plain awful.

Later that morning, as Lois drove toward Clark's hotel, she thought about her new partner and the surprising compassion he'd displayed at Platt's death. He'd tried to protect her from both the danger and the sight of the dead man. Then he'd gone all Mother Teresa on the cop who'd made the crack about the barbeque sauce. To top it all off, he'd blamed himself for Platt's death, even though Lois knew that there really hadn't been anything else they could have done. The only other course of action open to them would have been to take Platt into what would have amounted to protective custody, and it was unlikely that he would have agreed to that, especially given his state of mind.

No, Platt's murder — she ignored Bill Henderson's idiotic determination of suicide, this was murder and she was determined to prove it — wasn't Clark's fault. But his sense of responsibility was endearing. He hadn't been putting on a show for her or for anyone else. If he'd been the only person there, he would have felt the same way about the situation. She had to help Clark see that it wasn't his fault.

Maybe it would help if she really believed it wasn't her fault either.

Never mind. She had to put it behind her. Remember the three rules and don't get involved with your stories. Be objective, be above the fray. It was important business, but ultimately it was just business.

Yeah, right. That little speech didn't work any better this time than it had at any other time.

She rolled to a stop in front of the hotel. Clark really needed a better place to live, she thought, and maybe when this EPRAD story was put to be she could help him find one. This hotel would have to be completely renovated to qualify as a dump.

She found his room without falling through the floor or stepping in anything that smelled too bad. Her watch read two minutes after nine. Farm boy had better be ready to go.

She heard him talking after she knocked on the door, and then it sounded like he hung up a pay phone. Pay phones in the rooms? Unbelievable. He really had to find a better place.

The door swung open and she saw the most beautiful sight she'd seen in — in probably forever. Adonis, wearing glasses and a towel around his waist, stood in the doorway, barefoot and dripping water. His chiseled shoulders and arms and rock-hard abs slapped her into breathlessness.

Then she looked at the vision's face. Clark. It was Clark Kent standing —

Clark Kent looked like that?

There were professional bodybuilders who couldn't

hold a candle to Clark. There were professional athletes who'd kill to have a body that looked like his. For that matter, there were actresses who'd kill to be seen in public with a man who looked like that.

And she was standing right in front of him. Speechless. Running out of oxygen.

Idiot! she berated herself. Say something! Preferably before you faint!

"I said nine I thought you'd be naked — errrrmhhh, ready!"

Oh, that was just brilliant, she thought. Make him think you're really an oversexed airhead with nymphomaniac tendencies!

A smile flickered on his face and then vanished. "I was on the phone with my mother," he explained. "I'll be ready in a jiffy."

He walked to the bathroom and gave her a good look at his sculpted back as it dipped in a perfect V-shape toward his waist and — and whatever was underneath that stupid towel.

The bathroom door closed behind him and Lois took off her jacket. For some reason the room seemed overly warm. Maybe he should talk to the manager about the heating problem. As if it would do any good in this vertical landfill.

Water. She needed a drink of cool water. That would take care of her rising temperature.

She shut the front door behind her and opened a cabinet to look for a glass — what decent place has the kitchen stuff in the front room? — and found shelves crammed full of junk food.

Chocolate bars. Twinkies — weren't they supposed to last longer than any other food except honey, able to survive a nuclear war? Ho-Hos. Cookies of all shapes and kinds. Two jars of peanut butter, one crunchy and one creamy. Several varieties of chips, none of them the marginally healthy kind.

It was a fantasy snack cabinet for any kid. What was up with Clark, anyway?

She shook her head and closed the cabinet, then found a glass on the counter that didn't look too dirty. She opened the refrigerator to look for something cold to drink.

It was crammed with soft drinks and more junk food. Chocolate milk. Shasta soda, which Lois hadn't seen in Metropolis for years and had never bought because it tasted like battery acid to her. Candy bars. Jars of salsa. Several kinds of chip dip. Packages of store-bought donuts. The only thing marginally healthy on the shelves was a half-empty gallon jug of orange juice.

Surely he didn't eat all that stuff? Or at least not all the time! He couldn't, not if he really looked like every woman's dream date.

She pushed the refrigerator door shut and shook her head. Yet another mystery involving her new partner.

Partner?

Yes. Partner. She realized she no longer thought of him as some doofus from Kansas she had to drag around with her. He didn't know the city that well yet, he hadn't had the chance to develop any sources in the police force or in the shadow world between the honest citizens and the career criminals, but his heart was in the right place and he was steady as a mountain. She trusted him, and her trust wasn't given quickly or easily.

The bathroom door shut and she spun around with a surprised gasp, hoping he was fully dressed while simultaneously hoping he'd forgotten some article of

clothing in the front room and had also forgotten she was there and had dropped his towel —

But his hair was combed and dry. His light brown suit, set off by a sky blue shirt and patterned tie, fit him like a second skin. Even his blocky glasses seemed to suit him. She caught her breath and stared.

He frowned slightly, then glanced down as if checking to make sure his fly was closed, then looked up at her with a quizzical expression. She took a breath and forced out, “Well — we’d better get going.”

They both moved toward the door, but Lois stopped and spun to face him. “So — explain something to me. You eat like an eight-year-old and you look like Mr. Hardbody. What’s your secret? And — can I have it?”

He stared at her as if thunderstruck. He obviously wasn’t going to answer, so she sighed and opened the door, trusting him to follow. It was just as well. The walk to the Jeep gave her a chance to get her breathing under control.

It had been months since she’d reacted to any man in any way, much less the way she’d reacted to the sight of Clark Kent with no shirt on — and wearing little else. She’d have to watch herself around him. It would be too easy to fall into those muscular arms and give herself up to a moment of passion with him.

And it would be a disaster if she did. She was still in love with a dead man, and she wasn’t ready to stop missing him. She wasn’t ready to be a woman by herself again. She didn’t know when she’d be ready for another relationship, or even if she’d ever be ready for another relationship. Claude was gone and she was still here and for a moment she hated him for not being there with her, for not giving her the support she needed, for not putting his arms around her to chase away her fears.

But it wasn’t fair to blame him. Claude hadn’t gone to the Congo to die. He’d been chasing a story, one that they’d worked on together, one on which they’d planned to share the byline when he returned with the information they needed to identify the head of the gun-running organization in New Troy. Lois had built one side of the story, Claude the other side, and all that had been necessary at that point was to go to the smugglers’ destination and find out who was running the show.

They’d argued. Lois had wanted to go, but Claude had finally convinced her that he could maintain a lower profile as a French national than she could as an American tourist. She’d reluctantly agreed that he had a better chance to get the information they’d needed and get out in one piece. His love for her and concern for her safety had swayed her judgment, and he’d gone in her stead.

And he’d never returned.

The memory of their last moments together slammed against her heart like a tsunami and she relived that morning once more.

She woke up early that morning, knowing that Claude was leaving at noon to catch his flight to Africa. Perry had given her the day off, and she was determined to make the most of it.

She came back from the bathroom and slipped into bed with him. As she lay her head on his chest, his long arms wrapped around her shoulders. “Welcome back, cherie,” he grunted. “It is so much a wonderful way to greet the day with such a beautiful woman in my arms.”

She chuckled. “I love the way you tell me, darling. By the way, you don’t speak French, do you?”

They both laughed at the old joke, still funny even after all these months. “Actually, I do have a passing acquaintance with that language.”

She kissed him gently beside his mouth. “In that case, I can expect to hear you speak to me in the most romantic terms ever.”

He rolled toward her and ran his hand down her side. He knew what that touch did to her, especially since she’d told him often enough.

His hand stopped just below the t-shirt she’d just put on. “Cherie,” he murmured in her ear, “you seem to have misplaced a part of your sleeping garment.”

She grinned and slowly shifted his hand a little lower on her bare backside. “Yes,” she breathed back, “I suppose I have. Of course, since you’re such a gentleman, you wouldn’t take advantage of me when I’m in this very exposed condition, would you?”

He pulled her against his body and kissed her until they both nearly passed out. “Yes, my beautiful love,” he panted, “I would indeed take every advantage of it.”

With her last coherent thought, Lois answered, “I was hoping you would.”

They’d lost themselves in each other that morning. When the alarm clock had finally gone off at nine-thirty, Claude had apologized to her repeatedly as he dressed and called for a cab. Lois, in a last-ditch passive-aggressive effort to keep him from leaving, hadn’t gotten dressed. She’d made him coffee and toast and helped him finish packing while wearing only that cotton t-shirt as her top, and even though she’d known she’d been torturing him she hadn’t passed up a single chance to kiss him or caress him or lean against him. Something deep inside her desperately had wanted him to stay. That part of her had been unreasonably terrified that she’d never see him again.

And she hadn’t. And her world had nearly been destroyed.

Just as the world around her now no longer existed. Her personal pain was threatening to push her over the edge of reality. She knew she’d lost her sense of balance and she steeled herself to hit the concrete sidewalk.

But she didn’t fall. Someone was standing in front of her, holding her upright. Someone was talking to her, even though she couldn’t make out the words. Someone was keeping her from pitching over that precipice.

It was Clark. Yes! Clark. She snatched at his upper arms as if lunging for a lifeline in a stormy sea. She plunged her head into his rock-hard chest once again, this time trying to remain in contact with the world around her.

That memory wasn’t supposed to come up during the day. That memory was too private, too personal, too raw and devastating to share with anyone. She’d never told anyone about that last morning, not her mother or her therapist or her best friend.

But somehow she thought she could tell Clark. She needed to tell Clark. She had to tell him something. She had to explain why she’d just dissolved into a puddle of tears in the middle of the sidewalk and all but fainted dead away.

Her breathing slowed and she got her feet under her. Clark’s grip on her arms slackened and she stood by herself, with only one hand on his arm to maintain her balance.

“Lois?” he asked. “Are you okay now?” She nodded twice. “Should I call someone? Cat, maybe?”

“N-no. I — I’m okay now.” She sniffed and wiped her nose with her hand. “Thank you.”

He nodded and slowly stepped back. “Do you want to tell me what just happened?”

Terror at the thought of actually voicing her agony gripped her and she turned her face away from him. She’d just told herself that she should tell him something, and now she was balking. It wasn’t right. They were partners. He needed to know, at least the bare bones of it.

“Lois, give me your keys.”

That got her attention. “Excuse me?”

“I want your car keys because I’m taking you home. You’re exhausted and you’re all but out on your feet. You need more rest than you’ve gotten the last few days.”

His words enraged and energized her. So he was going to take care of her, was he? Who did this hack from Nowheresville think he was, anyway? Nobody took care of Lois Lane!

Then she deflated. Nobody but her best friend. Or her new partner.

“No,” she said quietly. “I’ll be fine.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“Please, Clark.” Her eyes locked onto his and she willed him to understand. “I just — for some reason I remembered the morning my husband — the last morning I had with Claude. It just hit me out of the blue and — and I guess I didn’t handle it very well.”

He sighed deeply and nodded. “That’s understandable.”

She snorted. “What, that I didn’t handle it well?”

“No. That you’d remember that day with your husband.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Think about it. Samuel Platt was married and they had a daughter. He obviously loved both of them and hated being separated from them. You saw him dead last night. And you haven’t been getting enough sleep lately.” He lifted his hands. “It’s a good bet that all those things triggered that surge of memory.”

“Yeah.” She nodded slowly. “Yeah, that makes sense.” She tried to laugh. “Oh, well, if I were going to get clobbered by any memories of Claude, I’m glad it was that one.”

His face crinkled into a thousand-watt smile. “I’m guessing it was a good memory.”

She returned his smile and felt her face warm. Blushing? Lois Lane was blushing? She’d never live it down!

“Yes,” she admitted. “It was a very good memory.”

He nodded. “Good.” He put a brotherly hand on her shoulder. “You need to hold on to those memories. You should never forget him.”

She took another quick moment to digest his words, then cocked her head to one side. “That’s funny, because I’ve met a few men in the last few months who say they want to make me forget him.”

He shook his head and his smile receded, yet his eyes became even more intense. “Don’t do that. Don’t even try to do it. Even if you decide to let yourself love someone again, you mustn’t let yourself forget Claude. He was a vital and important part of your life. Being with him and loving him has helped make you the person you are today. The time you spent with him is a part of you, and any man who wants you to forget a part of yourself to be with him isn’t the right man for you because he doesn’t care about you the way he should.”

She held his gaze for a long moment, then broke the stare and reached into her purse for her keys. “That’s a very

impressive and heartfelt speech, Mr. Kent. It almost sounds as if you know exactly what you’re talking about.”

He blinked and smiled again as he removed his hand from her shoulder. “Maybe I do.”

She nodded once, then gestured with her keys. “Shall we go to the office now? We do have work to do.”

“Are you sure you’re up to it?”

She suppressed the reflexive urge to snap at him. “Yes, I’m sure. And I know you’re only trying to help, that you’re not trying to run my life or steal my story, so I’m going to let you live.”

His grin turned wry. “That’s very generous of you.”

“This time, I’m letting you live.” She jabbed a finger at his face. “Just don’t let it happen again, Farm Boy. Next time I might not take it so easy on you.”

The twinkle in his eyes told her that he understood. “Got it,” he answered. “And from now on I’ll watch my step.”

As they pulled away from the curb, Lois wondered idly if Clark could read minds. He’d known just how to speak to her and how to react to her. If he’d treated her almost any other way, she would have ripped him a new one and dragged his unconscious body onto the news floor and left it for the cleaning crew.

But he’d handled her perfectly. And, wonder of wonders, she didn’t care that he had handled her. He’d spoken the words she’d needed to hear and had done exactly what he should have done, not too much and not too little.

She kept the smile from her face. The young man had some real potential. But she didn’t want him to get a big head about it.

Chapter Six

Lois was frustrated.

Again.

She leaned toward the speakerphone and tried once more to convince the detective that Platt had been murdered, but he rebuffed her. “Sorry, Lane, but the coroner’s verdict is gonna read ‘suicide’ and there’s nothing either of us can do about it.”

“Come on, Bill! You could gather evidence to indicate that — ”

“We gathered all the evidence at the scene. The contusions on Platt’s head and neck aren’t definitive enough to indicate that he was murdered. They could have been inflicted yesterday or a week ago. And nothing else at the scene or in his background points to his being murdered. This is a suicide. Leave it be.”

She barely restrained herself from punching the phone. “This isn’t over, Henderson! We’ll get you proof that this was murder, and you’ll look like a buffoon!”

Henderson chuckled wearily. “Won’t be the first time, Lane. Now if you don’t mind, I have a few other things on my desk just crying out for my attention.”

This time she did slap the ‘off’ button as she stood. Bill Henderson was a good cop, maybe the most honest cop in Metropolis at his level of authority, but sometimes he lacked imagination. He couldn’t or wouldn’t take that intuitive leap to see what really lay behind the facade thrown up by the criminals he investigated. Still, he was always honest with her and never held back information unless he thought it would compromise his investigation.

She heard her name called, but she was still too angry to respond. Not until Clark touched her elbow and nodded

toward the ramp from the elevators to the newsroom floor did she look up.

She barely restrained herself from snarling, “What?”

Clark blew out a tight breath through his nose. “Over by the elevators. That’s — ”

“I know. That’s Mrs. Platt and her daughter Amy. I recognize them from the pictures in Platt’s apartment.”

As Lois led Clark to meet them, she heard Amy gently complain, “Mom, I was supposed to be at Susan’s by now. We have to go!”

Her mother folded her coat and put it in Amy’s lap. “I know, honey. Just wait over there by the elevator and give me a minute to talk to these folks and we’ll be on our way.”

“Okay, Mom, but don’t take too long. I’m going swimming with her, remember?”

She gently pushed Amy’s wheelchair toward the elevator bank. “I remember, dear. And I promise, I won’t be a minute.”

Amy took over and wheeled herself the rest of the way as her mother turned to face the two reporters. “I — I haven’t told her yet. I don’t — she didn’t understand why her father had to be away from us, so I don’t know — there’s no telling how she’ll react.”

Lois searched for some words of comfort, something she could say to help, but her mind remained blank. The only thing she could do was to reach out and touch the other woman’s arm and mutter, “Mrs. Platt, I’m so sorry.”

Mrs. Platt blinked back a tear and smiled. “Thank you. Please call me Melody.”

“Of course, Melody. I’m Lois Lane and this is my partner, Clark Kent.”

She felt Clark step up beside her as Melody Platt took a deep breath to collect herself. “You see, everything we worked for was for Amy. The space lab on Prometheus was the only hope, and now — ”

Lois interrupted with a question. “Mrs. Platt — I’m sorry, Melody — when you and Amy left your husband — ”

Her soft blue eyes were suddenly liquid granite. “No. We did not leave him. We never left him. He made us leave. He was sure that they were going to come after him. He was afraid that Amy and I would get hurt, so he — he sent us away.”

Lois blinked. This was a new piece of information, one that changed the dynamic of Platt’s life and cast more doubt on the coroner’s verdict of suicide. “Do you have any idea who might have — ”

Forcefully, Melody Platt broke into Lois’ question. “All I know is that Samuel knew that Prometheus was being sabotaged. And that knowledge got him killed.” She leaned closer to Lois and softened her voice. “Please help me. Don’t let his daughter grow up believing her father committed suicide.”

“We’ll try,” Clark assured her. “We promise.”

Lois nodded in agreement. “That goes for both of us, Melody.”

Melody smiled wearily. “Thank you.” She reached out for Lois’ hand to shake it, then Clark’s. “Thank you both.”

She turned and plodded to the elevators. Somehow she brightened as she neared her daughter, and they were chatting happily about the afternoon swimming session as the doors closed in front of them.

Lois dropped her head down for a moment to quickly wipe her eyes — she noticed that Clark pretended not to notice — then she turned to him and asked, “So, we’re

going to prove that Samuel Platt was murdered?”

Clark nodded slowly. “Yep.”

“Any ideas on how we’re going to do that?”

“Nope. You?”

“Not at the moment. But I don’t believe that this is over. Whoever is responsible for Platt’s death isn’t finished.”

Jimmy’s voice cut across the newsroom. “Hey! Everybody! The Congress of Nations is making an announcement about the space program!”

The volume on the ceiling-mounted TV rose as the conversation level in the room plummeted. “... this special report from the Congress of Nations.”

A middle-aged but firm and confident woman wearing the robes of her native India came on the screen, flanked by several other members of the Congress of Nations. She stepped to the battery of microphones and calmly stated, “I am pleased to announce that we have unanimously decided that the space station Prometheus will proceed.”

A reporter called out, “What about Lex Luthor’s proposal?”

“This body would like to extend our deepest gratitude to Mr. Lex Luthor for his generous offer. But it is our firm belief that the space station should go forward as originally planned, a project dedicated to global cooperation for the advancement of science. The colonists’ launch, scheduled for next week, will depart as planned. The rockets will also carry an auxiliary propulsion module.”

A darker note entered the woman’s voice. “Should any serious problems arise, we would be forced to cancel the mission.” Then she smiled and lifted her head. “We don’t anticipate that happening. We anticipate success.”

Clark looked at Lois at the same time she looked at him. “So?” he drawled.

“So the space program goes forward. And if there’s a serious problem, we’ll be ready for it.”

A confident expression stole across his face. “And we’ll get to the truth.”

She felt her eyes focus on his. “You’ve got it, partner.”

Jimmy turned down the TV volume and gestured to Lois. “Conference room,” he mouthed.

She nodded. “Come on, Clark, Jimmy’s got something.”

Jimmy waited until they followed him into the room, then he closed the door. “So I gave Star Labs the copy of Dr. Platt’s report, and they recreated the launch on this big hologram. It was really smooth. Anyway, they concluded that Platt’s theory was right on, that it was deliberate sabotage, and that the transport explosion was no accident.” He hesitated a moment, then smiled and said, “Congrats!”

Lois leaped up in celebration and tried to punch Jimmy in the shoulder, but he leaned back and she missed. But she didn’t care, because they’d been right! She’d been right!

She turned to Clark and said, “We were right! Platt was right!”

Jimmy left on some other errand as Clark responded, “Yes! Now we can write the story.”

“No, now I can write the story.”

“With my help!”

“Yes, with your help, and now we can convince people that there was sabotage and if we can convince them who was behind it — ”

“We can stop them!”

“Oh, Clark, this is great!” she squealed. Without thinking about it, she reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck.

His arms slid around her waist and held her close, and it

wasn't long before she felt both of them shift from coworker-celebration-hug mode to man-woman-hug mode. She squeezed her eyes shut and held on for just one second more, then put her hands on his shoulders and pushed back.

He let her slide away, but she was sure he didn't want to let her go — not that she was sure that she wanted him to let go. His eyes found hers again and they locked together. All she could see was those big brown orbs threatening to suck her into the whirlpool of his soul.

For the briefest moment, she desperately wanted to give herself up to that whirl of passion.

But she couldn't. She wouldn't. That would be a disastrous event, right up there with the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and Vesuvius erupting all over Pompeii in 79 and the time Lucy spilled nail polish on Lois' favorite skirt when she was about to sneak out for a date she wasn't supposed to go on.

Lois blinked and turned her head away, hoping to escape for the moment. Then he said, "Why don't we have dinner?"

"Yes!" came to her mind, but instead she almost whispered, "Oh — I don't know —"

"To — to celebrate. We should celebrate this victory."

A victory dinner? Which, of course, would include Jimmy, given his important contributions to the story. "Well — sure, yeah, we can do that. A celebration dinner."

He smiled and her heart nearly melted. Those perfect, brilliant teeth all but cried out for her to try to adhere her lips to them, assuming she could work her way into his mouth. She wondered for a wild moment if her schedule were clear enough to just break out and give herself to the moment and —

No! The Luthor interview was tonight! And he was too close, way too close. The pain and loss she'd felt emanating from Melody Platt still resonated in her psyche and she couldn't risk getting hurt. Not now, not yet. "Wait! What am I talking about? I can't! I — I have plans for tonight. I'm — I'm sorry."

His smile faded and the world grew darker. "Luthor?"

It sounded like a challenge, and Mad Dog Lane never shrank from a challenge. Besides, Kent didn't own her! She was her own woman, and she'd been reporting hard news in this city when he'd been counting mosquito larvae in Rhodesia. "Yeah. Luthor."

He stood straighter and seemed to close in on himself. "The story you've been working on for months?"

The guy was jealous! And there was no reason for him to be. He had no claim on her, either personally or professionally, and she wasn't about to put herself under his corn-fed thumb for any reason. She turned her back on him and stalked through the door. "Yes. The story I've been chasing for months."

She knew her tone was too snarky, that Clark didn't deserve the quick brush-off she was giving him, but her walls were up again and she wasn't about to let him inside them. It was too big a risk for her, no matter how wonderful his eyes were or how weak her knees felt when he beamed that smile her way. This wasn't just self-defense, it was personal survival.

He followed her out of the conference room onto the news floor. "Tell me something, Lois. Just how far are you willing to go to get this interview?"

That was below-the-belt tacky. But she didn't want to make him too angry, so she tried to be conciliatory. As she picked up her purse and headed toward the elevators, she

said, "Not that it's any of your concern, but as I told you before, this is strictly business."

He followed her, almost at her shoulder, and raised his voice. "What is your problem, anyway? You've had a chip on your shoulder since the day I met you. You resented the fact that —"

"That Perry foisted an inexperienced —"

"Snob!"

That stopped her in her tracks. "What?"

He stood at the bottom of the steps and glared at her, the interest and affection she'd seen just moments before gone as if it were never there. "You are a snob, Lois."

She couldn't believe he was saying that. "Well, coming from Mr. Green Jeans, that's really —"

Her mind empty of acceptable insults, she turned away and took a step, but unreasoning anger flooded her and she spun to face him. "I live by three rules, Kent. I never get involved with my stories, I never let anyone else get there first, and I never sleep with anyone I work with." She stared at him for a long moment, daring him to say anything else, then finished with, "This. Is. Business."

She didn't look at him again. The elevator doors closed and she headed down to the garage for her Jeep.

There were three other people in the elevator, none of whom knew her by her first name, so breaking into tears or even releasing a snuffle was out of the question. She held her reaction behind a wall of forced anger until she climbed into her Jeep and closed the door.

Then it hit her and she crumpled behind the steering wheel. She'd allowed her fear and the pain from her past to damage her relationship with her new partner, a man who'd learned more about her in the past few days than anyone else in Metropolis knew, with the possible exception of Cat Grant.

No. He knew more about her than Cat did. As wonderful as Cat had been to her, as many hours as they'd spent together consoling each other and crying on each other's shoulder, Cat had never pierced as deeply into her heart as Clark had in such a short time. Every other man she'd known in the past six months would have run away from her tears and her memories. But Clark had embraced them, comforted her, accepted her as she was, and up until just a few moments before hadn't pressed her to do or be anyone different than who she was.

And she'd learned to trust him in that short time. She'd come to believe that he'd never betray her or pressure her to do anything or be anything that wasn't in her character. She wouldn't have believed that he'd react to her the way he had, and she was sure it was her fault for pushing him away.

She'd have to fix it somehow. Perry couldn't know that she'd lashed out at the rookie and all but taken his head off just because he'd challenged her sense of self. Clark didn't seem like a person who'd hold a grudge, but she couldn't be sure until she tried to apologize to him.

And that wouldn't be easy.

Enough of Clark Kent. She needed to get ready for her dinner date with — her interview with Lex Luthor.

I watched her stomp to the elevator and thought seriously about slamming my head against the wall, not that it would do me any harm or the wall any good. I just couldn't believe how quickly I'd gone from holding her tenderly to insulting her and accusing her of unethical behavior in pursuit of a story. I knew she'd never let herself get too close to an interview subject. She was too smart, too

wary, too cagey for that to happen.

But I'd let her get too close to me. When she'd said she'd have dinner with me, I'd felt like I'd set a new personal high altitude record. Then she'd shaken her head and told me she was having dinner with Luthor tonight. And my mind had just folded up and fallen down around my socks. I'd been hurt by that rejection, which wasn't really a rejection, and I'd lashed out at her from my own pain and my own fear for her safety.

How stupid could I be, anyway? I knew she was a young widow. I knew that she was still grieving for her husband. I knew that she didn't think she was ready for another relationship, and I knew that she was right. But I'd still let myself dream about it, just for a moment, when I'd held her and she'd held me and then we'd looked into each other's eyes and if I hadn't asked her to dinner I might have kissed her and then where would we be?

I guessed I could be incredibly stupid. Maybe it went along with my strength and speed. Incredibly strong, incredibly fast, incredibly idiotic. Made a twisted kind of sense to me.

And now what? What was I supposed to do to fix this? If I sent her flowers she might take it as some kind of romantic overture and stuff them down my throat. If I followed her and apologized she might think I was a weak-willed needy country boy with delusions of adequacy. If I did nothing she'd certainly think I believed every moronic thing I'd just said to her. I just didn't know what to do.

Then Jimmy tapped me on the arm and leaned close. "The Chief wants to see you."

I sighed. "That doesn't sound good."

"It's not supposed to."

I looked at him. He wasn't at all happy with me, and I could guess why. Like everyone else in the newsroom, he felt like it was his responsibility to keep Lois from getting hurt too badly. I'd seen it in their interactions, how Jimmy watched Lois when he didn't think anyone was looking. He never acted like a stalker or moped around love-sick. He was more like a pesky but faithful younger brother to her. But he did watch over her from a distance.

Like Perry did. I made my way to his office, ready to be fired.

But he surprised me. "Close the door, son. I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes."

"Yes, sir."

"Sit down, Kent. You're making my neck hurt, looking up at you like this."

I sat. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about, sir?"

He leaned back and gazed out the window, his face pregnant with an Elvis anecdote. "Did I just see Lois leave?"

"Yes, sir. She's getting ready for her interview with Lex Luthor."

He made a show of looking at his watch. "Kinda late in the day for an interview, isn't it? Even for the great Lex Luthor?"

That little bit of sarcasm was telling. "I think it's an interview over dinner."

He nodded slowly. "In a fancy upscale and very expensive restaurant?"

"I don't know."

He waited, then turned his head to look at me again, still wearing that nothing-but-a-hound-dog expression. "But you don't think so, do you?"

I sighed. "No, sir, I don't."

"I see." He shifted in his chair to face me directly. "Is that why you and she were out there snarling at one another?"

I bit my lip, then decided to tell the truth. "Partly. Partly it was because I got stupid for a couple of minutes."

He nodded again. "It happens, son. Everybody gets stupid sometimes. Even the King acted stupid after Lisa Marie was born. Course, it wasn't the same kind of stupid. But you get my point, don't you?"

I nodded. I wasn't sure I understood what he was trying to tell me, but I didn't want to disagree with him, not yet. And certainly not about Elvis.

"Good. Then you'll understand that I'm not mad at you when I give you a couple of creampuff assignments that will keep you out of Lois' hair for a day or so." He leaned back and linked his hands behind his head. "Give you both a chance to cool down a little."

I nodded again. "Thanks, Chief."

I got up to leave, but Perry stopped me. "Wait a minute, son. Isn't your mother showing some of her art work here in Metropolis sometime soon?"

What did that have to do with the cost of tea in China?

"Yes. It's at the Longwell Gallery downtown, starting a week from Monday. Why?"

"Oh, I was thinking I'd go down there and see some of her sculptures. And I was hoping that you could come with me and explain them to me."

I laughed. "Chief, I'm not sure I understand what my mother's work means. She tells me that sometimes she doesn't even know. Great art is intended to say different things to different people. At least that's what she tells me when I don't get it."

He smiled. "That's all the more reason for you to come with me. Alice used to tell me that I had no eye for beauty." He looked up and seemed to peer back in time. "And I'd tell her that all the beauty I ever needed to see was in her."

"Wow." I swallowed — hadn't meant to say that out loud. I searched for something to say and picked, "I wish I'd had the chance to meet her."

"I do too, son," he breathed. Then he stiffened, as if suddenly returning from his short trip down Memory Lane. "Learn from me, Kent. I love this paper. I have its ink in my veins. But I lost the best part of me when that drunk ran that red light four years ago. Alice was driving to a show — alone — and I was going to meet her there. But she died alone in that wreck because I was too wrapped up in some story to be where I'd told her I'd be. We were supposed to drive to the theatre together, but I let myself get stuck here and called her to tell her I'd be late and we argued over the phone and she drove in by herself and she died."

I knew he'd intended to tell me not to neglect my own personal life for my professional life, but I could hear the guilt and pain in his voice. It sounded a lot like mine. "It wasn't your fault, Perry. It was the drunk driver's fault. You couldn't have changed that. There was no way for you to make that guy not drunk, or to stop him from driving that night."

"Her."

I lifted my eyebrows. "The drunk driver was a woman?"

He nodded. "Had her two kids in the car, too. She got to the emergency room and they lost her there. The kids died at the scene. So did — so did Alice." He sat back and wiped his face with his hands. "The cops said she was doing over ninety in a thirty-five zone, headlights turned off on a rainy

night. Never hit the brakes, never swerved. Alice probably never saw her.”

I tried again, knowing it was in vain. “It wasn’t your fault, Perry. You couldn’t have known what would happen that night. There was nothing you could have done to change anything.”

“I know.” He exhaled some of his stress. “I know that in my mind, but my heart don’t want to listen. And you know what? Lois’ heart is like that. She isn’t responsible for Claude’s death, but she still blames herself. And you have to allow for that when you deal with her.”

I nodded. “I know that in my head, Chief.”

We looked at each other for a long moment, then his eyes changed and he made this ‘Aha’ movement with his head. “I see. You think I need to have this same talk with Lois too?”

I licked my lips. “That’s up to you, sir.” I waited a beat. “But maybe it wouldn’t hurt.”

He nodded. “I’ll take it under consideration. That’s about it, son.”

I stood and had reached for the door when he spoke again. “A lot of that goin’ on around here, ain’t it?”

I stopped and turned back to him. For a moment I felt as if he were looking down inside my soul, seeing the scars I carried from what I’d allowed Rachel to suffer. And I felt as if he were trying to tell me not to let my guilt guide my life.

He knew. I didn’t know how he knew — maybe he just knew in general and not specifically — but he knew.

I let out a long breath. “Yeah, Chief, a lot of that going around. Practically an epidemic.”

He nodded and broke the eye contact. “Just remember that hurtin’ somebody else ain’t medicine for that particular sickness.”

Chapter Seven

Lois was still frustrated. So far she’d gotten about two sentences worth of information for her profile on Metropolis’ most eligible and richest bachelor. She focused on cutting her filet mignon — not that it needed much cutting, since a filet mignon at Lex Luthor’s table was of the absolute highest quality, just like everything else in his life. All of her surroundings were expensive and rare, and the decor rivaled that of any European royal residence.

She’d been probing for personal information, background data for her profile of him, and he’d been dodging her adroitly since her first query. But she had to keep trying. “Your mother and father both died when you were fourteen, correct?”

He straightened and wiped his mouth with the twenty-dollar napkin from his lap. “Why don’t I just have my office fax you my biography?”

“I don’t want that. I don’t want the standard line. I want to know the real Lex Luthor.” She paused and he gestured for the waiter — the man had a waiter at a private dinner for two people! — to pour more wine. She glanced at the man, then continued, “I want to know what makes you tick, what you strive for, what you want.”

He lifted his glass and sipped quite elegantly. “Pleasure. The pursuit of pleasure.”

She lifted an eyebrow in response. He tilted his head to one side and asked, “Does that surprise you?”

“I would have guessed you’d say power instead of pleasure.”

“Power is a means, not an end.”

She waited for him to elaborate, but he didn’t. Next

question. “You took over your first big company when you were twenty-one, right? There were rumors that the buyout was coerced. Is it true that the board of directors were given — ”

“Was the food to your liking?”

He was trying to throw her off her game. And it was working. “It — it was delicious.” She smiled and turned away as if embarrassed to be so single-minded. “It’s just that when I work I — I don’t — ”

“Hmm,” he murmured, “all work and no play. Is that your credo, Lois Lane?”

He leaned forward and smiled. It was a powerful, all-encompassing smile, one which spoke of confidence and interest and secret pleasures shared by only two. The palpable impact of that smile broke her concentration and purged her mind of her list of questions and topics for the interview.

He’d rattled her and she didn’t know how to react. She stammered, “I — I don’t think that we should — ”

He picked up her wineglass and handed it to her. “Why don’t we just enjoy the evening, enjoy each other, let down your hair, loosen the tie?”

They touched wineglasses and Lois smiled. “I’m not wearing a tie.”

“It’s an expression, one which might apply more to me than to you.” His voice was so warm it could melt butter from three feet away. “You’re so tense,” he purred. “Why don’t you just — ” he put down his glass and gently grasped her hand “ — let your defenses down?”

He was charming, he was urbane, he was smooth as silk underwear, and she couldn’t help but compare him with Clark Kent — and Clark kept winning in that mental comparison. “I think you’ve gotten the wrong idea about this dinner, Lex.”

He sighed and backed off a little. “Look, I hope you don’t think we’re here merely because you’re a beautiful young woman. It wouldn’t speak very well for either of us.” He picked up her notepad and flipped through it without reading it. “You want an interview, a scoop? I understand that. Quid pro quo, let me tell you what I want.”

He leaned closer and his eyes lit up with a manic intensity. “My talent in life is not making money,” he said. “It’s not juggling companies. It’s character assessment.”

His gaze was intense and piercing, cutting through her defenses as if they didn’t exist. “And I sense things about you,” he continued. “Possibilities, potentials — you have the intelligence, the spirit, and the vision to transcend the mundane.”

He paused and gently pulled her hand toward him and rubbed the back with his thumb. “And just so there are no misunderstandings, you are beautiful.”

This was not good. She’d lost control and she didn’t see any way to recover. She had to get out of there. She had to escape somehow, and she fell back on the work excuse. “Lex, I have a story to write. Tonight.” She tugged her hand away from him and leaned back. “I should get going.”

He lifted his head and said, “No dessert?”

It was a double-edged question. He wasn’t talking about any baked Alaska or chocolate cake, and they each knew that the other knew it. “Um, heh-heh — no, I never have dessert.”

Had Lex been sitting next to a snake, Lois might not have been able to tell the difference — his gaze was that mesmerizing. “Really? You don’t know what you’re missing.”

She was a little bird and he was a hungry cat stalking her. She was a mouse and he was an owl swooping down on her. It was time to escape while she still could.

She stood as calmly as she dared and said, “Thank you for dinner. It was really quite delicious.”

He stood with her, took her hand against her will, and bowed over it. “We’ll have to do it again some time.”

She smiled and turned to the door. “Of course.”

She fumed at herself during the entire ride home. Lex pretended not to notice her squiggling around on the huge leather seat, and he even made convincing small talk about sports, the weather, the prospects of Senator Kelly’s re-election bid, and she eventually calmed down. The driver pulled the big Rolls-Royce limo to a smooth halt in front of her apartment, and the tall dark-skinned man wearing a turban leaped out and opened the door for them.

Lex stepped out and helped her exit the limo, then he faced her and adjusted the wrap around her shoulders. “It’s a little chilly tonight. Wouldn’t want you to catch a cold.”

She smiled thinly. “Thank you, Lex. But I’m a big girl and I can take care of myself.”

“I never thought otherwise, my dear. But courtesy demands, at an absolute minimum, that I accompany you to your door.”

She unlocked the outer door of her building and stepped to the elevator, grateful that it was working tonight. He stood close to her on the ride up, not quite close enough to lean against her, but inside her personal space. He even held the elevator door for her when it opened on her floor.

Then, instead of smiling and bidding her good night at her apartment door, he circled around her, moved his lips close to hers, and leaned in to kiss her. Once again, Lois thought about snakes, this time of the constrictor variety, the ones who wound themselves around their prey and crushed the breath from their lungs until they suffocated.

She thought about pushing him away, but she still hadn’t gotten that story on him and didn’t quite want to offend him. She considered turning her cheek toward his mouth, but his gaze pinned her as effectively as a sword thrust between her eyes. At the last moment, she let his lips descend on hers, but she held back and didn’t return the kiss. Thankfully his tongue didn’t put in an appearance, although she wouldn’t have been surprised to see it flicker in and out of his mouth as if tasting the air around them as he broke the kiss.

Then he leaned back and smiled again. “Good night,” he whispered huskily. Then he turned and walked away without a glance back at her.

I’d followed Luthor’s limo from his ‘home’ in the tower — no one could possibly use all that living space — through back alleys and over rooftops, and now I stood back in the shadows across the street from Lois’s apartment building. I could never let Lois know that I’d been watching over her, but at the same time I couldn’t let that base creature have any opportunity to defile her.

Base creature defile her? Oh, great, now I was thinking like him! What a horrible concept!

I put it out of my mind and watched him escort Lois to her door. If he’d held that kiss a few seconds more they’d have been lighting cigarettes for each other instead of wishing each other a good night. And I couldn’t help but think that Lois hadn’t exactly fought him off. Was she blinded by his charm and money? Or was she still angling

for that interview? I’d watched him deflect her questions at dinner, and I knew she didn’t have anything close to a story on him yet.

Would she let me help her? Or would she shove me away for butting in? Was she too proud to accept my help, or was I still the hack from Nowhereville? I didn’t know, and until I knew, I’d have to be careful.

I almost left to fly back to my hotel room, but instead I floated up to her apartment window to eavesdrop on her. Yeah, I know, my mother would have tanned my hide, but I was worried about her.

That was my excuse, anyway.

I was encouraged by the sounds I heard from inside. I hoped that a woman slamming the front door and then throwing her purse and coat on the sofa meant the same thing in Metropolis that it meant in Smallville. If so, it meant that she was angry about not getting the goods on Luthor.

And that meant that she might accept my help with the story. Better yet, it meant that she might still accept me.

That was another scary thought.

Lois growled at her purse and coat and snarled at the ceiling. “Well?” asked Lucy.

“Oh, I blew it! I didn’t get the interview!”

“No,” said Lucy, “I meant, did he ask you out again?”

“There are more important things in life than a second date!”

Lucy’s hands found Lois’ shoulders and began to rub them gently. “That’s true. There’s unexpected phone calls, the third date, chocolate, the fourth date, flowers, the fifth date, birthday presents — ”

“Come on, Punky!” Despite her anger at herself, Lois chuckled at her sister’s attempt to distract her. “I think he did ask me out, actually. But I’m not sure.” She sighed deeply. “And even if he did ask me, I’m not sure I want to date him.”

“Really? That’s an interesting point of view. The third richest man in the world asks you out on a date and you’re not sure you want to go? Isn’t he the one voted the world’s most eligible bachelor last year?”

“I’m holding out for this year’s model.”

Lucy gave her sister a gentle shake. “Lois! Come on! You can’t wear black for the rest of your life.”

Lois pulled away. “Claude was a good man, Luce. And I still miss him.”

“He wasn’t perfect. He did have flaws, you know.”

“Don’t start that again! I don’t care if he wasn’t perfect! When he — he left a hole in my life that I don’t think anyone will ever fill.”

“I understand that. Besides, you’re right, he was a good man. And you shouldn’t try to put him out of your life. You should remember him. You should cherish your memories of him. They’re important to you, and they should be important. They’re a part of who you are.”

Lois frowned. “That’s funny. Someone else said almost the same thing to me not long ago.”

“See? You have lots of smart people in your life.” Lucy stepped close and hugged her sister. “I believe there’s someone out there for me. And I believe there’s someone out there for you, too.” She smiled and pointed at the window. “Just think, Lois, Mr. Right could be right outside your window now.”

For a moment, Lois tried to believe her sister’s words, tried to buy into the idea that they really was someone out

there for her. But her grief and loneliness chased the rainbows away once more. “Oh, come back to Earth, Lucy! This is reality we’re talking about, not the nice-girl dreams we had when we were kids.”

“I still have them. I think you should too.”

Lois walked to the window and looked down at the street, trying to imagine a man who’d accept someone as damaged as she was. She tried to picture a man to whom she could give her broken heart, a man who wouldn’t mind being second best in her life.

Then she rolled her eyes and yanked the blinds shut. “Not gonna happen, Punky. Not in this lifetime.”

By mid-afternoon the next day, the body of the Messenger sabotage story was ready to present to Perry. Lois grabbed the sheets from the printer’s output tray and motioned to Jimmy to follow her. She gathered Clark with a tap on the shoulder and the three of them marched toward the editor’s office. “I’ve got a really good feeling about this,” said Lois. “I just know this is going to be a huge story.”

“Yeah, just don’t forget what I contributed.”

“We won’t forget, Jimmy,” Lois assured him. “You’ll get all the credit due to you.”

Lois led the trio into the office, laid the document on the editor’s desk, and stood straight and tall before him. “Chief, I think this — ”

Perry stopped her with an upraised hand. Then he picked up the printout and held it up in front of them. “This is the story you’re turning in? All three of you?”

Lois glanced at Jimmy and Clark, but they had apparently decided to let her be the spokesperson. “That’s it. It’s all there, too, a really juicy scandal and sabotage and — ”

“Hold on now. Let me read through it to make sure I understand what it is you want me to print, okay?”

“Well — sure, Perry. Peruse away.”

The three reporters stood waiting patiently as the editor grunted his way through the document. Occasionally his eyebrows would rise, and once he frowned and grunted at the same time. Lois had seen this act before, usually every time she’d turned in something really hot, but Jimmy hadn’t seen it first-hand and Clark hadn’t seen it at all. She could feel them getting antsy behind her, and their trepidation began to affect her. But she couldn’t interrupt the process. This was how Perry worked, and no one could hurry him when he was in editor mode.

Finally Perry leaned back in his chair and held the document up in front of his face. “All right,” he said, “let me see if I’ve got this straight. You want me to publish a story that says the Prometheus project is being sabotaged, that the space transport Messenger exploded because of that sabotage, and that the transport carrying the habitation modules to the space station Prometheus — scheduled to be launched in less than three days — is probably also going to blow up. And all of this information you got from interviewing Samuel Platt, a man who was banned from the scientific community, underwent psychiatric treatment, and committed suicide! Although he was — “ here Perry leaned forward and made air quotes with both hands “ — probably murdered. Now — does that about sum it up?”

The good feeling Lois had carried into the editor’s office had vaporized like an appliance repairman’s appointment. “Chief — “ she tried to start.

“Hard facts, people!” Perry bellowed. “Hard facts!

That’s the name of this game! Now go out there and get me some!”

He thrust the printed summary into Lois’ hands as he glared at all three of them. There was nothing for them to do but leave and do as they had been bidden. She’d been thwarted, but only for the moment.

Lois led the parade onto the newsroom floor, determined to do what had to be done. And Kent wasn’t ready for this kind of investigative activity. Besides, she was still mad at him for the cutting comments he’d made to her the previous day. “What we need is physical evidence,” she called over her shoulder to him. “We’ve got to get something concrete about the destroyed shuttle.”

“I’ll call Dr. Baines and see if I can get permission to set up an independent examination of the — ”

“Clark, Baines is not going to let you do that! She could be involved. Besides, we don’t have time to play by the rules. The colonists’ transport goes up in two days.”

She snatched her coat away from his helpful hands and put it on without his officious assistance. “I’m making the call,” he insisted. “Maybe someone else at EPRAD will authorize it.”

“You do that,” she snapped. “And be sure and let me know how it works out.”

As Clark headed for his desk, Lois stalked toward the elevators. “Where are you going?” asked Jimmy.

“Nowhere.”

“I’m coming too!”

Great. That was just what she needed. Add hopeful Jimmy underfoot to naïve Clark underfoot. At least Jimmy knew his way around a camera. Maybe he’d be more useful than Mr. Green Jeans and his soft-headed head-in-the-sky dreamerism.

She paused in the elevator to tell herself not to make up words for Kent ever again. He just wasn’t that important to her.

She wouldn’t let him be important to her. It hurt too much when people got close.

By the time they put together everything they needed for their little foray into the hidden corruption in EPRAD, the sun had set and Jimmy’s courage had evaporated with it. “I guess I don’t need to point this out to you, Lois, but what we’re doing is dangerous.”

She was too close to the truth to be stopped now. She’d go the rest of the way alone if she had to. “Fine!” she snapped. “You go back to updating obituaries. I’ll grab the scoop of the century all by myself.”

They stopped outside the hangar where EPRAD was working on a shuttle hull. Welders showered sparks from a number of different locations both near the floor and high up on the sides of the hull. Several workers hauled cables of different sizes from one level to another. A trio of better-dressed manager types were standing several yards from the base of the upright hull, holding a roll of paper which looked like a blueprint and alternately pointing at various locations on the scaffolding surrounding the hull.

Jimmy frowned. “How do we get inside?”

“We don’t have to.”

“What? Why not?”

“I watched them load the Messenger wreckage into the truck. The whole left side of the shell was bashed in. That one isn’t.” She paused and a realization struck her. “They’re working on a phony shell.”

“Smooth,” Jimmy said. Then he looked at her

expression and stuttered, “If you’re into the whole ‘hide the truth’ thing, of course.”

“Right. Well, we’re not hiding the truth, we’re here to reveal it. Where’s the hangar they drove that truck to?”

Jimmy stepped back to get his bearings, then pointed. “Over there. About a quarter-mile that direction.”

He led them through alleys between buildings and ended up at another hangar. She headed for a steel door with a small window at eye level. Lois tried the doorknob, but it was locked, and the door also had a deadbolt above the knob.

Jimmy fished a small packet out of his pocket and pulled out several small but stiff wires. After a few seconds work, he had both the deadbolt and the doorknob open. “You’re amazing,” said Lois. “Where’d you learn to do that?”

“Reform school. It was a bum rap.”

At that moment Lois didn’t care if he’d done time for breaking into the White House. They were in.

Her companion chirped like a real-life Jiminy Cricket. “Lois, what do you expect to find here? Do you know what particle isolators even look like?”

She didn’t answer. They turned a corner and found what appeared to be one of the shuttle’s thrusters lying on its side. There were burn marks around holes in the sides and fused components inside the holes.

“Wow,” breathed Jimmy. “Smooth.”

Pay dirt. They’d found what they’d come to find. “Take pictures of everything that isn’t pristine and brand-new. We’ll have them analyzed later. Then we’re going to have to break into Dr. Baines’ office. I’m positive she’s lying about that report. I never trusted her, not from the very first time I met her. The way she looked at Clark — very unprofessional.”

She suddenly realized that she couldn’t hear his camera snapping. “Jimmy? Jimmy, where’d you go?”

She suddenly sensed a presence behind her. She turned and saw a tall blond man wearing a black muscle shirt, black slacks, and an air of menace.

It would have been polite to ask him what he was doing there. Instead, Lois swung her purse into the side of his face and kicked him in the crotch, then slammed her purse into his head once again as he knelt in agony. A second kick to his side drove the air from his lungs and he fell over with a breathy groan.

She stepped back and looked around, then found Olsen on the floor of the hangar. A bloody cut on the back of his head told her that she’d been right in her assessment of her victim.

“Jimmy!” she urged. “Come on, get up! We’ve got to get out of here.”

The only response was the snick of a switchblade knife behind her. The man she’d knocked down was tougher than she’d thought. He was moving toward her in a crouch, holding a wicked-looking knife in his right hand. He thrust it at her and she deflected his arm, then pulled it down and slammed her knee into the back of his elbow. The sudden pain cost him his grip on the knife, and Lois punched him in the face. As he straightened, she drove her spiked heel into his stomach, and when he bent over she threw a roundhouse punch at the side of his head.

He went down without a sound. Lois flexed her hand and decided it was bruised but not broken, then turned to revive Jimmy and get out fast.

But the sight of a grim Antoinette Baines pointing a

pistol at Lois’ midsection from six feet away dissuaded her. “Very impressive, Lois. These days, a woman has to know self-defense.”

She stared at the pistol Baines held with steady competence and decided that making a move for it would be suicide. “Yeah. Look, I know you’re busy, so I’ll just take my friend and leave you to —”

“No,” Baines purred, “I don’t think you will.”

A large meaty hand dropped onto Lois’ shoulder. She turned her head to see her former sparring partner glaring at her, his eye swollen and bruised and a cut on his cheek leaking blood. He grabbed her other arm, turned her around, then forced her to walk in front of him.

She didn’t bother to ask where they were going. She knew she’d written her last banner. The next time her name appeared in the Planet, it would be in the obituary section.

She hoped Jimmy had updated hers.

Chapter Eight

When the staff meeting started and Perry asked me where Lois was, I was more than surprised. She hadn’t let me know where she might be or where she was going, although given our last conversation I shouldn’t have been at all surprised that she wasn’t there. But Jimmy wasn’t there either, and that was very odd. Ever since I’d met him he’d been trying to get some real news assignments from Perry. Missing a meeting was not the way to the editor’s heart.

Then I had a thought. If Lois and Jimmy are both missing the same meeting, what are the chances that they’re together? And what are the odds that they’re in trouble, especially since Lois wasn’t going to let go of the EPRAD investigation for love or money?

The odds were more than good. I excused myself, saying that I’d try to contact Lois. When Perry followed me to the storage closet and asked me when I was ‘coming out of the closet,’ it was all I could do to keep a straight face.

He had no way of knowing that I’d already had a very long talk with my mom about ‘coming out’ and using my powers openly. All I needed now was a suitable disguise, and she’d promised me several to choose from. I just hoped whatever I ended up with wouldn’t make me look completely ridiculous.

But that was in the future. I needed to make sure Lois and Jimmy still had a present.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out where they’d gone. But the EPRAD facility was a pretty big place, and it took me a few minutes to locate them. I would have found them faster had I not wasted so much time scanning the hangar where the work on the fake shuttle hull was going on full blast. When I finally figured out that I was looking in the wrong building, I felt a little stupid.

I finally spotted them in another hangar, one away from the center of the action. Of course. Dr. Baines was holding a pistol on Lois and Jimmy, both of whom were bound to support girders. Looked like Lois was right about the pretty blonde doctor. I wondered idly if she felt that way about all blondes, or was it just intelligent women who put her off?

Didn’t matter. I had to help them.

“You’ll never get away with it,” bluffed Lois. “Everyone at the Planet knows where I am.”

Baines smiled. It was a cold, reptilian smile, one that reminded me of a certain billionaire who I didn’t much like either. “Doesn’t matter,” said the blonde serpent. “In a few moments, no one will be able to tell your remains from

your friend's here." She kicked Jimmy in the leg and he moaned slightly, but didn't lift his head or open his eyes. He was hurt and needed help right away.

So I followed my first instinct and burst through the door. "Let them go," I called out.

The blond muscle guy lifted an Uzi and pulled back the bolt. I hadn't seen that before, and I didn't want him spraying bullets all over the place. One might ricochet and hit either Lois or Jimmy, and I couldn't risk that. Baines' pistol was also aimed at me.

My only thought was to free Lois and Jimmy. "Put down those guns or I'll —"

Do what? What was I going to do?

I suddenly realized how stupid I'd been. I couldn't risk blowing my cover. It didn't matter whether or not Baines was working alone or with someone else, I couldn't let her know what I was capable of. And despite knowing Lois, I didn't know if she could refrain from printing the mother of all Pulitzer nominees. "Clark Kent — Super-Powered Menace Or Savior?" I could see the headline dancing in front of my eyes.

Baines pulled me back to reality when she asked, "Or what?"

Out of the corner of my vision I saw Lois roll her eyes. There was nothing else for me to do, so I shrugged and said, "Nothing."

Great job, Clark. Way to be a hero. You just made Rachel out to be an absolute genius for dumping you.

"I told Perry I needed a task force," Lois griped — again. "A task force! And what do I get? Well-meaning amateurs." She turned to look at Clark over her shoulder. "I still cannot believe you came barreling in here like some five-hundred-pound gorilla! If you really thought we were in trouble, why didn't you call the police?"

"Look, I —"

"Don't tell me! I already know! You're like every other man in Metropolis! You've got a testosterone surplus that would supply the entire United States Air Force! 'I can do it myself!' That's your motto!" She paused. "Baines has to kill us now. I don't know why she hasn't done it already."

Clark must have been fiddling with his chains. Just like a complete optimist. He wasn't tied up with ropes, he was chained to a steel girder! And Baines' silent friend — the guy was probably too muscle-bound to talk and glare at the same time — had secured Lois with a tie-down strap, not unlike the ones her father had used long ago to secure his luggage to the top of the car as he drove out of their lives.

She'd never see her family again. The thought made her mad, and Clark was a convenient target, so —

"Lois, I've somehow managed to —"

"Mess everything up? No kidding!"

"Now hold on a second! I'm not the one who snuck in here and —"

Now he was blaming her for him being an idiot! "What are you saying? Are you saying that this is my fault? At least I had the guts to come in here and — and —"

She paused and thought. "What am I saying?" Despair padded in on kitten paws and jumped up into her lap. "This probably is my fault."

She waited for him to comment, but he said nothing. "I — I sometimes do things, like jump in the pool without checking the water level first. But — Clark, it's the only way I know how to do it — how to get the respect that I want, that — that I deserve."

She stopped to let him comment, but he remained silent. There was a need inside her to be totally honest with him, to let him know exactly why she did what she did. "You remember how I told you about my three rules?"

"Yes," he replied quietly.

"Well — I've broken every one of them. I — I somehow manage to always get involved in my stories."

"You slept with someone at work?"

Oh, great, he would focus on that one. "Yeah."

He paused for a moment, then asked, "It — it wasn't — Jimmy — was it?"

In another setting she would have burst out laughing. Or punched him in the mouth. "Don't be ridiculous." She paused to gather her thoughts, then continued. "It was just after I started at the Planet." She could hear the pain in her own voice. "Claude."

"Wasn't — didn't you marry a guy named Claude?"

She cleared her throat. "Claude Rochambeau. We spent the night together and he — he got up and was going to steal my story but he didn't and it made me fall in love with him right then and there and three months later we got married."

She stopped and sniffed once. After a moment, he said, "From what I've been told, you two had a very happy marriage."

That was nice of him, she thought. He could have said any number of insulting or cutting things at that point, but he didn't. "Yes. We did. Until — until we chased a story about gun-runners from their drop-off point in Metropolis back to the source in Africa. I wanted to go but Claude — he talked me out of it and he went in my place and he — he didn't —"

She still couldn't say the words. She was about to die herself and she still couldn't say that Claude was dead. At least Clark wasn't rubbing it in her face or making excuses for her or lying that everything was going to be all right.

"Claude died over there?"

There it was. Gently but baldly stated. "Yes," she muttered. "We think — Perry thinks that either they recognized him or someone over there sold him out. The Congolese government — " she almost couldn't continue. " — the government sent him back — his body — with their profound regrets for the tragedy." She tried to wipe her nose on her shoulder. "The ambassador came to see me and he was very polite and quite proper and I wanted to rip his lungs out."

"I'm sorry, Lois. You didn't deserve that much grief."

"But I —"

She stopped herself from saying that she did deserve it, that it had been her fault. Clark asked, "What were you going to say?"

She hesitated, then decided that she had nothing more to hide. "I'm responsible. For — for Claude dying. I should have gone to the Congo, not him. Yes, he knew the country better than I did, but that was because he'd worked there before and there were bad people there who recognized him, who knew him and the caught him and they — " she finished in a whisper " — they killed him."

"It wasn't your fault that he died."

"Really? You think so? If we hadn't been married he wouldn't have felt it necessary to protect me by going to Africa in my place. And I let him go!" She heard him take a breath to argue and she forestalled him. "Never mind. It doesn't matter now anyway."

She felt drained. It was the first time she'd told the story

to someone who hadn't known Claude, and she waited for Clark's reaction. "I guess when you're in love with someone," he finally said, "it doesn't matter how many rules you set for yourself or how smart you are. You're still vulnerable."

"We're only human," she lamented. Then she added, "Oh, what difference does it make now? We're all just going to die."

They were both silent for a long moment, then Clark said, "Lois, you know what you said about respect? I just want you to know that everyone at the Planet — and I mean everyone — thinks you're just about the best reporter they've ever met. Perry told me that the day I interviewed."

"He did?" she sobbed.

"Yes. Not that it really means anything, coming from a hack from Nowheresville — but I think you're pretty terrific too."

The tears were flowing freely now. Tears of regret, tears of loss, tears of anger for letting the bad guys win one from her, and tears of loss because she'd never get the chance to learn just what a good guy Clark Kent really was. "Oh, Clark — I'm sorry! About everything. I know it's too late for apologies, but I never meant —"

Antoinette Baines' voice pierced the shadows and interrupted her. "What a fascinating conversation. I hope you'll forgive my eavesdropping. I also hope you'll forgive the accommodations, too, but I never was much of a hostess."

Lois couldn't let Baines know how scared she was, so she slipped into the best defensive mode she still had, the reporter. "Answer one question. Why?"

"Oh, I suppose that Emily Post never made much sense to me. I'm sure that's my mother's fault."

Oh, good, thought Lois, she thought she was funny on top of being a murderer. "I meant, why sabotage the space program?"

"Oh, that." As if lecturing a ten-year-old, Baines replied, "It's simple, Lois. Profit. Outer space is no different than any other new frontier. It will belong to those who get there first and seize the high ground."

She felt Clark come to attention at Baines' words, but she couldn't put her finger on the reason. Before she could ask for an explanation, Baines continued, "Sorry you won't be around to enjoy the rest of the evening. But accidents do happen."

That didn't sound good. "Accidents?"

The blonde doctor's voice sounded so sad. "Yes. You see, while dismantling the orbital maneuvering system, the monomethyl hydrazine leaked — " she opened a valve on a barrel which began leaking a sickly yellow liquid " — and mixed with the nitrogen tetroxide." She opened another valve on another container and a dark green liquid sloshed out. "They're two of the main ingredients for liquid rocket fuel, you know. The explosive reaction destroyed the remains of the shuttle before EPRAD could determine the exact cause of the launch pad explosion which originally wrecked it. Unfortunately, the blast also killed three nosy reporters who didn't bother to read the signs." She turned and gave them a sad face. "You know, the ones that say Danger, Toxic Chemicals, things like that?"

Baines stepped close to Clark's feet and looked down at him. "It's a shame, too, Mr. Kent. You and I could have had — well, let's just say you presented me with some very interesting choices."

Lois couldn't see behind her very well, but she did see

Baines bend down and give Clark a soft kiss. She hoped for an instant that he'd throw up in her mouth — or at least on her shoes.

But he didn't. What a time for him to be stoic.

Baines and her pet Neandertal strode away to the accompaniment of splashing liquid. The smell alone would have told Lois that the chemicals were volatile, and while she didn't quite know what would happen when the mixed, she was sure it wouldn't be a good thing.

It was all over. Death was walking toward her, his skeletal index finger slowly beckoning, his bony hand reaching out to take hers. It was time. She closed her eyes and waited for the blast that would send her to be with her beloved Claude. At least Jimmy wouldn't feel it. Still out cold, he'd be dead before he knew it.

But something else happened instead. She heard Clark's chains rattle again. Then he spun around and tore her bindings loose. "Clark! How did you —"

He lifted her and pushed her toward the exit. "Missing link! Come on!"

She helped him lift the still unconscious Jimmy to his shoulder and together they ran for the door. It was a race against time, and the odds —

They didn't make it. They'd only taken two steps outside when the mixed chemicals exploded like a firebomb. The flames chased them and Lois looked back and knew they were all about to be burned to cinders —

Then suddenly all three of them splashed down in a mud puddle. She sat up and looked around, then saw Jimmy's face under the surface of the water. She grabbed his hair and pulled his head up and he coughed and took in a lungful of air.

Clark sat up and looked back at the destroyed building. Somehow he'd kept his glasses on his face, something Lois would have bet real money wouldn't happen.

"What happened?" she asked, as if Clark would know.

"I don't know," he said. "I guess the force from the explosion must have carried us here."

The force from the explosion? That didn't sound at all reasonable, nor did Clark sound very convincing, but the fact that they were all still alive and not burnt to death meant that something unusual had happened.

She'd puzzle it out later. Right now they all needed to stay alive. "Clark, we've got to get Jimmy to the emergency room. I think he has a concussion."

"Right. I'll go get —"

"Wait! Look up there!"

Like a Phoenix rising from the ashes, a small helicopter soared above the burning building. It had to be Baines. The witch was making her getaway! She had to be stopped somehow, but short of finding a handy surface-to-air missile, there was nothing Lois could —

Then the helicopter burst into flames and fell to the earth in blazing fragments. No one could have survived that.

Lois glanced at Clark. His expression conveyed horror at the sight, as if he'd somehow failed. But how could that be? He'd gotten all three of them out of the building just before the blast, never mind how he'd done it. There was no way for him to have saved Baines and her cohort without flying up to intercept them, and he would have had to have done that before the helicopter exploded. Neither of them had anticipated that outcome.

First things first. "How did you get here, Clark?"

"Wh-what?"

She grabbed his arm and shook it. “Clark! Come back to earth! How did you get here?”

“Oh — uh — taxi?”

Was he asking her or telling her? It didn’t matter. “Bring Jimmy and follow me. I’ve got to hot-wire my Jeep. My purse was in that blast and my keys are slag by now.”

He hefted Jimmy with no discernible effort. “I’ll follow you.”

They took off across the grounds at a trot. “Lois?” he called. “If your purse was in there, doesn’t that mean you don’t have your driver’s license or — ?”

“What? Never mind! If we get stopped I’ll tell them to call Henderson.”

“Well, there is that, but I was also thinking that that you don’t have any house keys now and can’t go home to clean up.”

She hesitated, then forged on. “Remember that I told you to keep a change of clothes at the Planet? That’s what I do, and they’re going to come in handy after we drop Jimmy off at the hospital.”

How he had enough breath to laugh, she didn’t know.

I wanted to pinch myself. “Messenger Sabotaged, Saboteur Dies In Fiery Explosion.” The front page blared out our success and validated all of our hard work.

The story I’d helped Lois write was on the front page. It was under her byline, of course, but I was listed on the next line as a contributor, along with Jimmy. The Planet was holding a party, complete with funny hats and champagne and streamers and noisemakers and Perry was actually smiling. I could tell that his blood pressure was down to just above normal, probably due to a combination of paava leaves and increased advertising revenues and a triple-sized print run for the morning edition.

Jimmy was sitting in a wheelchair with several pretty young things around him, wearing the bandage on his head like a medal of honor. One of them cooed, “Were you scared, Jimmy?”

“Scared? No, of course not.” He pointed to his bandage. “I was hurt, yeah. But I was more concerned with the larger issue. Unless we got out of there alive, the colonists’ launch could blow up as well.”

“Oh, you poor boy!” “Can I get you some more punch, Jimmy?” “Let me wheel you over to the window. You look like you could use some sunlight.”

He flashed me a quick smile and a wink, then allowed himself to be transported to juvenile male heaven. Perry lunged out of his office and waved for attention, then bellowed, “I just spoke to ground control over at EPRAD. They went back over the colonists’ launch vehicle with a fine-toothed comb. They found the same coolant problem in the protective bands and fixed it. The launch is all set for tomorrow morning!”

Cheers went up from all around. Then he leaned down and said, “It’s a no-go for you, Lois. No reporters allowed.”

She yanked off her sparkly blue Uncle Sam hat and growled, “Imagine the Daily Planet getting an exclusive personal account of being on the colonists’ transport!”

Perry shook his head. “No can do, Lois. I’m sorry, but this ain’t my party and I didn’t draw up the guest list.”

“All right,” she sighed. “Another time. Maybe.”

Perry looked up at me. “Clark, you’ll be pleased to know that Platt’s widow and daughter are back on board.”

It was good news. “Thank you very much, sir. I appreciate — we appreciate your telling us.”

Perry smiled and walked off. Lois turned to me with a half-smile on her face. “Clark, I — I just want — I want to thank you for — for all your help getting us out of there.”

I couldn’t tell if she was totally sincere or if she was fishing for something. “I’m glad it all worked out.”

Her smile morphed into something more personal but also somehow menacing. “And — one other thing.” She stepped closer and lifted my tie, much like Cat had done not long ago. “If you ever breath a word about anything I told you in there — “ the smile was gone and fire danced along her eyebrows “ — I will deny every word of it and I’ll find a way to make you pay.”

I tried my most sincere face on her. “You can trust me, Lois.”

She flipped my tie away with her hand. “Right.” Then the blue hat flopped back onto her head, almost down over her eyes. “I’ve heard that one before.”

She turned and made her way through the crowd, accepting congratulations and handshakes as she went. Cat stopped her and they laughed about something I couldn’t pick up over the crowd noise, then Cat looked my way and smiled.

They separated. Lois headed toward the far side of the news floor and Cat floated in my direction. I braced myself for another assault on both my senses and my libido, but she fooled me when she gently embraced me and whispered, “Thank you for saving her.”

I returned the embrace for just a brief moment. “You’re welcome.”

Cat slipped back and looked me straight in the eye. “You’re a fine man, Clark Kent. And I’m glad you came here. You’ll be good for her.”

What? “Whoa, wait a minute! I think you’ve got the wrong — ”

She giggled and slipped back into her normal character. “No, silly, that’s not what I meant! You’re honest as the day is long, and you won’t try to take advantage of her. And she’s not used to that. It’s going to be a new experience for her.”

“Huh? I mean, didn’t she and Claude — her husband — didn’t they work together?”

Her eyes darkened. “They did. And she loved him unreservedly. But he took advantage of her a lot, even if she couldn’t see it. He never used her and threw her away, but if it hadn’t been for Lois Lane, we’d be remembering Claude Rochambeau in a far less positive way.”

I hesitated, then plowed ahead. “What, exactly, are you trying to tell me?”

She glanced around to make sure no one else was close enough to hear. I did too, and I noticed that even in a crowded room like this, people gave Cat Grant room to operate on a man. “I dated Claude before Lois did,” she said quietly. “And he wasn’t above using other people’s work in his own. He never quite plagiarized anything that I know about, but more than once I saw other people’s ideas pop up under his byline. And he dated a lot of women besides me.”

I almost didn’t ask the next question, but I thought I needed to know the answer. “Did he ever cheat on Lois?”

Now she hesitated. “If he did, he hid it so well I can’t find any evidence of it. And I think I would have by now. So no, I don’t believe he cheated on her.”

I gave her the raised-eyebrow sign of respect. “Well, if you can’t find any evidence, there probably isn’t any to find.”

Suddenly she was all woodland sprite and hoyden again. “That’s what I thought, too.” Her index finger tapped my nose. “Thanks. Anyway, I’m glad you’re here. You saved my best friend’s life. I’m — very grateful.”

I don’t know how she did it. I hadn’t seen her move, but she might as well have been posing there in front of me wearing nothing but high heels and a smile. “Ah. Yes, I’m glad of that. Of both of those things. Glad that Lois is alive and that you’re — grateful.”

I disengaged from her as gracefully as I could. As she all but shimmied across the floor, her catwalk drew stunned stares from every male who saw her and poisoned icicles from every female. The crowd parted like the Red Sea and closed behind her in a panting hush.

I suddenly realized that I’d lost sight of Lois. Then I realized that it was probably one of the things Cat was after. Even as she’d given me some fairly important personal information on Lois, Cat had distracted me very completely. I’d have to watch out for that in the future.

But that wasn’t the most important thing on my mind. Lois was up to something. And she hadn’t wanted me to know what it was, so it was sure to be dangerous.

Chapter Nine

Lois hated standing in line for anything. It reminded her of college registration, where incoming freshmen always got to the tables in the lobby early in the day and had to stand around waiting for the registrar to call their names. It was like the hurry-up-and-wait deal Claude had complained about from his hitch in the French Army. And waiting in line to board the colonial transport was nerve-wracking, knowing that at any moment someone might recognize her or realize she shouldn’t be where she was, doing what she was doing.

Today, however, there was something else bothering her that wouldn’t go away, wouldn’t be silent. Every time she stopped in place, Clark Kent popped up in her mind. She wouldn’t have minded if the image she had of him was the one from his hotel room, the one with the towel around his rock-hard waist, but no, her mind was determined to chew on the inconsistencies he kept shoving at her.

He looked like a body builder and moved like a dancer, yet he ate like an overweight eleven-year-old with a dozen sweet teeth. He was shy and self-effacing, yet he came up with insights and information no rookie should even think about coming up with. He didn’t brag about his strength like other men, but she’d seen his chest and shoulders and the sight of that door at the EPRAD hangar flying across the room kept playing in her mind. And he couldn’t be so dumb as to just leap into a room with armed bad guys in it. He’d had some kind of edge he wouldn’t or couldn’t use for some reason. Did he carry a gun? Was he a wanted fugitive somewhere? Was he some kind of martial arts expert who didn’t want to be recognized?

The line shifted again and she moved forward seven inches.

What about those chains he’d worked out of? Missing link? Was he kidding? Even if Baines hadn’t known how to secure a prisoner, that silent muscle man had to have known. Kent should not have been able to free them from that hangar.

And how had they ended up in the only mud puddle around big enough for all three of them? Even if their clothes had caught fire, the water in the puddle would have put them out. That was too lucky for words. And the

distance they’d traveled was too far to be blown there without all of them suffering serious injuries, yet none of them had gotten as much as a scratch from that landing.

Speaking of landings, the day he’d fallen down and ruined his suit and that guy had been saved from the sewer cave-in, Clark’s story hadn’t — wait, he’d never told her just how he’d ruined his clothes. He’s looked — and smelled — like he’d been in a sewer. And he’d dodged a number of questions about how he’d done the things he’d done, like his ‘taxi’ answer outside the hangar and his non-answer about how he maintained his Atlas-like physique.

No, there was something really, really odd about Clark Kent. Too many things didn’t fit. He had some kind of secret, something he was hiding. But she’d figure it out.

After she filed the story about the transport launch, that is.

I sat at my mother’s kitchen table, sipping fresh country coffee. “How’s it going in there, Mom?”

“Almost finished with the last one. Are you sure you don’t have any preferences you want to share with me?”

I think I laughed. “You’re kidding, right? After you spent all that time on them, now I’m going to give you my opinion? Besides, you’re the famous artist, not me.”

She came back in the room and smiled. “I wish your father could have seen this day. I bet he’d be so proud of you.”

“I don’t know, Mom. He constantly warned me about being dissected like a frog in a lab if I let people know what I could do, remember?”

She flopped down with a sigh in the chair next to mine. “Yes, I remember. But I also remember how his chest would bulge out whenever he told one of his friends about your latest grades or how your football team had won another game or how high you ranked in your college class.” She shook her head. “Not one of his friends had a son or nephew who accomplished as much as you did while still so young.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “Well, we really don’t know how long I’m supposed to live, remember? I might run out of steam in a few months or so.”

She patted my arm and smiled. “You haven’t lost a step for years, and I’ll bet my latest masterpiece that you won’t for a long time yet. Now come on and let’s try on some of my latest creations.”

“I hope they do the job. If I have an effective disguise, I won’t have to worry about people finding out about me.”

“We won’t know until we take a look.” She stood and held her hand out to me. “I’m really proud of a couple of them.”

“Just a couple of them? The others are duds?”

“No, they’re — wait, that’s a pun, right? Of course it is! ‘Duds’ also being clothing! Very cute! The famous writer made a pun! How droll!”

She was letting me have that one, so I had to try on all of the outfits she’d made.

Green tights with a leopard-patterned long-sleeve shirt? With studded wristbands? Ew. And was this a belt or a bandolier? Was I a hunter or a idiotic-looking model?

“Mom, I’m just not sure about this one.”

“That’s okay, honey, I wasn’t sure either. I just wanted to give you plenty of choices.”

Green and blue shirt with a blue cap and — what were

those yellow things, horns or wings? And I definitely didn't want to wear a mask, even if it reduced the chances that someone would recognize me. I was going to be different enough, so I didn't want to appear to be hiding. Besides, a mask might catch fire if I used my heat vision and it wasn't on just right.

"I don't know, Mom, it doesn't really say what I have in my head."

She nodded. "Take it off and you can try on the next one."

Crimson. Yech.

I looked back over my shoulder and the mirror showed me a guy who was either a giant raspberry popsicle or a gay pride marcher.

"Mom —"

Her hand flew up and she sighed. "Don't say it. We'll try the next one."

Primary blue with red and yellow highlights. That was closer, but I still looked like a billboard for a girdle company.

"This one's very good, Mom, but maybe too busy in the middle?"

She stood back and frowned in thought. "Let me take another whack at this one."

I could tell she was close to the end of her endurance. "What about that one?" she called from the living room.

It was much better than the others, including the one where I looked like a supersonic Robin Hood. I walked out and stood in front of the mirror next to her. "I like the cape. And the colors are vibrant and direct, but simple. No complex patterns, either. I like that."

She elbowed me in the ribs. "Told you I was a world-famous artist."

I turned, trying to get a sense of how I'd look to others. And I found that I really liked it. I wasn't real thrilled with the briefs on the outside of my pants, but they matched up well with the red boots and actually completed the lower half of the outfit. I just had to remember to wear a cup under them.

I stood tall and looked at her in the mirror. "Well? What do you think?"

An impish grin grew from her mouth. "Well, one thing's for sure. Nobody's gonna be looking at your face."

"Mom!" I was shocked that my mother would say such a thing! And to her son!

She burst out in a giggling chuckle. "They don't call 'em tights for nothing!"

I wanted to be mad or embarrassed, but she hugged me and I forgot all about it. Then she lifted her hand to her mouth and said, "I don't know — there's something — missing. Something should be —"

She suddenly spun and dove under the bed, then came up with an old suitcase. "This was your father's when he shipped out to Korea," she said.

Then she opened the case and lifted out a blue blanket. "And this is the baby blanket we found you in so long ago." Then she picked up a triangle of material and held it up. "And — this."

It looked like a red stylized 'S' on a field of yellow bordered in red. It dawned on me that she wanted to put it on the front of the outfit. I almost declined, but then I realized that she was right, the outfit did need something

else on it. Besides, the suitcase had been Dad's, and anything in it held a lot of significance to her. So I nodded.

"How long will it take you to get the symbol on the shirt?"

"Not long, maybe ten minutes. Why don't you go watch TV until I'm finished?"

"No, I'll wait here."

Then I remembered why people wouldn't be looking at my face. "On second thought, I'll be back in about ten minutes. I need to — to go pick up a little something."

I modeled it for her again — with the additional hidden accessory — and she loved it. Of course, I did too. "Oh, I wish your father were here! He'd be so thrilled!"

I still wasn't convinced of that, but I let it pass. It's not polite to argue with your mother, especially when she's just sewn a superhero outfit for you. "I'm just glad you didn't come up with something black or gray, like Batman's suit is supposed to be. I'd rather wear the leopard-print than anything that dark."

"Well, you're going to be a hero for the light, not the darkness. You need to be easily seen and easily recognized. And I love the way the cape turned out! It'll look great when you're flying."

I turned once more. "This should do it." Then I reached up and pulled off my glasses. Without them over my eyes and my hair fixed different, it should fool any casual man or woman on the street. "That's it, Mom. This is my new outfit." I gave her a hug and lifted her off the floor. "Thank you so much! You're an absolute lifesaver!"

She laughed over my shoulder. "Put me down! Thank you. Now all we have to do is figure out when and where you make your debut."

I nodded. "Yeah, but we can wait on that. Why don't we watch the colonists' shuttle launch? It's supposed to take off in just a few minutes."

The PA system was alive with constant status reports and updates on this and that, all things which Lois ignored as she tried to look like she was supposed to be where she was. She handed her boarding pass to the shuttle entry guard — it was just a piece of firm paper with no description, photograph, or identifying marks on it, no security at all — and stepped inside the hatchway.

This was it! There were only minutes to go before the launch. And she was in the perfect position to report on it. Things were going as smoothly as if she'd been officially cleared to board.

As she stepped inside and moved away from the flow of the real colonists, the PA announced, "T minus three minutes. Three minutes to launch."

Not much time. She needed to find a place to sit where she wouldn't be crushed by the G-forces the launch would generate. Maybe the compartment where she was hiding would be a good place.

She closed and bolted the hatch and looked around. Sure enough, there was a fold-out seat against the wall where she could strap in. As she unlatched it, someone on the PA announced that "The umbilical cord attached to the liquid fuel booster has been disengaged and secured. T minus one minute and counting."

The seat folded down and revealed several restraining straps. As she tried to figure out what strap held what part of her down, a beeping noise drew her attention.

That didn't sound right.

The beeping was coming from a small box attached to

the wall.

It didn't look right, either.

Upon closer inspection, the box revealed itself to be a bomb.

A BOMB?!?

There was a bomb on the shuttle! A digital timer embedded in enough plastic explosive to knock out the shuttle and send it crashing back to earth in a fiery death for everyone aboard and anyone unlucky enough to be under the wreck. As she yanked open the compartment door and yelled for help, she felt the booster engines fire.

Too late to get off the shuttle and she had to stop them! Not only did she not want to die, she didn't want the space program to fail. She yelled again but no one came.

There wasn't enough time to wait for help and the bomb was firmly affixed to the wall of the compartment. It wouldn't come off. She grabbed a pair of snips from a tool locker and started cutting electrical wires behind a maintenance hatch on the same wall as the bomb, hoping to get someone to help her. Failing that, maybe she could at least stop the launch craft from falling out of the sky and killing all those people.

The vibration from the engines increased. All she could do was keep cutting and keep hoping. Even if she never reported this story, she wouldn't let people die if she could help it.

Mom leaned against my shoulder as we watched the countdown on the TV. "There she blows, honey. I remember when the three of us watched the first moon landing. You sat in your father's lap and clapped and bounced like there was nothing better in the world. When you finally went to bed, you told us you wanted to be just like Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin." She smiled and sighed. "And now we're going to have an entire colony of humans actually living and working in space!"

I nodded and hugged her. "It is wonderful. And it gives me some hope."

She patted my chest. "I know, you wish you could find your people. I wish you could, too."

"It's okay. I think I came out on top on the deal, having you and Dad as parents."

She turned misty eyes to me. "Thank you, Clark. That's one of the nicest things you've said to me. And you've said a lot of nice things to this old lady over the years."

I was about to say something else nice when I heard something from the TV. The announcer repeated, "EPRAD has halted the countdown. There seems to be a problem with the electrical systems feeding power to the life support system in the main cabin. It's almost as if — wait, there's something — did someone just use the word 'sabotage' from the control floor?"

I'm sure Mom said something to me, but I wasn't there to hear it. Whatever outfit I was wearing was about to get its public debut. Fleeting, I hoped that the belt on the briefs held up while I was flying.

Lois felt the booster engines settle back and shut off. Good, she thought. At least if the bomb blows up it won't do it in the air. The colonists will have a better chance to survive.

She resumed pulling at the bomb, but her best efforts were for naught. If she'd had more time, maybe the screwdriver could have separated the timer from the C4 it was embedded in, but she didn't have any time.

And maybe she didn't have enough time to get away now.

Her only hope was for someone who had some idea of what to do to come in the compartment and help her. Someone with some training or expertise in bomb disposal would be best, but at this point she'd take help from anyone.

Even this guy in the blue tights wearing a — a red cape? Who was this guy, a circus clown? Or maybe one of those desperate weirdos who stood out at the street and held up signs to attract drivers into their businesses? Or maybe an escaped maniac?

Whoever he was, he looked vaguely familiar —

And then the maniac yanked off the timer and started rooting around inside the housing. "Hey!" she yelled. "Get away from that! Do you have any idea —"

He pulled out what looked like a detonator and —

"What are you doing? That's a bomb! You could set it off doing that!"

Then he swallowed it.

Lois knew that her last sight was going to be this idiot's insides splashing all over her. What a way to die, covered in someone else's intestines. She almost laughed as the bomb exploded inside his stomach and —

And —

And — nothing.

His cheeks bulged and he belched and he patted his chest twice and said "Excuse me."

That was it. She was dead and this was a post-traumatic death hallucination. It would slowly fade and there'd be a bright light and she'd move toward it and —

And — nothing. Again.

She focused on this — this wannabe Blue Man as her vision grayed at the edges and then sharpened again. She reached out and touched him with one hand. Solid, and therefore real. She pinched her other hand and felt the sharp pain. Apparently she wasn't dead.

"Who — what — who are you?"

He smiled and turned away.

That smile — something familiar —

She followed him out of the room into the corridor of the shuttle. The colonists were coming back from their launch couches with stricken looks on their faces. Then he stopped in front of Amy Platt and her wheelchair with his hands on his hips. Despite the circumstances — or maybe because of them — Lois was impressed.

"There was a bomb," she said. "He — he — ate it."

Those who looked at her clearly didn't believe her. She didn't mind. She'd seen it and she didn't believe her.

Then the man smiled at Amy and said, "Hi."

"Hi," returned the girl. "I like your costume."

"Thank you," he said. "My mother made it for me."

This guy has a mother? Wow, mused Lois, I'd hate to be her daughter-in-law. She must be a holy terror.

The man in blue and red said, "What's your name?"

"Amy. Amy Platt. Who are you?"

"I'm — a friend."

No name? thought Lois. Or is that he doesn't want us to know it? But if that's true, why is he dressed like a neon traffic light?

Amy smiled. "Can you teach me how to fly?"

"Not fly. But once this lab is operational, maybe you could walk. That's very possible."

A woman's voice came over the PA. "Attention colonists. The mission has been scrubbed. Prepare to

disembark.”

The colonists’ faces drooped even more. A man standing behind Amy said, “That’s it, then. It’s all over.”

“Why?” Lois asked. As she spoke, she realized that she’d just blown her cover. If she’d been a real colonist, she’d have known what the guy was talking about.

Melody Platt said, “Once the thrusters have been fired, they have to be replaced.”

The man who’d spoken earlier added, “We lose our launch window.” He sighed heavily. “We’ll just have to forget about Space Station Prometheus.”

A chorus of moans arose. Then the garishly dressed man said, “No. You don’t. There’s nothing wrong with this transport vehicle or the station. You only need to get there.”

Lois waited for someone to ask the obvious question, but no one did, so she did. “How are they supposed to do that?”

“Easy. I’ll give them a boost.”

He opened the main exit, then turned around. “Is there anyone on board who’s not supposed to be here?” No one spoke. “Anyone at all?”

Lois wasn’t going to confess. She glanced at Melody Platt, but the woman just smiled. Then the man — she had to find out his name, she couldn’t just keep calling him ‘the man,’ even in her head — looked straight at her. “How about you, ma’am?”

“What? Who, me?”

“Yes. What’s your specialty?”

He would ask that. “Um — I’m chronicling the voyage.”

It sounded lame, but maybe she could bluff him out.

“Where’s your acceleration couch? What level and what compartment?”

“Er — “ Nuts. She was busted.

He gave her a stern look. “You were in that access room. It’s a good thing you were there, because you found that bomb, but you might not have survived the launch sitting in a jump seat. At the very least you were risking serious spinal injuries.”

“Oh.” There wasn’t much else she could say.

“Please come with me, Miss — say, what is your name?”

“Lois Lane.”

“Very well, Miss Lane. If you’ll just wait outside and let the real colonists secure the outer hatch, I’ll see what I can do about sending them on their way.”

There was nothing else to do but follow his instructions. As Lois watched in awe from the gantry crane, the man stood under the booster engines and looked up at them intently. Then he floated up —

Her mind shut off for a moment. The guy swallows explosives and floats. It was almost too much to take in.

Then she realized that there was a breeze that hadn’t been there before. The launch vehicle, which had been a windbreak for her, was now lifting off the launch pad as if by magic. And the guy’s red cape was flapping majestically in the wind.

It wasn’t possible.

But it was happening.

This was some story! It was almost as good as — no, it was better than the one she’d expected! And it was an exclusive! Wait until Perry saw her copy! He’d tell some Elvis story that —

“Excuse me, ma’am.”

She turned to see two burly men in security uniforms

standing on the walkway. This didn’t look good.

“Yes?”

“Ma’am, you need to come with us, please.”

“But I’m watching the —”

“Right now.” The guard exhaled. “Please.”

Oh, well, thought Lois, it would be a good sidebar on the state of EPRAD’s security.

As I flew toward the Daily Planet with Lois in my arms, I thought about other times when I’d held a beautiful woman. There was Rachel, of course, and Lana, who was still beautiful even if she’d gained quite a bit of weight with her babies, and Aduke, the Nigerian princess who’d taught me ballroom dancing, and Tracy, the woman in Maine who’d wanted to marry me two years ago, and Miriam, the wild and free Australian girl I’d met in the Philippines, but none of them could hold a candle to Lois Lane.

I realized that she was having a little trouble breathing, so I slowed down and lost some altitude. “Sorry. I’m not used to carrying passengers.”

She let go with one hand and brushed her hair back. “No problem. I’m not used to being this kind of passenger, so I guess we’re even on that score.”

I didn’t have anything to say to that, so I just smiled.

“I didn’t get a chance to thank you,” she said.

“For what?”

She frowned. It reminded me of the frown she’d given me at the headline party when I’d told her she could trust me. Even when she frowned, she was beautiful. “For everything, actually, but specifically for getting me out of the clutches of EPRAD’s security people. They don’t blink.”

That sounded like a non sequitur. “Excuse me?”

“When I’m dealing with somebody in the Metropolis police or fire department or the DA’s office, I can usually get what I want just by staring at them. I stare, they stare back, and the first one to blink loses.”

I nodded. “I see. And the EPRAD people don’t blink?”

“Not a bit. I think they’ve had that capability surgically removed.”

I managed not to laugh out loud. “I’m sorry it took so long to rendezvous with Prometheus and that you were in there with them for most of the day.”

She shrugged. “No problem. Now I have a terrific sidebar for my story.”

“Sidebar?” It was a bit lame, pretending that I didn’t know what she was talking about, but maybe I could distance this person — whoever he was — from Clark Kent, at least a little bit.

“It’s a companion piece to a larger story, usually fits in one column on one page. It usually details or further explains something mentioned in the main story.”

I nodded as if I’d just learned something. “Got it.”

She smiled and looked forward again. “I can’t wait to get to the Planet. Could you come up to the news floor with me? I’m not sure my editor will believe me if he doesn’t see you himself.”

I smiled. “I think I can do a little better than that.”

Lois tried to look suave and debonair and nonchalant as the man in red and blue blew open the doors to the Planet’s upper observation deck and floated through it carrying her in his arms. She could see Perry’s face — he’d been stunned into silence for once in his life — and Jimmy’s reaction — he was trying very hard not to jump up and

down in place as he snapped photo after photo — and Cat’s open-mouthed attempt not to laugh hysterically as they settled gently on the middle of the newsroom floor.

Everyone moved aside as they landed. He set her down on her feet as gently as she might lower a kitten to a pillow at bedtime, then looked into her face as if searching for something he hoped he wouldn’t find. What that might be, Lois didn’t know, and at the moment she didn’t much care.

She heard Cat mutter, “I don’t believe it.”

“What, a man who flies?” asked a co-worker.

“No. Lois Lane, literally swept off her feet. It’s — it’s fantastic! In every sense of the word, it’s simply fantastic!”

She’d fill Cat in later. Right now, she wanted to memorize every line in this incredible man’s face, every curve of his shoulders, every twinkle in his eye, every tilt of his warm smile. And she was tantalized by the feeling that she’d seen him before somewhere. It felt like a recent memory, too, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

The man smiled again — he really had a killer smile to go along with those fabulous shoulders and chest and waist and — stop drooling, Lois, you horn dog! He turned to go, but Lois touched his elbow to stop him. “I think — considering the fact that I saw you first — that I was the first one to see you, that is — you owe me an exclusive interview.”

“You mean, in addition to the one we had in the air just now?”

“Well — that was hardly a proper interview, now was it?”

“I suppose not. Is that the rule, Ms. Lane?”

She smiled back, happy that he was still willing to banter with her. “No. But — I’d appreciate it. Very much.”

“In that case, I’ll be glad to give you a proper interview.” He turned to go.

And he floated up toward the doors where they’d entered. “Wait a minute!” she shouted. “How will I find you?”

He looked back over his shoulder, his face somehow stern and inviting at the same time. “I’ll be around.”

Then he was gone out the window, flying over the city.

Cat ran up behind her and asked, “Did you find out what the ‘S’ stands for?”

“What?”

“The ‘S’ on his chest. That’s what it looks like to me, anyway.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess it does. Huh. Maybe — super?”

Cat’s voice dripped sarcasm. “The guy’s name is Super?”

Lois came out of her reverie. “Super? No — it’s — he’s a super man — Superman?” She turned to Cat and announced. “That’s it! His name is Superman!”

“That’s what he told you?”

“No! He said he was a friend and that he was here to help! I’m naming him Superman!”

Cat shrugged. “Okay, if that’s what you — ”

“Jimmy! How many usable shots did you get?”

“Huh? Oh! At least ten, maybe fifteen.”

“Great! Get them developed as soon as you can. Perry, I’ll have the eyewitness story of how Superman saved the colonists’ transport on your desk in an hour! I know it’s too late for the evening edition, but it’ll work great for tomorrow morning’s page one!”

“Of course it will, Lois, but — ”

“And we can still slide a photo and teaser caption into tonight’s edition! Take care of that, will you?”

“Hey, Lois, who do you think runs this — ”

“Cat, come with me! I need your point of view for a couple of sidebars.”

“Sure, Lois. Anything you — ”

Lois turned to the crowd around her and clapped her hands twice. “Come on, people! Get back to work! We’ve got a newspaper to print!”

Behind her, she heard her boss call out, “Hey, that’s my line!”

“One hour, Perry! Look for my story in your inbox! It’s going to be great!”

“Of course it will,” she heard him sigh.

She was in her element, reporting the news as it happened and telling the public the truth about everything. The only thing that would have made it better would have been having Clark beside her to —

To do what? Write? She could do that by herself. To hold her hand? She absolutely didn’t need him doing that. To edit her copy? No way. She told herself that Lois Lane needed a man like a fish needed a bicycle.

Yet her partner’s absence bothered her, as if her life were out of balance unless she knew where he was and what he was doing. She’d known him less than a week, and already he was like an irritated tooth her tongue wouldn’t leave alone.

Echh. That was a metaphor she wanted to remember.

A determined frown grew on her face. She’d ponder the state of Clark Kent versus the universal equilibrium later. At the moment, she had work to do.

Chapter Ten

It was a little after midnight in Metropolis. I’d been helping out at car wrecks, traffic jams, the occasional robbery, and an in-flight emergency over Virginia for most of the evening, and it felt good to use my powers openly. Several people thanked me profusely, two women offered to let me spend the night at their homes — one of the women wore a wedding ring and it wasn’t clear to me whether or not she wanted us to share a bed — and one man offered to pay me. I thanked the man and asked him to pick out a good charity and send the money there. He almost fell over himself as he agreed to do it.

Both of the women who’d offered me “shelter” seemed a bit disappointed when I told them I already had a place to sleep. Neither of them looked as good as Cat Grant, and they certainly didn’t come anywhere near Lois’ standard of beauty.

The thought surprised me. I had to stop comparing every woman to Lois. That was not a profitable line of thought.

And one mugger offered me a bribe to let him go — a hundred twenty-three dollars, his take from a previous robbery. I held him until a police car drove by and his latest intended victim flagged them down. After a lengthy explanation from both myself and the victim — along with a quick flight demonstration — the officers agreed to arrest the mugger and attempt to return the loot to its rightful owner.

I felt like I’d actually accomplished some really good things. But it was getting late, honest people were mostly headed home, and I wanted to get some sleep after my busy day. But there was one more errand I needed to take care of first. I only hoped my intended conversational partner was still awake.

He was. I wasn’t surprised that he was still hard at

work. A man such as he didn't knock off early without a specific purpose in mind.

I stood on the railing of Luthor's office balcony until he noticed me. He finally caught sight of me and turned in his chair. It was too bad that all the documents I could see on his desk were for legitimate businesses. I would have loved to have gotten proof of his criminal involvement right then and there, especially if he were to invite me to enter his office.

I walked toward the door and he flipped a switch to raise it. Then he applauded sarcastically. "Astonishing debut, Superman!"

I lifted my eyebrows in surprise at his form of address. "Haven't you heard?" he asked, his tone just short of mocking me. "That's what they're calling you. It's international news! So, to what do I owe this honor?"

Now that I was standing in front of him, I wasn't sure my idea to confront him was really a good one. It might backfire on me. But it was too late to fly away now. I tried to lower my voice to a register Clark Kent wouldn't normally use. "I came to tell you that I know who you are," I said as I stepped closer. "Who you — really — are."

He tilted his head to one side as if he had no inkling of what I was talking about. I folded my arms and locked eyes with him, trying to be as intimidating as possible. "I suppose, on its face, it was a good plan. Destroy Prometheus so you could put your own space station in its place. Not only would you make billions from the patents on the vaccines developed and the patents which you would have owned, but you would also be the supposed savior of the space program."

He stepped away and made a production out of lighting a cigar. "Well, it's an interesting theory, Superman, but I'm afraid that's all it is."

I wanted him to show some reaction to my accusations, some kind of remorse. I wanted to know that he was still human under that facade of philanthropy and that very real criminal patina. "You are also responsible for the deaths of at least four people. Commander Ladderman, Dr. Samuel Platt, Dr. Antoinette Baines. Not to mention her assistant. Those probably aren't the only skeletons in your closet."

He didn't appear the least bit intimidated, much less frightened. Not even nervous. "So you've become both my judge and executioner?"

I tried to look stern and unyielding. "Like any other citizen of the planet, I must obey the law. I am not above it. You, on the other hand, seem to believe that you are above the law, that it doesn't apply to you."

He adjusted his sports coat over his turtleneck sweater. I had to admit, it was a good look for him. "I hold a certain position in this city —"

"Yes," I interrupted, "you do. You have the honest people of this city convinced that you're a successful businessman and philanthropist. And there is nothing that would please me more than to see you dethroned and behind bars like any common criminal." I paused for effect. "And that day will come."

His cigar must have been a good one. He certainly seemed to enjoy it. Or maybe he just enjoyed the thought of my challenging him. He lifted his eyebrows and said, "I trust not. But, as they say, let the games begin."

"The games?"

He smiled as if he'd already won something. "The contest, Superman! The one between yourself and me." He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not certain why you've chosen

me, but I gleefully accept the challenge." He stepped closer and blew a stream of smoke in my face. "And I'm sure that this contest will be — most interesting."

Well. If I'd expected him to be quaking in his hand-made Italian loafers at my pronouncement, I was apparently destined for disappointment. I had nothing more to say to him, so I turned to leave.

But I couldn't resist taking one more shot. "By the way, if you ever want to find me —" I lifted up above the railing and glared down at him "— all you have to do is look up."

As I whisked out of sight, I glanced over my shoulder and saw him gazing up into the sky. The expression on his face was a mixture of surprise and determination.

But the thing I hoped I'd see — fear — wasn't there. Not only was he not afraid of me, he wasn't afraid of being found out or arrested or even accused of wrongdoing. He was probably the most amoral person I'd ever heard of, much less ever met.

And I wondered if what I'd just done had been a smart thing or a dumb thing. On the plus side, I'd let him know that I was on to his game and that I'd be watching him. But maybe I should have been more cautious. Maybe telling a cagey cat like Lex Luthor that he wasn't a mystery to me was giving him an advantage. After all, he had no rules, and I'd just told him that I did have them. And he wasn't the kind of man who believed in the concept of a fair fight.

But it was too late to change things now. I'd thrown down the gauntlet, and he'd picked it up and tossed it back in my face. It shouldn't have surprised me.

Now all I could do was hope that I was as ready for him as he would be for me.

Lois lurched up out of a deep sleep into panicked awareness.

It was dark and she was trapped in a small room with a bomb and she was tied to a folding metal chair with cloth chains and the smell of the chemicals was making her nauseous and something evil was stalking her. She gasped for breath and fought her bindings for a moment before realizing that she was wrapped up in her own comforter on her own bed. She threw off the covers and ran to the bathroom to stand over the open toilet.

Her stomach settled down without completing its rebellion. She drank three glasses of water, one after the other, and towed her face and arms dry. Then she sniffed the shoulder of her pajamas and decided to change into fresh clothing.

Her dream, disjointed as it had been, stayed with her, as often do the dreams of those suddenly wrenched from them back into reality. She glanced at the bedside clock. Almost five-thirty, so it wouldn't do much good to go back to sleep. And she'd been up until almost midnight writing up stories of Superman's rescues and various good deeds across the city until Angelo, the Planet's night editor, had ordered her to go home and get some sleep.

She pulled off her still damp sleeping garments and put on fresh underwear, then folded her sheets back so they'd air dry during the day. A quick glance into the living room revealed that if the night-owl who called herself Lucy Lane had come home after Lois' bedtime last night, she'd made it to her own bedroom without kicking off her shoes or dropping other articles of clothing first. That usually meant that she hadn't yet returned.

Feeling safe, Lois ventured to the kitchen for a glass of orange juice. Her dream was still in the forefront of her

mind, so she decided to review it and see if there was any meaning or insight to be gleaned from it. And to keep the night feeling going, she didn't turn on the light. The nightlight on the wall was illumination enough for her.

The first thing she remembered was the end of the dream, the part that had awakened her. There had been a terrifying feeling of being hunted by someone or something — no, it had been a thing, some monster in human guise, with fangs and claws hidden but ready to extend at a moment's notice. That might not mean anything specific, though. She was on several hit lists already. Still, as soon as she got to work, she'd have Jimmy check on the people her investigations had put in prison. Maybe one of them was out and hunting her.

Her dream had begun so well, with her soaring through the clouds wearing a very elegant black evening gown. That part was easy. She'd been flying with Superman, and she'd heard soft music accompanying them. But he wasn't carrying her, just holding her hand as she glided above the city beside him. She remembered looking at him in the dream and wondering if he could read her mind.

Of course he doesn't read minds, she chided herself. If he could do that, he'd have reacted the day before while he'd been carrying her. Some of her passing thoughts would have been censored by Penthouse. She'd have learned then whether or not he could super-blush.

She tried to visualize Superman in flight beside her. He'd seemed open and friendly as she'd rested in his arms, yet stern and firm at the same time. And there was still a tug of familiarity with the face in her memory.

She thought of Claude and was almost surprised not to burst into tears. Oh, she still missed him terribly, but this time the pain didn't threaten to cut through her chest and dump her heart out onto the floor at her feet. She smiled for a moment as she thought about him, then lifted her orange juice in remembrance of her late husband. Irrationally, she felt a warm frisson of comfort slide over her skin, as if Claude were smiling at her from whatever perch he now occupied in eternity.

The knowledge that Claude had loved her so much enabled her to take a step back from any other man and observe him more objectively than she might have had she not known such happiness. That really helped in thinking about Superman, because as far as she could tell there was not one thing about him that she didn't like. If not for the memory of her loving relationship with Claude, his very presence might have completely overthrown her reason.

Claude couldn't have compared to Superman either on a physical level or even with his looks, but Claude had loved her and she had loved him. That made all the difference, as far as she was concerned, and it meant that at least on one level, Superman couldn't compete with Claude Rochambeau.

She finished her juice and put the glass in the sink, then frowned as she considered how familiar Superman had seemed to her as he'd stood beside her, tall and confident, in the colonists' launch. And he still twanged some chord of familiarity in her mind. She tried to remember where she'd seen Superman's face before. On the subway? No, that didn't fit. Had he attended or even participated in a recent news conference? That didn't ring a bell either. Maybe she'd seen him in the Chocolate Heaven? No, he didn't look like he ate much chocolate. Was it —

— didn't look like he ate much chocolate —

A cascade of memories tumbled into her mind and

dropped her to the floor in a boneless heap.

Clark ate like an eight-year-old but looked like Mr. Hardbody.

Superman's physique was a bodybuilder's dream.

Clark's mother was an artist who lived and worked in Kansas.

Superman told Amy Platt that his mother had made his costume.

Clark had a killer smile.

Superman had a killer smile.

Clark had an overdeveloped sense of right and wrong.

Superman had been out most of the night saving lives and catching criminals in the act. Nothing seemed to be beneath his notice. And she had neither seen nor heard from Clark since she'd sneaked off to stow away on the colonists' launch vehicle.

Clark had torn the steel door to the EPRAD hangar off its hinges and thrown it more than thirty feet.

Superman had lifted the shuttle into orbit.

Clark had intended to do something to save them when he'd burst into the hangar.

Superman had swallowed a bomb with no more harm than a belch.

Clark had broken them loose from his chains and her cargo bindings with ease.

Superman was far, far stronger than anyone Lois had ever heard of.

Clark had carried both her and Jimmy an impossible distance to safety when the chemicals in the hangar had exploded.

Superman had flown Lois from EPRAD's launch site back to the Daily Planet effortlessly.

Clark hadn't been able to tell her how he'd gotten from the Planet to the hangar.

Superman didn't need a taxi.

Clark hadn't been the least bit bothered when Luthor had pointed that sword at his throat.

Superman seemed to be invulnerable. The guy could swallow bombs without injury.

Clark was eloquent and well-spoken and liked to joke when it was appropriate.

Superman understood colloquial English and had a good sense of humor.

Clark was self-effacing almost to the point of shyness.

Superman was confident of what he could do without bragging about it.

A man had been saved from a sewer collapse just before Clark showed up looking and smelling like he'd been crawling through a sewer.

And no one had ever explained the bulldozer malfunction which had enabled Clark to get the story of the theater closing, scoop Lois, and get hired at the Planet in the first place.

It all fit together. What a story! It would win her every journalistic prize available. She'd be feted from Andover to Zurich. She'd be the one who broke the true story of Superman's real identity!

If she was right.

But it had to be! There was no other explanation that fit the facts. The hairstyle was different, but it was the same shade. The height, the build, the stride, they were all the same or very close. Even their voices were similar. Clark Kent was Superman!

Her train of thought was logical. Her conclusion was logical. But it wasn't reasonable. Why would someone with

those abilities hide them? Why reveal himself now? Why would he pretend to be a normal person? If she could do all those wonderful things, she'd do them all day long and tell everyone who she was!

Of course, she'd never have a private life. She'd be a target for the press, for charitable organizations, for criminals — her family wouldn't be safe! Lucy wouldn't be safe!

She gasped as she saw in her mind's eye what her life as an openly super-powered woman would be like. And it wasn't a pretty sight.

She'd have no personal time. None whatsoever. She'd always be at the beck and call of anyone needing or wanting help only she could give.

She'd never be sure that any man would love her for herself or for what she could do for him.

She'd have to quit the Planet. No one with anything at all to hide would trust her to interview them without fearing what she might do.

The government might even get in on the act. How would she react if some paranoid Federal drone decided she was a threat instead of a friend?

Anyone she cared for, or appeared to care for, might be used as leverage to get her to do or not do something. She might as well paint concentric circles on her back and chest and hand out t-shirts that read "Threaten Me — I Know Lois Lane."

Sometimes epiphanies suck, she mused.

If she were right — if Clark were indeed Superman — then revealing his true identity would be the worst thing she could possibly do to him. Their budding friendship would never survive such a betrayal. And afterward, he'd never be able to trust her no matter how she tried to make it up to him, not for the rest of his life. And she'd surely put his mother in mortal danger, not to mention the people in his home town, the girls he'd dated, anyone he'd had extended contact with at any time in his life —

No. This story would never be published, at least not by her. True or not, she'd never breathe a word of it to anyone.

And she couldn't let Clark know that she knew. This was his secret, and he seemed to have some very good reasons for keeping it. He wasn't going to tell her now — they'd only known each other for like a week! And she understood completely. If she had a secret like his, she wouldn't tell him about it yet either. She'd have to earn his trust before he'd share this with her.

The thought that he probably would tell her eventually made her smile. Maybe he didn't trust her enough, not today, but she trusted him to tell her when the time was right.

Then she heard the front door open and close. "Lois?" whispered Lucy. "Are you up yet?"

She laughed. Leave it to her little sister to be her anchor to reality. "Yes, Lucy," she called out, "I'm up." Then she remembered that she was sitting on the kitchen floor, clad only in what their mother had insisted on calling her 'unmentionables.' "I really hope you're alone, Punky."

"I'm alone. Why?"

"I'm in the kitchen and I'm not dressed."

Lois heard her sister drop her coat on the couch — couldn't she find a hanger and put it in the closet? — and slide through the still-dark living room toward her. "What's wrong? And why are you naked in the kitchen?"

My sister is a creature of extremes, mused Lois. If I'm not fully dressed, then I must be stark naked.

She looked down at herself and shrugged. "Close enough, I guess," she muttered to herself.

Lucy turned on the kitchen light and leaned against the doorpost as a smirk spread over her face. "Well, well, well. Have you been drinking or did you get lucky last night?"

"Neither, smarty-pants. I had a pretty intense dream, that's all."

Lucy's mouth twitched. "Must have been a real doozy to get you to walk around the apartment in your lacy black lingerie." She opened the refrigerator and pulled out a soft drink can. "Did you at least get lucky in your dream?"

"Lucy! You're incorrigible!"

The younger Lane sister reached out her hand. "I sure hope so."

Lois took it, but before she pulled to lift herself to her feet, she asked, "Wait a minute. Have you been drinking?"

"You mean, am I as likely to fall over on you as I am to help you up?"

"Yeah."

Lucy chuckled. "I'm not drunk and I won't fall. Come on up. We'll sit on the couch and tell each other about our respective evenings."

Lois gave a mock groan as Lucy pulled her to her feet. "Sounds good to me. Just let me get dressed."

"Or," Lucy said with an impish grin, "I could strip down to my bra and panties and we can sit on the couch together and talk about boys like we used to when you were in high school."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Maybe you should just go to bed and get some sleep. It's about time for me to get ready for work anyway."

Lucy's response was occluded by a jaw-cracking yawn. "Wow! Okay, we can put this off until you get home. I'm still waiting to find out if you got lucky in your dream."

Lois shoved her sister's shoulder and guided her out of the kitchen and across the living room. "Put the soda back in the fridge and get some sleep, Punky! Maybe when you wake up you'll remember your manners."

Lucy gave her sister the once-over. "I'm not the one who's almost naked sitting on the kitchen floor, smelling like I'd just run a ten-K for time."

"Lucy, you're —"

"Incorrigible, I know. Go to work, okay? You'll be happier there anyway."

Lucy shuffled to her bedroom door as Lois pondered her sister's last statement. Was she a workaholic? Was she hiding from life behind her career? She didn't know, and there wasn't time to think about that. She still had a shower to take and a taxi to catch and bad guys to expose and a Superman to protect. Time for Mad Dog Lane to return to the fray.

The morning after my 'debut performance,' as my mom had termed it, I walked down the ramp and saw Jimmy giving Lois a file folder. "Hey, Jimmy," I called out. "Glad you're back at work. How's the head?"

He shrugged. "The doctor says I'm lucky that it's harder than it should be. Perry said it was a good thing or I might not have recovered so quickly." He pointed at his bandage-free cranium. "But, as you can see, I'm hale and hearty and ready for action!"

Lois smirked. "Hale and hearty? Weren't they a comedy team on the radio a few decades ago?"

He turned to her in mock anger. "How can you treat me so badly after I almost gave my life for your story?"

Wouldn't that have made a great headline? 'Promising photojournalist cut down before he achieves greatness.' That's a natural!"

Her eyes twinkled. "Yeah, a natural disaster."

Jimmy mimed being stabbed in the chest, then mimed pulling out a knife. He offered the imaginary weapon to Lois. "Excuse me, madam, but is this yours?"

Her eyebrow twitched. "You keep it. I've got lots more." She made shooing motions at him. "Go! Earn your pay, smooth one."

He grinned and winked at me, then left on some vital errand. Lois turned to me with a strange expression on her face, then it cleared. "Hi, Clark. Where've you been?"

"Around."

Luckily she didn't press me for details, but she did start walking back up the ramp to the elevators. "Well, not that it's anywhere near as exciting as the stories you covered on the Smallville Press, but Superman was in the newsroom yesterday and I've just about nailed down the exclusive."

"Congratulations, Lois. I know it'll be a great story."

She stopped and turned to me, her face aglow with — something, I wasn't sure what. "Clark, you should have seen him. Up close, he is the most — the second most magnificent figure of a man I've ever seen."

She didn't say who was first, but I figured she was probably talking about her late husband. "It sounds like he made quite an impression on you."

"Well, yeah, he did. He's a very impressive guy." She started for the elevators again. "Why? Are you jealous?"

I hoped this was the friendly banter it seemed to be. "Of Superman? Should I be?"

She turned as if to tease me, but then her face grew serious. "No. Superman is an ideal, a symbol for truth and justice as much as he is a real person who chooses to use his extraordinary abilities to help others. You," she said as her face grew impish again, "on the other hand, are my partner, and since you still lack sufficient experience investigating and reporting the news, you are still the junior partner."

"Fair enough. Hey, wait, where are we going?"

"Terrorist shootout on Sixth and Middleton. First reports say that Superman disarmed the bad guys and freed the hostages, but he didn't hang around to answer questions. We're going to interview the officers on the scene and the former hostages." The elevator doors opened and suddenly she was in my face. "And Kent? I'll ask the questions this time."

"Yes, ma'am." I'd rather she write the bulk of the Superman coverage anyway.

I stood behind her shoulder in the elevator and smiled to myself. I'd been right. Working with Lois Lane was going to be the greatest challenge of my life.

I already loved it.

Chapter Eleven

As Lois had known they would, they got more information from the freed hostages than the other reporters did. Clark's trust-me smile and his ability to reach people on an emotional level let them open up to him. He was proving to be more of an asset than Lois had initially suspected.

He helped her calm one woman in her mid-fifties who had seemed to be as afraid of Superman as she had been of her captors. She was the one who described how Superman had grabbed an assault rifle by the barrel and crushed it,

then had caught two bullets fired by a second gunman and aimed at another hostage. She also described Superman's face as he disarmed the gunman who'd fired the shots as "hot enough to melt steel."

Lois had sneaked a glance at Clark at that point. He'd actually gone a little pale, and his eyes were wide with something close to shock. There was something in his past that made situations like that difficult for him, and she hoped he'd gotten the message to control himself at all times.

Lois wrapped up the questioning and called in the story, and she made sure that Clark heard that his name would be second on the byline. As she hung up the pay phone, she turned to her partner and said, "Looks like our work here is done. How about some lunch? Assuming, of course, that Cat doesn't mind."

He frowned slightly. "Why would Cat mind if we had lunch together?"

"Well, you — I thought you might be interested in her. Personally, I mean."

The frown faded into a small grin. "Oh. To tell you the truth, although I think she's a very nice person and she's obviously a good friend to you, I hadn't planned to ask her out."

Lois' grin was tinged with a shade of relief. "That's good. Because she's got a date tomorrow night and I was concerned that you weren't moving fast enough for her."

His grin twisted with irony she didn't think he knew was there. "I'm pretty fast, but I don't think I'm in her league."

She thrust the double meaning down and asked, "So we're on for lunch? My treat."

He smiled wider and nodded. "Sure. I'll get the next one."

She pursed her lips for a moment, then chuckled. "It all goes on our expense account, Clark. Didn't Jimmy fill you in?"

He tilted his head. "Sure he did. I just wanted to see how far you planned to take the kidding."

Her hand found his sleeve and she tugged him toward her Jeep. "Not that far. I'm not real big into hazing the new guy."

"Thanks. I'm not either."

She pulled out her keys. "That figures, you being the new guy and all."

His laugh was Waterford crystal edged with ermine. "As always, your analysis is spot on. Where do you want to go eat?"

"You like Italian?"

There was that starlight smile again. "You have no idea."

Lois put her fork down and sighed as she gazed at the thinly scattered remains of her meal. "Mama Teglia has outdone herself this time. That was almost too wonderful for words." She looked across the small table to her partner. "What do you think about this place? Isn't it great? And the food is always terrific!"

Clark dabbed his lips with his napkin. "It's at least as good as anything I've ever had in Rome or Palermo."

She gave him a skeptical glance, then her face cleared and she nodded. "That's right, you've traveled quite a bit. Sounds to me like you've just about circumnavigated the globe."

"Yeah. Took me longer than it took Magellan, though."

“But you made it back home.” He averted his eyes. “You did, didn’t you?”

He pressed his lips together and took a short, sharp breath. “I left home not long after I graduated from college and didn’t get back to Smallville until earlier this year.”

“Really? Even while your mother was making such a name for herself in the art world?”

He turned flat brown eyes to her. “Yes. Even then.” He hesitated, then continued, “I wrote lots of letters and managed to call her as often as I could, but no, I didn’t go home.”

Lois put her napkin on her plate and pushed it to the other side of the table. “Why is that, Clark?” she asked softly.

His hands kneaded each other in his lap. “You don’t want to add my troubles to yours.”

She reached out and rested her hand on his shoulder. “We haven’t known each other for very long, Clark, but I believe I can trust you. I hope you feel that you can trust me. Besides, a burden shared is a burden lessened.”

He lifted his head sharply and opened his mouth, then snapped it shut and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I almost said something insensitive and stupid.”

“But you didn’t. So there’s no need for an apology.” She moved her hand back. “If you don’t want to tell me, you don’t have to. I can’t force you to, and I won’t try. But I am willing to listen if you’re willing to talk.”

He closed his eyes for a long moment, then opened them and looked at the table. “I guess, since you told me something about your life, you should know something about my background too.” He shifted on the bench, then wiped his mouth with one hand. “My father died when I was a junior in college. By the time I graduated, I was engaged to a young woman I’d known in high school. We’d talked about wedding dates, what music to use, what she wanted her dress to look like, that sort of thing. We were pretty serious about it.” He lifted his eyes to hers. “You know what I’m talking about, right?”

Lois smiled. “Claude and I got married in a judge’s office on a Friday evening. We wore our work clothes and spent our honeymoon at the Lexor. Three nights and two days, then we went back to work Monday morning and spent the day knocking people over with the news. I didn’t get a fancy wedding.”

“But you got Claude out of the deal.”

“Yes. That made up for not having the big frilly dress.” She laughed aloud. “On top of that, I didn’t have my mother’s idea of a wedding.”

He relaxed enough to grin slightly. “I guess that’s a plus.”

“It was. But we were talking about you, not me. What was this girl’s name?”

His eyes clouded over. “Rachel Harris. She was the sheriff’s only daughter.”

Instead of making perfunctory jokes about not keeping her out late or putting a hickey on her neck, Lois just nodded for him to continue.

“Anyway. We dated through college and just kind of drifted into being engaged. I wasn’t all that thrilled at first when people I barely knew came up to me and asked me about our wedding plans or where we’d live or how many kids we wanted, but I came to realize that being engaged to Rachel gave me a — a level of acceptance in the community I’d never known before.”

Lois frowned. “Why was that?”

“Because I was adopted. People used to talk about me when I was little, and I heard and understood a lot more than they thought I did. It made me feel like an intruder, an outsider, an interloper in their lives. Oh, I know they all didn’t feel that way, and the ones who did feel that way didn’t make it their life’s main focus, but I felt it all the same.”

He stopped and took a drink. The waiter approached the table and Lois gestured for him to wait. “When my dad died,” Clark continued, “it was great to see all the support the town gave my mom and me. And Rachel helped a lot, too. I think that’s when I really fell in love with her.”

Lois waited for a moment, then took a sip of her soda. As she put it down, she asked in a soft, matter-of-fact voice, “What happened?”

Clark flexed his hands twice and licked his lips. “After we both graduated — Rachel had a degree in law enforcement and went to work in the sheriff’s office with her dad — I took over as editor of the Smallville Press. We’d picked a wedding date in the fall and reserved the church and the room for the reception and the band and everything. And then — then she got caught in a hostage situation at the town bank. Three men from Missouri tried to rob the place.” He snorted and shook his head. “They thought they were the modern-day James gang, carrying on the finest traditions of Frank and Jesse. Idiots.” He stopped and swallowed hard. “And Rachel was out of uniform and wasn’t carrying a weapon. She couldn’t defend herself.”

Lois scooted closer to him and put her hand on his. “She got hurt, didn’t she?”

He seemed close to tears. “One of the thieves shot her in the back and in the leg. She recovered but she — she couldn’t be a cop anymore.” He stopped and suppressed a sob. “Those bullets destroyed her life’s dream. And I let it happen.”

She squeezed his hand. “No you didn’t.”

“You don’t understand! I could have done — I should have done something! I should have saved her!”

“Where were you when she was shot?”

He clenched his teeth together. “Right behind the counter in the bank, about twelve feet away.”

It was obvious to her that telling this story was taking a toll on him, but now that he’d started she didn’t want him to stop. He seemed to feel a need to share it with someone. “What were you doing there?”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I had sneaked in the back way. I saw it start and I got in before the police covered all the exits. One of the gunmen was in the back and I took him down silently. I was trying to figure out how to handle the other two when — when the bullets started flying.”

She understood. He’d been right there and hadn’t been able to help the girl he was supposed to marry. “Clark? Was there any warning? Did anybody yell ‘I’m gonna shoot’ or something like that?”

“No,” he shuddered. “A Smallville policeman outside the bank — not one of Sheriff Harris’s officers — opened fire first and the gunman emptied his assault rifle and — and Rachel almost died.”

“Then you didn’t ignore someone in danger, did you?”

“What? No! Of course not! What do you — ”

“And you didn’t abandon her to them, did you?”

“No! I — ”

“And you tried your best to help everyone there, didn’t you?”

He stopped and stared at her. She hoped she hadn't tipped her knowledge of his Superman identity, because she still believed that he needed to be the one to tell her. But she also had to get through his defenses and into his mind and heart on this subject, this thing he was carrying around his neck like an anvil-shaped albatross.

Still staring, he almost whispered, "Yes. I did my best."

"Then you couldn't have done more. It wasn't your fault."

His gaze wandered off somewhere toward the ceiling. "Superman could have done more, could have saved her."

She nodded and released her grip on his hand. "You know what, Clark? I think Superman is a great guy and he's going to save a lot of lives and protect lots of property and catch lots of bad guys. But even he can't keep everyone from getting hurt or dying. Even Superman has his limits."

"But I was there, Lois! I was right there and I could have done something else but I didn't!"

She sighed. "I'm not what anyone would call a religious person, Clark, but I do know two or three things about theology. First, I know that God exists. Second, I know that I'm not God."

He lifted an eyebrow when she paused. "What's the third thing?"

"The third thing is that you aren't God either."

The statement seemed to slap him across the mouth. His jaw loosened and his eyes widened, and he stuttered, "That's — you don't — but —"

"Clark. Look at me." She waited until she had his full attention before continuing. "Did Rachel blame you for what happened to her?"

"Uh — well — no."

"What did she say?"

"Before she found out she — that she'd never be a cop again — she chewed me out for being so reckless." He sighed. "I could never make her understand that I wasn't being reckless. She got hurt because I was being too careful."

She knew what he meant. He was telling her that he'd never admitted to Rachel just how different he was. That they'd been engaged before he'd shared his biggest secret with her.

That was not a good thing, but she'd let him deal with that decision on his own. What she felt he needed to know now was that no one blamed him for Rachel's injuries but him.

"Did her father blame you?"

He rolled his eyes. "He was even louder than Rachel was. According to him, I was reckless, unwise, impulsive, quixotic, and downright unreliable, and I had no more business trying to help than a snapping turtle in a beauty contest."

Lois felt her jaw slacken. "He actually called you quixotic?"

He nodded. "He's very literary."

She allowed herself a chuckle, then got back to business. "So what I'm hearing is that nobody blames you for Rachel's injuries, not the law, not her father, not the bank, and not even Rachel herself. Is that right?"

He leaned back a little. "Well — yes, I guess so."

"So why do you think you're the only one who's right about this? Why do you think that you could have and should have resolved that situation with no injuries or damage?"

His mouth opened and closed once or twice. Lois

thought it made him look like a fish.

Then he set his jaw. "There are things about me that you don't know," he insisted.

"Fine," she conceded. "There are always things about other people I don't know. That's one of the reasons I became a reporter, to learn those things. But do any of those things I don't know about you alter the basic question, which is this: did you cause Rachel to get shot?"

"Of course not!"

"Good. Then I can tell you that unless you can show me that you're the one who guided those gunmen to that bank on that particular day at the time when Rachel would be in the bank and out of uniform without a gun, or that you're the one who actually pulled the trigger on the gun that shot her, you're not the one to blame for her injuries."

"But —"

"No buts!" she insisted. "That's the way life works, Clark. If we don't physically perform the act which injures someone, and if we don't knowingly put that someone in harm's way, we're not responsible. That's not just the law, that's a valid moral position."

He sat back in thought for a moment, then his eyes flashed and he leaned forward. "Are you telling me," he almost snarled, "that you're not responsible for what happened to your husband? That Claude's death wasn't your fault?"

Her mind went on strike for a moment as she replayed her statements to her partner. In trying to convince him that he wasn't to blame for Rachel's being shot despite his special abilities, she'd also talked herself into a corner where she either had to admit that she wasn't responsible for Claude's death or retract everything she'd told him.

But she'd believed what she'd said when she'd said it. She hadn't quite realized that she'd been quoting her therapist, but her logic had paralleled Dr. Friskin's all the way. Of course, Lois had been far more abrupt and direct than the doctor had been, but the basic message had been the same. And if Clark wasn't responsible for Rachel's injuries, she wasn't responsible for Claude's death.

Now she had a choice to make. She could either agree with Dr. Friskin and declare herself not guilty, or she could keep her guilt and grief close where the pain was disabling but familiar and comfortable. And no one could do this for her. It had to be her decision and hers alone.

Epiphanies definitely and truly sucked.

She came back to herself and saw Clark frantically waving his hand in front of her face. "Lois! Are you okay? Come on, talk to me!"

She shook her head and frowned as she reached out to push his hand away. "I'm fine! What are you doing, flagging down a taxi?"

He exhaled deeply. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! You just shut down for almost half a minute! I was afraid that you were going catatonic on me!"

She smiled. "No. I'm okay. I was just thinking."

His eyes narrowed back to normal and he relaxed. "That must have been some kind of dynamite thought."

"It was," she conceded. "It was very informative. And to answer the last question I heard you ask before that little side trip through my psyche, I've decided that I'm not responsible for Claude's death."

He frowned and sat back. "The way you're saying that — it sounds almost as if it's the first time you've spoken those words."

She nodded. "It's the first time I've said them and

meant them. My therapist has been trying to help me work through my guilt for over six months. The things I said to you — oh, Clark, I'm so sorry! That must have been brutal for you! You must think I'm totally heartless!"

He licked his lips again. "No, I don't think you're heartless. Yes, it was pretty brutal. But I understand what you were trying to tell me, and I understand why you said it."

"Thank you for not being angry with me for the way I spoke to you. I wouldn't blame you if you were."

He lifted one eyebrow. "And I wouldn't blame you if you picked up a chair and hit me over the head with it. I had no business saying what I said to you. I'm very sorry."

She returned the gesture. "It's the same kind of thing I've said to my therapist any number of times. I'm not mad at you and I'm glad you're not mad at me."

"I'm not angry. I can't say I enjoyed it much, but I'm not mad."

"I'm glad of that. But the important question is whether or not you believe it."

His eyes flickered, then focused on her with an intensity she'd never before experienced. "If I agree with you, doesn't that make me something of a coward for leaving her after she was hurt?"

She couldn't let herself be intimidated now. He was close to something important. "That depends. Why did you leave?"

He hesitated, then said, "She told me to. She broke our engagement and told me to go."

Lois nodded in thought, then put her elbows on the table. "Do you mind telling me what she said to you?"

His eyes slid shut for a long moment and he sighed again. "The first couple of days, we talked wedding plans and our future together and whether or not I'd think she was sexy with surgical scars on her back and leg. Of course I told her they didn't matter at all, and I meant what I said. Then when — when the doctors told her that her legs would still work but not well enough for her to be a cop, she withdrew from me and eventually told me that she didn't love me any more."

"Did you believe her?"

"Not at first, no. But she wouldn't talk to anyone about us, not me or my mom or her dad or our pastor or the hospital chaplain — nobody could get through to her. She called off the wedding, cancelled all the reservations we'd made, and told Pastor Reynolds that she refused to be a burden to me, that I deserved better than to be shackled to a cripple."

She patted his hand again. "I'm sorry. That must have been terrible to hear."

He lifted his glasses and wiped his eyes. "It was." Clark shifted on his bench and crossed his arms. "You're lucky. Your husband left you when he died, but he didn't reject you."

Lois sighed. "I don't think she was rejecting you, Clark. I think she was blaming herself and she did what she thought was the noble thing to pull away from you. She thought she was saving you from yourself and what she thought was your misguided willingness to take care of her."

He frowned at her. "Since when are you a psychologist?"

"I'm not. But I've been in some pretty intense therapy sessions, both private and in groups, and I've learned how to look inside what people do and say to what they really

think."

And, she thought, saving lives as Superman helps you deal with your perceived failure with Rachel, and that's why you reacted the way you did in that shootout this morning. She couldn't say that to him, of course, but she hoped he'd eventually make the connection on his own.

He looked away and sat silent for several minutes. The waiter once again approached cautiously, and this time Lois waved him over. The young man left the check with her without a word and pointed to their beverages. Lois shook her head in the negative, and he nodded and left them alone.

Clark finally stirred. "I think it's time to get back to the office. Perry will want to know where we've been."

Lois nodded. "He's good about cutting his reporters some slack as long as they're producing. But you don't want to take a three-hour lunch when you still have unfinished work in your inbox."

He turned to her and smiled weakly. "You ever do that?"

She snorted a laugh. "No way. Especially not since he read Ralph the riot act in the middle of the newsroom last year. He's not all that productive even now, but at least he comes back from lunch on time."

He stood and reached for the check, but Lois beat him to it. "I've got this one, remember?"

"Right. You like to be on top." At her raised eyebrows, he added, "Of things, that is."

She stood and pulled her fingers through her hair. "Nice save, farm boy. I have to make a quick pit stop before I pay the bill. I'll meet you at the Jeep."

He nodded as he dropped some cash on the table for the tip. "I'll be around."

She stopped suddenly and spun around. "Oh! I just remembered something. Are you free for dinner tomorrow night? Cat and her new boyfriend invited me to go out with them, and I really don't want to go alone."

"She's not using him as a stalking horse to get to me, is she?"

"I'm pretty sure she's given up on you for the time being. And if not, I'll keep you safe."

"Isn't what's-his-name — Mitchell — available on short notice?"

She tilted her head and gave him a medium-strength Mad Dog glare. "I'm not asking Mitchell, I'm asking you. What's your answer?"

His sideways grin lit up the room. "I think I can squeeze it into my schedule. I can't have my partner feeling like a third wheel on a bicycle."

Before she could come up with a suitable retort, he turned toward the door. She watched him thank Mama Teglia for the wonderful meal and the waiter for his attention. He smiled at the cashier and opened the door for a couple coming in. He was such a Boy Scout, she thought.

Not, she admonished herself, that it was a bad thing.

As she checked her makeup in the bathroom mirror, she pondered her situation. Everything she'd heard from Clark seemed to verify that he was indeed Superman. If she'd had any serious doubts, they'd been all but erased from existence by their after-lunch conversation. And as she thought about her earlier decision to keep that information private, she realized that she'd have to walk a narrow path between not revealing the secret to the world at large and not letting Clark know that she'd figured it out. And maybe she could drop some obscure hints to Clark to accentuate the differences between himself and his hero persona. She

didn't think anyone else would connect them the way she did, but it wouldn't hurt him to take some precautions.

She frowned at her reflection. Since when was Lois Lane the self-appointed protector of Superman's secret identity and psyche? Who'd elected her for this office? She knew she hadn't campaigned for it. It didn't look like it would pay very well, either, and there was absolutely no publicity attached to it. Probably no award dinners, either.

Then she smiled as she thought about having Superman next to her on stakeouts and investigations and interviews. He'd come in very handy on so many levels.

And he was very easy on the eyes and ears, too. So the benefit package for this job was going to be pretty good.

She frowned again, this time at her traitorous thoughts. She didn't want to be unfaithful to Claude's memory, but she was alive and he — he wasn't.

The thought pained her but didn't crush her. Maybe it was time for another session with Dr. Friskin. Maybe she'd made more progress in the last six months than she'd thought.

And maybe Clark had helped, just a teensy little bit.

Enough introspection for one day! Time to get back to work. There were still bad guys who needed to be busted, and Lois Lane was going to be the one to do it. Nobody beat her to a story, not even Superman.

Of course, if he wanted to tag along right behind her, she wouldn't object.

I sat on my crummy hotel bed for what I hoped would be one of the last times and thought about what Lois and I had discussed at lunch.

I thought about it a lot.

My first concern as we'd headed back to work was that I might have accidentally revealed something about me being Superman. But Lois hadn't even mentioned him, except when I'd asked her a question about her interview with him. I almost volunteered to contact him for her, but then I realized that there was no reason for me to know him. All I would have done was raise her suspicions about the relationship I had with him.

And now I was officially disturbed, mentally speaking. I was thinking and talking about myself in the third person, all because of a garish costume and the fear of being dissected like a frog.

The other thing that weighed on me was my feelings of guilt for Rachel's injuries, a guilt which Lois had argued very convincingly wasn't valid. I wondered how she'd known what to say to me, how she seemed to understand my mind so well so quickly.

It had to be that she'd gone through a lot of the same things with Claude's death. She'd mentioned something about six months of therapy, and she must have been taking good notes. Everything she'd said made sense to me.

Maybe it was time to let go of that guilt.

And maybe it was time to go see Rachel again. Mom had told me that she'd gotten married to an insurance salesman in Nebraska and was working as a claims investigator for his company. It sounded like she'd adjusted to her circumstances and was building a good life, even using her training and education positively. Maybe I should see for myself, and if Mom was right, maybe we could be friends. Not too close, of course — I didn't want to give her husband any reason to be jealous. But if I could see that she really was doing well, it might be easier for me to forgive myself for not saving her.

Lois had badgered me about finding a better place to live until I'd agreed, so she and I were going to look for an apartment for me next week. And she'd mentioned something about how Superman's confidence and stern demeanor worked well both when subduing criminals and when rescuing frightened accident victims. It was kind of an odd comment for her to make, but I realized that if I were open and friendly and smiling as myself and less so as the costumed hero, I could put more distance between myself and my alter ego. It was just one more way I was glad that Lois and I were partners.

The smile grew on my face before I realized it. I was really looking forward to apartment-hunting with Lois. I'd have to make sure I wasn't too familiar or too friendly with her. I didn't want some stranger to make an assumption about us which might embarrass her.

I had a great job, I'd made some outstanding friends, and for the first time in my life I could use my abilities openly. Life was looking great.

I loved Smallville and the people there, I certainly loved my parents, but I felt like I was finally coming home. I lay back on the pillow and let myself drift into the arms of Morpheus.

Chapter Twelve

Lois unfastened the multiple locks on her door and shoved it open, thrust her key ring into her purse, and kept a lookout for intruders, all while balancing a bag of groceries in one hand and gripping the day's incoming mail in her mouth. Lucy looked up from the couch and said, "Hey, Sis. You need any help with that?"

Lois kicked the door shut and grabbed the grocery bag with both hands. "Oh, all I can get," she muttered around the envelopes between her teeth.

Her sister laughed and jumped up to take the bag. "Kitchen, right?"

Biting back the sarcasm on the edge of her tongue, Lois nodded. "Got some nice microwave dinners, some milk and cereal, and a box of cake mix."

Lucy stopped in mid-step and nearly fell. "Cake mix? You bought cake mix?"

Lois took the mail from her mouth and dropped it on the coffee table. "Sure. Why not?"

The bag thudded down on the kitchen counter. "Because you don't cook, that's why!"

"Hey! There are eggs in there! If they're broken you're going out for replacements!"

"Forget the eggs! Who are you and what have you done with the real Lois Lane?"

Lois stared at Lucy for a long moment, then burst out in peals of laughter. "It's not funny!" Lucy insisted. "This isn't normal for you! Why did you buy cake mix?"

Still smiling, Lois replied, "I'm going to make a cake."

"Really? What for? Whose birthday is it?"

She brushed past Lucy and began putting away the groceries. "I'm sure it's somebody's birthday somewhere."

"Grrr!"

"Sorry! I'm going to make it for a co-worker. He's pretty far from home and I think he's a little homesick."

"Uh-huh," Lucy purred. "So, does this co-worker have a name?"

Lois marveled that her sister could go from angry vixen to sexy gossip in a single breath. Maybe that was her superpower. "He does. His name is Clark."

"I see. And is Clark handsome?"

“Yes.”

“And is Clark — single?”

Lois opened the egg carton and found no damage.

“Yes.”

Lucy’s hand rested on Lois’ shoulder. “You’re going to make me pull all the important information out of you one piece at a time, aren’t you?”

Lois turned and gave her sister a deadpan stare. “Yes.”

“Ohh! You are a hateful old hag, Lois Lane!”

Lois hid her smile inside the refrigerator. “That’s what all my overly inquisitive little sisters tell me.”

“Not funny. You need to find a new gag writer.”

There was no response. “Come on, Lois! Tell me all about this guy! He’s hot, isn’t he?”

The refrigerator door swooshed shut and Lois folded the empty grocery bag for disposal. “Being hot isn’t the only good thing a guy can be, Lucy. Clark is smart and talented and good-looking and he’s a really nice guy.”

“Really? Well, then, when do I meet him?”

Lois’ glare drilled through her sister’s eyes and directly into her brain. “You don’t. You stay away from him, understand? No attacking while the prey isn’t looking.”

“I don’t work like that!”

“Really? What about Drew Thomas during my senior year of high school? He dropped by to take me out to dinner and while I was getting ready you started making out with him in the living room! And you were just a sophomore!”

“You should thank me!”

“Thank you? For stealing a potential boyfriend?”

“For letting you know he wasn’t there because of your sparkling personality!”

They stared into each other’s eyes for a long moment, then Lois chuckled. “Yeah, he did turn out to be kind of a rat, didn’t he?”

“Kind of, yeah. He dumped me two days later for some senior at another school.”

“Really? I’m sorry, Punky, I never knew that. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Lucy padded back to the couch. “I didn’t think it would do either of us any good. Besides, I wasn’t any more serious about him than he was about me.”

Lois followed and sat beside her sister. “Still, it must have been a little painful.”

“Nah.” But under her older sister’s devastatingly sympathetic gaze, Lucy offered, “Well, maybe a little bit. After all, I took him away from you.”

Instead of laughing, Lois put her hand over Lucy’s and gave it a squeeze. “I know,” she said. “I felt the same way when Linda King took Paul away from me in college. And it didn’t really help that much when I found out that Linda was sleeping with him mainly to get her stories published.”

“I guess not. You never needed to pull stunts like that.”

“I never did it, anyway.”

Lucy grinned. “And now you’re baking a cake for Clark! That’s his name, right?” Lois nodded. “What kind? Are you making the icing from scratch or did you buy some in a can?”

Lois took her hand back and pulled off her shoes. “Canned. I figured making the cake part would be adventurous enough.”

“Chocolate?”

“Is there any other kind?”

Lucy clapped her hands together and chortled with glee. “When are you going to present him with your gift of

cake?”

“I’ve got three days to get it right. Perry gave all three of us some comp time for all we went through on the space station story. Jimmy’s going to Atlantic City for an extended weekend getaway, and Clark said he planned to fly back to Kansas to help his mother pack her pieces.”

“Wh — what? He’s packing her what?”

“Oh. Sorry, I forgot you didn’t know. Clark’s mother is Martha Kent, the artist. Her professional name is Martha K. She’s going to have a solo show here in Metropolis soon.”

Lucy’s mouth dropped open. “His mother — Martha Kent — his mother is Martha K?” The girl leaped to her feet. “Oh, Sis, you’ve just got to get me a ticket to her show! She does such great work with iron and aluminum! You’ve never seen welded art like that before! Nobody has! She’s so original and inventive!”

“Okay, Punky, I’ll see what I can do.”

Lucy grabbed her sister’s hands and pulled her upright. “No! You have to get me in to see her! I have to meet her! Her work has had such an impact on my life!”

“Whoa! Lucy, I don’t know if I can — ”

“But I have to tell her about New Beginnings! Don’t you understand?”

Lois shook her head slowly. “No, I don’t. Why — ”

“Oh, please please please!”

Lois fixed her sister with a stern glare and spoke with a bad mock Cuban accent. “Lucy, you got some esplainin’ to do!”

“That wasn’t funny when I was five and it isn’t funny now!” Lois merely held the glare until her sister sighed in surrender. “Okay, I’ll try.” Lucy took a deep breath and started pacing around the coffee table. “It was one of the first pieces she presented after her husband died. She called it ‘New Beginnings’ because it represented a new beginning for her, but when I saw it in San Francisco I was just floored! It’s a linear piece that shows that a person can recover from a heavy blow and still succeed, still progress upward. When I saw it, I could almost hear it speaking to me!”

“When did you see it?”

“About six months ago. That’s also when I started following her work closely.”

“Aha! That’s when you left California and broke up with what’s-his-name, right?”

Lucy drew herself up and frowned. “Yes. I realized that following Jeff and his band all over the West Coast was a dead-end journey. It struck me that I needed to do something positive with my life, to accomplish something that I’d only dreamed of in idle moments. If someone her age could keep going after such a tragedy, then I could, too, especially since I was younger and hadn’t suffered anything close to what she had. That’s why I’m here now, to finish my MBA and make my life count for something other than putting notches my bedpost.”

“And you’re going to do that by partying all night?”

“I assume you’re referring to the morning I came home last week and found you on the kitchen floor in your lacy panties. I wasn’t out clubbing, I was finishing up a project for one of my classes. And before you ask, there are two guys in our six-person study group and neither one of them made a move on me.”

“Oh.” Lois felt chagrined. “I’m sorry, Lucy, I didn’t know.”

“You do now.”

“Yes, I do. And I’m glad you were working on

something positive. I'm also glad that I was wrong about what I assumed you were doing."

"Good. Now that we have that settled, I really want to meet Martha K. It's really important to me, Lois, so please, please, please do your best to get me in to see her!"

Lois nodded. "I will. I'll tell Clark that his mother's work has made an extreme impression on you and that you want to share it with the artist personally. I think he'll help."

Lucy lifted an eyebrow. "Make sure you talk to him about it before he tastes your cake."

They shared a laugh. "Okay!" said Lois. "Hey, how about you help me? That way if it turns out bad, I can blame you."

Lucy hugged her and bounced on her toes twice. "Are you kidding? He'd like that cake so much that I'd probably take him away from you! It'd be Drew Thomas all over again!"

As her sister bounded away to her bedroom, Lois tried to recover from the shock of Lucy's mock threat. But why was she shocked? Why would her statement have any impact on Lois at all? Clark was just a co-worker — okay, he was Lois' partner. And Lucy couldn't have any impact on that relationship. Clark just wasn't that important to Lois on a personal basis. And as far as Lois knew, she wasn't that important to Clark either, at least not on a personal level. As far as a personal relationship between Clark and Lois went, there was no 'there' there.

So how could Lucy take someone away from Lois when he wasn't hers to begin with? As a threat or a warning, it couldn't have much force. Surely she was just kidding around again.

Unless — there was something Lucy saw that Lois couldn't.

Or just didn't want to see.

Or maybe she just didn't recognize it yet. Maybe there wasn't anything between them so far, but could there be something in the future? Was there a day yet undreamed where Lois Lane and Clark Kent became more than just friends, more than just partners on the reporting beat?

Maybe the cake Lois planned to make for Clark meant that she felt free to experience something stronger between them, something more permanent, something deeper and more binding than sharing a byline. Sometimes a cake was just a cake, but maybe this one meant more than Lois had originally thought it did.

Only time would tell.

Her thoughts turned to the new player on the scene. Superman was a hero, but that was only because the man under the suit — Clark Kent — was already a good person. If Clark had been selfish or bitter or a bully, Superman would have been those things also, but to a much greater degree. Lois shuddered as she imagined a super-powered bully apprehending criminals — or, worse, organizing them for his own benefit.

It was frightening. It was almost as frightening as imagining Lex Luthor with super-powers. She was thankful that those abilities had come to Clark instead of someone with a lower ethical standard. On top of that, he was a darn nice guy, even if he did occasionally lean over her shoulder and edit her copy.

Clark's a pretty good guy, she told herself. I could have ended up with a worse partner.

He'd make a great husband for some lucky woman someday.

"That's the last piece, Mom. All crated up and ready for transport."

Mom patted me on the arm. "Thank you, Clark. You saved me a good bit of money. The shipping company wanted an extra six hundred dollars to pack those pieces."

"You'll still have to pay for workers at the delivery site."

She grinned. "Nope. That's the gallery's expense, not mine. They get to pay to pack them up again at the end of the show, too. All I have to pay for now is the rental for the tractor-trailer rig and the forklift to load it, and since Rachel promised to drive to Metropolis with me I don't have to hire a second driver."

I stopped. "Rachel's back in town? I thought she was in Nebraska."

"Oh, her office is there, but she's taking a couple of weeks off. She and Kevin are taking a trip to the East Coast to see if they want to relocate. Her reputation as an investigator has gone through the roof with the insurance company, and the company wants them to move East and take on more responsibility. Rachel mentioned something about her becoming an investigations trainer for the company, and Kevin may be moving up to regional manager."

I nodded. "That's great for them." I looked back at the crates littering the floor of the barn. "Do you think she'd be willing to talk to me?"

Mom put her hand on my arm. "Honey, you're not thinking of starting up with her again, are you? She's happily married now."

"I know that, and no, I wasn't thinking of starting anything. More like finishing something."

"Finishing what?"

I knew I was being dramatic, but I let out a long sigh. "We didn't part on the best of terms, and I want her to know that I don't hold it against her for breaking our engagement. I don't know that it was the best thing to do, but I think I understand why she did it, and I feel like I need to talk to her about it." I took a look at Mom's face and added, "Just the one time. I know she's happy now, and the last thing I want to do is interfere with that."

"Oh." She looked thoughtful for a minute, then relaxed and nodded to me. "You know, that actually sounds like a good idea. And it fits in with some of the things she's said to me lately. I think she'd be willing to talk to you. And to listen to you, too." She stepped back and took a long look at me. "I think you've already been talking to someone. Maybe you've even been listening to that someone."

I shrugged. "Could be."

She smiled. "I think you've even been paying a lot of attention to that someone."

"Well —"

"I think you've been paying attention to a girl," she teased.

"Mom!"

She laughed. I still loved hearing her laugh. "It's okay, Honey. I really do listen to you, and the way you've described this Lois Lane makes me think I'd like to meet her."

I couldn't stay mad at my mother. She had only my best interests at heart. "I think that can be arranged. Maybe the three of us could have dinner together one night during the show's run."

"I'd like that, but I wouldn't want to get in the way. You

know how third wheels are.”

“We’re not dating, Mom. We’re just partners in the reporting business.”

“Uh-huh. Is that all you are?”

I hesitated, and I know she noticed that I didn’t really answer her question. “Well, Lois has a sister who’s a college student. Maybe she’d like to come along, too.”

“Three women with one man? I don’t think you could handle it.”

I frowned. “If I can lift the colonists’ shuttle to the space station, I think I can stand up to three women for a couple of hours.”

She patted my arm patronizingly. “Different kind of strength, Clark. I’m not sure you’re ready for that.”

Right. Like I’m scared of three women, even if two of them were my mother and Lois Lane.

Wait. Maybe — maybe not. Maybe I wasn’t that strong after all.

I shifted gears. “Well, my boss asked me about your show last week. He said he wanted me to come with him and explain some of your pieces to him. Maybe he’d like to have dinner with us.”

“Without his wife? That wouldn’t be proper.”

I could hear my voice soften. “He’s a widower, Mom. Four years.”

“Oh.” She nodded, almost to herself. Then she brightened. “You wouldn’t be playing matchmaker with me, would you?”

“What!” The very thought of setting up a date for my mother — with my boss! — completely scandalized me. “You’ve got to be kidding! There’s no way I’d pull a stunt like that! I’d be out of work and out of the house so fast even I wouldn’t be able to keep up the pace!”

She laughed softly. “I’m sorry, but sometimes you’re just such an easy target. It’s okay with me if you and I have dinner with your boss and your co-worker.” She paused and cocked her head to one side. “Actually, it sounds like it would be fun. You’ve changed quite a bit in the last couple of weeks. You’re more relaxed and confident, and I’d like to meet some of the people who’ve obviously had such a positive influence on you.”

I smiled. “You think I’m more relaxed and confident?”

“Clark, you never would have worn that red-and-blue outfit in public three months ago! Yes, you’ve changed. I think it’s for the better, and I have to believe that the people you’ve met recently are at least partly responsible for it.”

That’s the moment I decided that I’d do whatever I needed to do to keep my mother away from Cat Grant. Perry, sure, I’d like for him to meet her, but not Cat. Not yet. There was no telling what the Planet’s resident gossip and sex kitten might say or do.

But as I thought about it, I found that I really wanted Mom to meet Lois. Somehow I was certain that the two of them would get along famously. Which meant, of course, that I’d probably end up having to spend even more time with Lois.

And that was starting to feel like a very good thing.

It wouldn’t be long before I’d have to figure out how to tell Lois about my “other job,” the one where I flew her around and pretended not to know anything about how a newspaper operated. A month before, having an award-winning reporter know my secret would have terrified me. But I realized that I was actually looking forward to telling her about myself and all the “interesting” things I could do.

I was looking forward to her knowing, but I wasn’t

really looking forward to actually telling her. That would be an awkward conversation. I only hoped she wouldn’t be too mad at me for not coming clean at the beginning. But I was confident that I could handle a little anger.

Besides, Lois would understand. She was terrific. I doubt I could have gotten a better partner.

She’d be a great wife for some lucky man someday.

— JJ Epilogue

Martha wiped her forehead with a gloved hand and walked to the house for a few minutes of rest and some iced tea. Her new piece, “Secrets,” was coming along, despite some false starts and one entire base she’d cast aside for later reuse. The day was really too nice to be working indoors, but artists worked on Saturday just like they did any day when their muses decided to tickle their subjects’ fancies.

Mean old muse with no appreciation for the beauty of the day.

She heard a tractor rev twice and looked in that direction. Wayne Irig waved at her as he plowed the near field, then pulled the plow from the ground and turned in her direction.

“Howdy, Martha!” he called as he shut down the motor. “How’s the art coming?”

She leaned on the fence and smiled. “Not too badly, Wayne. How are you these days?”

He lifted his hand and wiggled his fingers. “It’s all healed up now. Good as new.”

“I’m glad.” And she was glad. The madman Jason Trask had nearly killed both of them just weeks before, but good had triumphed over evil once again — if only by the skin of its teeth.

“Hear you got another piece you’re puttin’ together in that barn. Ain’t you got enough iron to weld already?”

She laughed. “It’s how I make my money now.”

“Ain’t you gettin’ rich off that land you’re leasin’ to me?”

They laughed together, both knowing that the lease payments were enough for Martha to keep the mortgage paid but little more. “Of course I am, Wayne. I’m just doing this to pass the time between crops.”

He smiled and touched the brim of his Stetson. “Sure. Well, this old field ain’t gonna plow itself. I gotta get back to work.” He restarted the tractor and gave her a jaunty wave.

She returned the wave and watched for a moment as Wayne returned to his work. Wayne was a nice man, she reflected. A bit too literal to understand her art, and although he’d never actually said so, such things were not important in his worldview. Wayne saw the world in farmer’s terms — plow, plant, reap and sell, pay bills, maintain the property, calculate whether or not he could afford a new tractor or if the old one would have to last a few more seasons, and so on. The man was the salt of the earth, honest as the day was long and dependable as the sun in the sky, but possessed a very limited imagination. Like so many of the people in and around Smallville, he made a good friend but an uninspiring companion.

Which was why she’d been so glad to meet Lois and Lucy several months before. They both “got” her art without being pretentious about it. Lucy had even shyly told Martha that while she deeply loved “New Beginnings,” “Moonrise Over Kansas” had left her puzzled. Martha had shared the secret of the latter piece — that it was the only one she had left over from the time before Jonathan’s death,

and while it was technically excellent, it didn't say much to her either. The small revelation had allowed Martha and Lucy to develop a real friendship over the next few months, both via phone and e-mail. And it seemed that both of them were profiting from the relationship, Lucy from Martha's lived-in wisdom and Martha from Lucy's youthful enthusiasm and optimism about life.

While Lucy was truly inspired by Martha's art, though, Lois seemed to be inspired by Martha's son. There was something between Clark and Lois that transcended simple friendship. The two of them sometimes seemed to think the same thing at the same time. Occasionally one would finish the other's sentence, something Lucy claimed she found "spooky." Twice, Martha had witnessed Lois giving Clark halfway decent excuses to disappear and perform Superman feats, and even though Lois fussed at Clark about his disappearing acts, there was no censure in her voice or manner. It was almost as if she knew what Clark was doing during those times.

If that were so, then their relationship was deeper than either of them would admit. When Martha had asked if they were seeing each other, both had all but stepped on their tongues denying the possibility. But when they had battled Jason Trask in Smallville, Lois had acted more like a girlfriend than just a colleague, and then had written the story discounting any possibility that there was a substance which could harm Superman. Her boy seemed to have found not just a home in Metropolis, but an unrelenting champion.

If Clark's life was going well, then Martha's was sailing over a glassy sea with all canvas billowing out fully. Her Metropolis show had done well — every piece she'd exhibited had sold, even the tabletop ones — and she'd just completed two commissions for her first European customers, one a French diplomat with a lineage which he claimed reached back to Louis XIV, and one to a petite Swedish lady with a diffident manner and a huge bank balance. The demand for her artwork had pushed the value of her existing pieces into the sky and promised to make her comfortable, if not wealthy, for the rest of her life. And the piece she was working on at the moment had already garnered the largest bid she'd ever received. She was determined to make it museum quality.

If only the silly thing would come together! The point of the piece was still just out of her reach, tantalizing her with its ethereal snarkiness. Some secrets, apparently, didn't want to be shared.

She was glad to have met Perry White, too. Every time they'd seen each other, Perry had treated her like the lady she'd always felt she was when Jonathan was alive. The man was charming and polite and genuine and she was truly sorry that there was no practical way for them to pursue any kind of relationship.

Perry, to his credit, kept up his end of their correspondence, both professional and personal. There was an open offer of half off any advertising she booked in the Planet for her art. He'd bought one of her smaller pieces and had made a standing offer of his hospitality any time she passed through Metropolis, whether it was between flights or a week's stay for a show. And although he'd let her know that he appreciated her as a woman, there was never any doubt in her mind that she'd never be pressured to do anything she didn't want to do.

And what she wanted to do now was drink something cold and refreshing.

She opened the kitchen door and stepped into the house. To her surprise, Clark sat at the table with a pitcher of iced tea, two glasses, two plates, and an boxed apple pie in front of him which bore a Metropolis-based bakery label.

He rose to greet her with a hug. "Hi, Mom. I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Of course not, honey! I was just taking a break and get something to drink. Welding is hot work."

"I know." He turned and poured her a glass. "Here you go. Do you want a large or a small piece of pie?"

"Oh, I think I'm going to need a large one."

Clark frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I'm your mother and I know when you need to talk to me. So sit, talk. I'm going to eat pie and listen and pretend to be Yiddish."

His grin reappeared at the old family joke, and she helped herself to a large piece. "Okay, Mom. Well — it's a about Lois." He paused and waited for a comment which didn't come. "Yeah. Anyway, last week I decided that I needed to tell her about — you know — " He made a wavy motion with his hand.

Martha put down her fork. "Have you actually told her yet?"

"Yes."

Now she waited for more information, but only for a moment. "When did you tell her?"

He dropped his gaze. "Last night."

"Uh-huh. What happened?"

He stood and paced the width of the kitchen. "We just finished a big story yesterday on a congressman who was selling his committee influence to an arms dealer — Perry put it on this morning's front page, above the fold — so I suggested that we go out to dinner to celebrate. Just the two of us." He stopped and spread his arms wide. "I hadn't — we've never been out together, just the two of us."

"And she said yes?"

"She did. And she had a funny little twinkle in her eye when she did, like she was really looking forward to it." He dropped his hands and returned to the table. "We had a very nice dinner at a pizza place and pool hall that Lois knows. The owner is the father of the girl she played doubles tennis with in college, a guy named Louie who Lois says 'knows guys who know guys.' And she said it with this wise-guy voice like she was trying to tell me that Louie is a little shady but a good guy anyway."

"You got all that from one phrase?"

His mouth twitched. "That and his offer to Lois to have me 'worked over' if I didn't treat her right."

Martha burst out laughing. "The more I hear about Lois the more I like her! Did she take Louie up on his offer?"

Clark shook his head. "She said she'd take it under advisement."

Martha laughed again. "I hope you never give her any reason for Louie to call the guys who know guys."

He licked his lips. "Actually, that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh?"

"Yes. When I walked her back to her apartment — Lucy's finally gotten her own place now, I'll give you the address before I leave — she invited me in for coffee and a chat."

Martha nodded for him to continue.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I sat down on her couch and picked up the coffee cup and when she picked up hers and took a sip I said, 'Lois, it's time I told

you that I'm Superman' and she nodded and said, 'I'm glad you finally came clean about it. I only have so much patience, you know.'"

Martha's jaw dropped. Her eyebrows climbed toward her hairline. A grin all but exploded from her mouth. "You mean she already knew? How? When? How long?"

Clark lifted a hand. "The gist of it is that she figured it out almost right away. Six months, Mom! She's known for more than six months and never said anything!" He shook his head and sighed. "You remember that I told you that Lois was making occasional comments about how Superman's voice was so deep and severe and his stance was intimidating and how he rarely smiled and stuff like that?"

"Yes. I thought they were just, oh, I don't know, hero worship kinds of things?"

"I did too, but they weren't. They were subtle hints to me to make Superman appear different from Clark Kent so no one else would make the connections she did. I told her she'd been sneaky and underhanded and she laughed at me!"

She put her hand on her son's arm. "Honey, what did you expect?"

"I expected her to be stunned that I was Superman! And when she wasn't — well — we — we sort of —"

"No."

He looked shocked. "What do you mean, 'no?'"

"Tell me you two didn't have a fight over this!"

He leaned back. "How did you know? Did Lois call you?"

"I wouldn't have been surprised if she had, but she didn't. But what did you expect her to do?"

He leaped up from his chair and began pacing again. "I don't know! I thought she'd be surprised, or astounded, or really mad, but she just smiled that Cheshire Cat smile and nodded like I'd finally understood something a fifth-grader would have known without being told."

"So she stole your thunder and threw you completely off kilter and you reacted emotionally instead of rationally, right?"

He shook his head. "Yeah, pretty much."

"And now you're not sure what to do next."

He stopped and gazed at the ceiling as if seeking inspiration in the old paint there. "I'm not unsure at all. I have no idea what to do."

Martha nodded. "Go talk to her. Apologize for being so crazy. If she really cares for you, she'll understand."

"Yes, but what do — what do you mean, if she really cares for me?"

"You talked about that too, didn't you? How much you really, really like her? You mentioned that you wanted to be sure she cared about you instead of about Superman, right? And that you'd never told Rachel about your abilities, and that might have contributed to the two of you breaking up."

"Uh — I — we never got that far. But — I don't understand how you —"

Martha tried to stifle another laugh but wasn't completely successful. "Oh, Clark, honey, she knows something about how you feel! I guarantee it."

"Oh." He slowly moved back to his chair and slipped into it. "Okay, if you say so."

She patted her son's arm again. "Look, Lois is an intelligent woman who knows her own mind. If you were hung up on Lucy, I'd be a little concerned that she knows your secret, but Lois is far more mature and stable than her

sister. Lois may or may not be the woman you spend the rest of your life with, but either way she'll be a faithful friend and companion. And she'll help you any way she can."

He sat back in apparent thought. Martha managed three more bites of pie before he roused himself. "Mom, I think you're right. I'll go find her and talk to her. I'll get on my knees and apologize if I have to."

"That's a good idea, honey. In fact, why don't you go see her now? I'll clean up here."

A smile split his face. "Okay! Thanks, Mom. You're still the greatest."

"Call me later and let me know how it went."

He waved and nodded as he all but sprinted out the back door. Martha heard the telltale 'whoosh' of a Superman takeoff. She reminded herself to be glad that he'd refrained from creating a sonic boom this time.

She put the tea pitcher in the refrigerator and rinsed out the glasses, then covered the pie with aluminum foil and put it in the freezer. Only then did she pick up the phone and dial Lois' number.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Lois. This is Martha Kent."

"Oh, hi, Martha! To what do I owe this honor?"

"I'm warning you that Clark is coming and he's in full-blown apology mode."

"Oh. Well, I'd better get ready for him, then. I wouldn't want him to think I've been waiting for him all morning, even if I have been."

"He also mentioned something about begging for your forgiveness on bended knee."

Lois laughed. "Oh, we can't have that! I want him to save the knee bend for another occasion."

"Do you now?"

Lois hesitated, then spoke. "Yes. I think — I think that it's possible that Clark and I — that there might be some potential for something permanent." She hesitated again, then asked, "What do you think?"

"Lois, that's not my call. That's between you and Clark."

"Sure it is. He was just there talking to you about last night, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was. And I don't think he realizes it yet, but he's more than halfway in love with you."

Lois made a sound Martha didn't quite recognize. "I — I see. In that case, let me tell you that the situation is — is a mutual one."

Martha grinned, knowing it would come through the line. "I thought it was. And for what it's worth, I approve. Assuming, of course, that you love Clark because he's Clark and not because he's Superman."

"My feelings for Clark don't involve the flashy guy in blue tights. You'll have to tell me someday how you got him to wear those red briefs on the outside, by the way."

Martha laughed yet again. "It's a promise."

"I'm going to hold you to it, too. To continue my answer, Superman is who he is only because Clark is already such a good man. I'd hate to see some of the men I know have those powers. You and Jonathan did a wonderful raising him."

"Thank you, dear. Now you'd better get ready for his arrival. He'll probably be more nervous than a long-tailed rocking chair in a room full of cats."

Lois laughed again. "I promise not to be too cruel. And I hope he knows how to get lipstick out of a shirt collar."

“He does. Don’t be too rough on him, Lois. His heart is in the right place, even if his brain sometimes isn’t.”

“Thanks for the heads-up, Martha. Bye for now.”

Martha hung up the phone and smiled to herself. Those two had suffered so much in their short lives, and they deserved some happiness.

As for her own happiness, she had her art, the farm, the warm memory of a very good man, and the prospect of grandchildren in a few more years to keep her spirits up. Not to mention the opportunity to interfere in her son’s life for a good many years to come.

Time to get back to work, especially since her muse was whispering in her head a bit more clearly than before.

“Secrets” would change direction once again, but this time Martha had a clear idea where to go with the piece. There were some secrets that should never be shared, some which made little or no difference, and some which all but cried out to be told. This secret would be shared with whoever deigned to look closely enough, although no one would ever know who the real subject was.

Except, of course, her son and the woman who seemed to hold his heart in her hands. And whose heart her son seemed to hold in his.

THE END