

Not the Years But the Moments

By Terry Leatherwood

Rated: PG-13 (for extreme emotional stress)

Submitted: March 2015

Summary: When Clark is shot during the events of the episode “That Old Gang of Mine,” Lois decides that loving him is too dangerous and she forces them apart. But when Clark’s parents are kidnapped and Clark is ordered to trade Lois’ dead body for their safety, she decides to take an active role in their rescue and changes everything between them, including their future together. Set in season two and goes forward from there.

Story Size: 69,950 words (376Kb as text)

WHAM warning: One of the central characters dies young and the other eventually finds love with another person. You have been warned.

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

Prologue

Perry shuffled the cards and flexed his shoulders. “Last hand for the night, folks. It’s getting late. Our banker, Clark, will settle up with everyone before you leave.” He set the deck on the table to his right. “Your cut, I believe, ma’am?” he offered.

The short, sharp-eyed, red-headed lawyer tapped the top of the deck with her index finger. “I like the cards just as they are. No cutting needed.”

“Your choice, Ms. McClure.”

“I already told all of you, it’s just Sharon, please. I’m Ms. McClure during office hours or to my slow-paying clients.”

Perry and Clark chuckled. Jimmy assayed a weak smile. Lois only glared.

“Sounds fine to me,” Perry replied. “Here we go, folks, five-card draw, nothing wild, pair of jacks or better to open. Everybody ante up a pair of white chips.”

Plastic disks clicked against each other as the five players tossed money in the pot. The editor dealt five cards to each player. “Your bet, Lois,” Perry said. “You in?”

“Five bucks.”

“Your hand’s that good, partner?”

“Just call, raise, or fold, Clark.”

“Okay. Here’s your five.”

Perry lifted one eyebrow. “Your bet, Jimmy. How brave are you?”

“Brave enough to be smart and not bet against Ms. McClure — sorry, Sharon. But I’m in for five.”

Sharon picked up a chip and tossed it in the pot. “The lady lawyer rides the wave with five.”

“And the dealer matches the five and raises five more. Anybody ready to quit yet?”

The other four players grunted, groaned, or chuckled, but each one put another five in the pot. Perry nodded and picked up the deck again.

“How many cards, Lois?”

“Just two, Chief.”

“Fine with me. Clark, what about you?”

“Three.”

“Here you go. How many, Jimmy?”

“I’ll play these.”

“Oh, I like an optimist. Sharon?”

“I’ll take one, Mr. White.”

“Here’s your one, and the dealer takes two.” Perry picked up his cards and smiled. “Now the real fun begins. Who beats who, and who goes home happy? Your bet, Lois.”

“I like these cards. I’m in for ten.”

Clark flashed a mega-watt grin at her. “I’ll match your ten, Lois, and raise you five.”

Perry leaned back and lifted his eyebrows. “Watch out, we got a high roller over here! I call your raise, Clark. Jimmy, that’s fifteen to you.”

“I know, I know!” He played with his cards for a moment, then sighed deeply. “Nuts! I fold.”

Sharon tilted her head to one side. “You may have given up too fast, Jimmy. Here’s your fifteen, Lois, and ten more. Are you still in?”

“Of course I am! Call. C’mon, Clark, call her.”

“I don’t know, Lois. I don’t think my hand is that strong.”

“Oh! Men!” She reached into Clark’s pile of chips and tossed another ten into the pot. “There! You call!”

“Wait a minute! You don’t know what I have!”

“And you don’t know that when you play poker you don’t play the cards, you play the other players! Your bet, Perry!”

“Let’s see, that’s twenty-five to me, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, then, Sharon, let’s find out what you’re made of. Here’s the twenty-five, and twenty more.”

Clark smiled ruefully at his cards and put them face-down on the table. “I’m out.”

“Clark! You can’t quit like that!”

“My cards, my decision, Lois. I can quit any way I want to, and I’m out. It’s you and Perry and Sharon on this hand.”

“Well I’m not folding! Twenty! And ten more!”

Perry gave her an Elvis-approves-of-the-banana-and-peanut-butter-sandwich grin. “I’ll match that ten, Lois.”

Sharon nodded approvingly. “Well, well, well, it seems we have a couple of players after all. That’s thirty to me, right?” She sat back and tapped the upper edges of her cards with her free hand. “Okay, it’s only money. I call.”

“I got you this time, Sharon! Lay them out where we can see them.”

“Very well, Lois. Full house, tens over threes.”

“What! You mean — oh, nuts!” Lois threw down her cards face up to reveal three queens. “Again with the great hand!”

Perry chuckled. “My, my, my. I’m glad my back was against the wall.” He put down his hand and displayed two black aces, two black eights, and the jack of diamonds.

Sharon smiled broadly. “Whoa! I’m glad we aren’t in Deadwood!”

Jimmy frowned in confusion. “What? Wait, Sharon, what does Deadwood have to do with the Chief’s poker hand?”

Sharon raked the pile of chips to the rest of her winnings for the night. “According to legend, kiddo, that was the hand Wild Bill Hickok was holding when he was shot in the back of the head in 1876. Black aces over black eights, although there’s some disagreement over the fifth card. Gamblers nowadays call it the dead man’s hand.”

Lois crossed her arms and huffed. “Thanks for the history lesson, but I’m ready for the next hand! I want some of my money back.”

“Sorry, people,” said Perry, “but morning comes early tomorrow, and this old newshound needs to get some shut-eye. I

already said this was the last hand.” He stood and stretched. “Everybody cash in and go get some sleep. Good night, folks. I want to see Lois, Clark, and Jimmy in the office no later than nine in the morning.” He picked up his coat and half-bowed to the red-haired woman sorting her chips. “Thank you for a most instructive evening, Sharon. I hope you’ll remember this night the next time one of your colleagues decides to give me grief about a story I want to run.”

She smiled back at him. “No promises, but I will remember that you’re more than willing to contribute to my retirement fund.”

Everyone but Lois laughed. “I’m glad you all find this so amusing. I’m going home. Clark, I’ll see you tomorrow. You can give me whatever’s left of my stake then.”

“Okay. Are we still on for breakfast tomorrow?”

She stopped in the doorway and her expression softened. “Yes. Come by and pick me up, okay?”

“Only if I can grab a ride with you from there.”

“Consider it done, partner. Good night, everyone.”

The other two men exchanged their meager chips for cash. Perry collected Jimmy with his eyes and they walked out together. “How’d she clean us out so easily, Chief?” Jimmy asked. “It was like she could see our cards.”

Perry laughed. “I’ll explain it to you when you’re older, son.”

Clark pulled a stack of bills out of his pocket and counted them out. “I think you made a real dent in Lois’ disposable income tonight.”

Sharon laughed. “It’s actually pretty easy when you know how.”

“I see. So, you’ve made a comprehensive study of poker odds?”

“Hardly. Your partner was right about several things tonight, but the one about poker that she really nailed is that you don’t play the cards, you play the people.”

Clark frowned. “I’m not sure I understand that any more now than when Lois said it.”

She folded the bills he gave her and put them in her purse, then took the cards and shuffled them expertly. “Look, you need a good hand to win, at least most of the time, but you have to know something about what your opponents have and what they’re going to do with what they’ve got. Will he bluff? Will she play cautiously? Will he try to win small pots along the way and end up a medium-sized winner instead of going for the big score? You have to read the other players.”

He shrugged. “Still don’t understand.”

“You need to know each player’s tells. And before you ask, that’s a poker term for something a player does to tip off the kind of hand he or she has.”

“I understand the concept, I think, but I’m still fuzzy on the details.”

“Okay, I’ll take pity on you. You’re easy to read. You only bet when you have good cards. You didn’t even have a pair of jacks on that last hand, did you?”

“Not to start with. I ended up with two pair, deuces and fives.”

“Not bad, but not great, either. It wouldn’t have beaten any of the other hands except maybe Jimmy’s, and I don’t know what he had. He lost two pretty good-sized pots early on and got gun-shy. Running him out was easy unless he had really good cards, so I knew I could beat him unless he had a killer hand. And unless he has that killer hand, he plays with his cards like he’s trying to rewrite the values.”

She fanned the cards in her right hand. “Now Lois, she’s a risk-taker, but the worse her hand is the louder she gets and the more she frowns. I knew she had a borderline hand when she raided your chips.”

“Three queens is borderline?”

“For her it is. She wants the big score every time. It’s part of what makes her such a good reporter, but it can work against her, too.”

“I’m beginning to understand what you mean. What about Perry?”

“Oh, man,” moaned Sharon. “Beating him was the luck of the draw tonight. He’s easily the best player you guys brought. His only real tell is that he tends to get more charming and down-home Southern when he has a weak hand. That’s the only way I was able to keep out of trouble with him.”

“Very enlightening.” Clark stood and shrugged into his suit jacket. “And I suppose you gained these people-reading skills in either law school or in the courtroom?”

She allowed him to open the door for her. “Nope. I supplemented my income in college by playing poker in Vegas. After all, I got my pre-law degree at the University of Nevada.”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. I think there are a couple of casinos that still won’t let me walk through the doors.”

They shared a laugh as they walked down the hall to the elevator. Courteous as always, Clark allowed his female companion to enter before him, and he was still chuckling as the doors slid shut.

Lois watched from the darkened side room as Clark and Sharon walked down the hall. What were they laughing about? What was so funny? And why was this woman lawyer walking so close to Clark? She was too chubby for Clark! He liked slender women!

Or — did he?

A still, small voice whispered to her that all men were unfaithful, that all men were out to use her, that even Clark would break her heart if she let him get too close.

Another part of her brain insisted that Clark was not like other men, that he was as faithful as the daily sunrise, if not more so, and if he ever broke her heart his only desire would be to mend it again.

The argument with herself was getting more intense as time went by. It was taking more of her time and energy to keep up with the two sides of herself. And neither side was winning.

She pulled her jacket tighter as if warding off a chill. This constant internal bickering was starting to get her down. She needed something to cheer her up, something to take her mind off her own relationships. And seeing that classic 1932 Ford V-8 sedan that Perry had been bragging about all afternoon might be just the ticket. He insisted that it had once been driven by Clyde Barrow on one of his getaway romps in Oklahoma. Or was it Texas? Or maybe Kansas?

No matter. She loved to tease the men about their toys. Even Clark would be impressed. Hearing the guys ooh and ahh over an old car would take her mind off her own problems and give her a good laugh.

She hoped.

Chapter One

Clark was exhausted.

He was mildly surprised that he could be exhausted given his powers, but as he thought back over the past few days he realized that he hadn’t slept at all since before he’d been “shot to death” in Georgie Hairdo’s club. Add to that his uninterrupted searching for Capone and his gang of reconstituted clones, fold in his frantic mental search for some way for Clark Kent to survive, stir in his anguish over leaving Lois to think he was dead, and it was no wonder he was wiped out.

He closed his eyes and settled down in the passenger seat of Lois’ Jeep. Maybe she’d just take him back to his place and drop him off. Maybe she wouldn’t feel like talking.

The soft stream-of-consciousness buzz from the driver's side told him that his probability assessments of her actions were, yet again, wrong by orders of magnitude, and that Lois Lane was just as much a mystery to him tonight as she had ever been. Maybe she'd quiet down if he ignored her and let himself drop off to sleep. He really didn't have the energy to keep up with her tonight.

Her sweater and slacks ensemble were ruined by the cement that still clung to her and with which she had coated him when he'd appeared out of the fog at the dock. Even the small blanket the police had given her, on which she now sat to protect the Jeep's driver's seat, would be useless for anything else. He wasn't sure he could clean up his clothes, either. They might be destroyed by now, although he hoped not. He liked that jacket.

The backhanded slap across the chest she abruptly gave him splashed a small dollop of still-damp concrete onto his chin and ensured that his sports jacket would soon join her clothes in the city dump.

"Wake up, you lunkhead!"

As he sat up and wiped off his chin, he turned to her and said, "I assume you want to say something to me and that you aren't just mad at me."

Her hands were white where she gripped the steering wheel, and they were strained as if she were still trying to pull herself out of that barrel of wet cement. Her eyes bore straight ahead and her teeth were mashed together so hard Clark was afraid she might break one of them.

"Lois," he called softly, "please pull over before you wreck the car."

She gave him a hard glance, full of unidentifiable emotion. Then she swerved to the curb and parked in front of an open donut shop. Then she grabbed the wheel again as if it were the only thing keeping her from flying apart.

"Thank you. Now what is it that you want?"

She all but pried her fingers from the wheel and crossed her arms over her chest. "Actually, there is something I need to say to you, Clark."

She stopped. He waited for a long moment.

He was about to prompt her when she spun in the seat to face him. "You know I — I have some pretty strong feelings for you, right?"

He nodded, unwilling to appear to be guiding her. This was starting to sound good — he hoped.

"And I know you have some pretty strong feelings for me, too, don't you? I mean positive feelings, more than just comfortable coworkers or friends or friendly rivals or — or anything like that."

He nodded again. This sounded like a very good thing.

"Okay. Then you — you also know that I don't have a good track record with relationships, especially romantic ones." She waved her hands aimlessly. "Actually, I can't think of any relationships of any kind that I haven't damaged at one time or another. Or that the other person hasn't damaged. I mean, I can't stand to be around either of my parents for very long, my sister and I don't see eye-to-eye on anything important because she's such a flake and she thinks I don't know how to have fun, Perry thinks I'm a great reporter but that I'm a workaholic, Jimmy dodges me if he sees me coming, Capone and Dillinger wanted to entomb me in concrete and sink me in the harbor, and even Superman has backed away from me." She dropped her chin to her chest and almost sobbed. "I — I don't know why you're still hanging around. I really don't. I'm a disaster waiting for someone to get close enough to get caught in the blast radius."

This did not sound so good. "Lois, I don't believe—"

"That's because you're such a great guy!" she wailed. "That's why you don't believe it! You're a really great guy with terrific parents and Perry thinks the world of you and Jimmy puts up

with me but he really likes you and Sharon thinks you're better than sliced bread and peanut butter and you don't need me destroying your life!"

Oh, this was bad, really bad. He had to reassure her of his fidelity. "I promise you, Lois, I'm not interested in Sharon — who are you talking about, anyway?"

"Sharon McClure, the poker player! The one who took everyone's money the other night! And if you don't like her I know that new ADA Mayson Drake would snap you up like you were on the bargain counter at Macy's!" She put her hand on his upper arm. "Oh, Clark, not that you're not worth more than that, it's just that she's so hot for you she can't eat ice cream without melting it all over herself."

He was all but drowning in mixed metaphors. "Lois! Now please, stop this! I don't want Sharon or Mayson or any other woman in Metropolis! I want to get closer to you!"

Her eyes froze over and her hand retreated to the ignition key. "That's too bad, farm boy. Because I'm stopping any kind of relationship we might have had right now! I think too highly of you to let you hang around me. I'm a disaster magnet and I won't be responsible for you getting killed again!" She wrenched the key around and yanked the gearshift lever into drive. "Now let me get you home and I'll see you at work when your doctor says you can come back and not one minute before!"

He forced his mouth closed and shook his head. Why couldn't he have just slept through her slap?

He had to try once more. "Lois, look, you've had a tough few days—"

"That's right, I have! And if I could hurt this much because I — because I thought I'd never see you again then I can't in good conscience let anyone else risk that kind of pain with me!"

"Don't you think that I should be involved in that choice?"

"No I don't think you should be involved! This is for your own good, Kent, and I'm not backing off from this! You work your side of the newsroom and I'll work mine! If Perry teams us up for a story I'll be professional about it and you'd better be the same! But no more secret smiles or double entendre conversations or hints about dates or cute notes or flowers or even coffee in the morning! You got that?"

This couldn't be happening. She couldn't be saying those things. She couldn't be calling it quits between them before they really got started.

He took a deep breath and tried again. "What if I don't want that? What if I want to pursue a relationship with you anyway?"

He heard her gasp, or sob, or hiccup, or something. Then she blinked several times and gritted her teeth again. "Tough tacos, pal. There's no 'we' now. There's just you and me and we're not going to be together, not ever, not in any personal way."

He sat back and took another deep breath. "Can we still be friends?"

She stopped at a traffic light and drummed her fingers on the wheel. "In a limited sense, yes. But I won't butt into your life and you won't butt into mine. If we happen to be at the same social function and neither of us is working, we won't make a scene and neither of us will storm out in anger and we won't snub each other. But we're not going to leave together, either. And don't ever ask me to dance with you again."

He looked through the windshield as the light turned green and she stomped the gas pedal. "That's a bit harsh, don't you think?"

She didn't look at him. "No, I don't. Get it through your thick skull, Clark. We're never going to be an 'us' except as reporters on the same paper."

He could tell she wasn't going to change her mind right now. "All right, Lois, I surrender. No 'us' unless we're writing the story."

"Good." She opened her mouth to add something but

apparently changed her mind. “There’s your apartment up ahead. I assume you can get in?”

“I’m sure the key is still under the plant.”

Her mouth worked again and Clark thought she was about to launch into a short rant on his over-trust of Metropolis’ citizens. But she stopped whatever she was going to say as she pulled up to the curb outside his building’s front door. “Here you go. Get some rest and get healthy.”

“Thank you.” He hesitated, hoping for more that didn’t come. “Good night.”

She nodded sharply without looking at him.

He exited the Jeep and closed the door. Lois pulled away without turning her head to look at him.

He turned and trudged up the steps to his place. It was the stress, he thought. It had to be the stress of losing him and getting him back so abruptly combined with her own near-death experience. She’d feel different in a few days, no matter how sure of herself she sounded at the moment.

For a moment he almost smiled. Lois had just confessed to him that she cared about him deeply, more deeply than he’d dared believe a few days earlier. He’d managed to penetrate her emotional defenses more thoroughly than he’d known.

But it wasn’t a good thing. She’d just thrown up a new barrier between them, what military planners called a “defense in depth,” designed to present an attacker with a series of obstacles to be overcome instead of putting all of the defense’s energy and effort into a single point. It reminded him of a football team, with the defensive line attacking the offensive line, the linebackers patrolling the area directly behind the linemen, and the defensive backs dropping even further back, all of them focused on keeping the offense from moving the ball to the goal line.

Clark sighed. Whether it was a military or a sports metaphor, he’d just run up against the proverbial brick wall around Lois’ heart. But now it was festooned with poisoned spikes and patrolled by grim-faced defenders, each with Lois’ features, ready to drop hot sand or large rocks or fiery brands on anyone approaching the citadel.

Wow. He really was worn out. He probably should take the next day off and lay in the sun from morning to evening. And he should stop watching war movies for a while.

He pulled the key from beneath the planter and leaned his head against the door frame. She had to feel different tomorrow. She just had to.

He wasn’t sure he could stay in Metropolis without the prospect of winning Lois’ heart.

She managed to turn the corner before the tears came.

She pulled over again and turned off the motor, then dropped her face into her hands and let the agony penetrate all her heart’s defenses. She forgot what coherent thought was as she soaked her hands, her sleeves, the top of her sweater, even the edges of the blanket the police had given her.

She’d hurt him so badly.

But he’d hurt her, too, and it wasn’t his fault that she couldn’t take the pain. It wasn’t his fault that Lois Lane, intrepid investigative reporter, was too much a coward to risk her heart on the best man she’d ever known. It wasn’t Clark’s fault that she believed — no, it wasn’t just a belief, it was an absolutely certainty — that if she ever let herself love him like she wanted to love him and she lost him for any reason it would kill her. She wouldn’t have to overdose on sleeping pills or jump off a building or shoot herself in the head or inject poison into her veins. If she were to allow herself to love him and then somehow she lost him, her heart would just quit on her and she’d drop dead wherever she was, whatever she was doing.

Lois was certain she couldn’t survive losing Clark if she let herself love him.

So the only option was to prevent it from happening in the first place.

As her crying jag began to wind down, she remembered how many tears she’d already shed over Clark. She’d thought him dead, just like the rest of the city. Jimmy had mourned him. Perry had missed him deeply. His absence had cast a pall over the entire news staff. Everyone had been affected by his death.

But none of them thought their lives had ended with his.

Hers had.

And then he was back, hale and hearty and smiling and she’d run to him and embraced him and covered him with wet cement and he hadn’t minded. She didn’t care if Superman had used Professor Hamilton’s process to bring him back to her. All that mattered was that he was back, that he was breathing and walking and smiling that smile that lit up whatever room he entered.

Then the cold icy truth had set in. Lois had already lost her heart to him. And if he died again, her heart would die with him.

She couldn’t risk that. It would hurt too much. She couldn’t risk seeing him, loving him, even having him all to herself, all the while knowing that there was no guarantee that he’d be alive to take the next breath. The thought of seeing him in a coffin or having to identify him on a slab at the morgue or seeing him dead on the street because he’d just taken a bullet or a knife or a bomb meant for her nearly tore her apart. She couldn’t risk being destroyed by her love for a man who might die the next day, the next hour, the next minute.

She couldn’t spend every moment in fear. She couldn’t spend the rest of her years terrified that she’d lose him to death. Another woman? Never happen, not with Clark. And even if it did, she could deal with it, work to get him back.

She knew she couldn’t take losing him to Death, the coldest and cruelest mistress of all.

It was better this way. Clark deserved to be with a woman who was willing to risk her heart with him despite his dangerous lifestyle. He should be with someone who would love him and take care of him but would go on if she lost him. And that wasn’t going to be her.

Nor could she risk the pain of losing him to her own relationship cancer. Every man she’d ever cared about had walked — or run — away from her for one reason or another. Her father had led the parade, but there were a number of others following him in a conga line of disappointment and betrayal. Some had left her, others had been abandoned or driven away, but all of her relationships with men had failed.

And she cared too much about Clark to number him among that company.

She swiped the heel of her hand across her eyes once more and restarted the car. She was ready for a hot shower and a long sleep. The shower would come first, then she’d type up some notes to Perry and email them to him, and by then her hair would be dry enough for her to go to bed. She hadn’t slept since the night of the shooting — at least, not very well or for very long — and she was exhausted. Her mind was ready to attack the next story, but she knew her body wouldn’t go much farther without rest.

It was a good thing the police had allowed them to link to Perry’s home phone via their car radio. He’d make sure everyone at the Planet knew that Clark was still alive — or alive again, whichever it was — and that she’d send some notes for her part of the story as soon as she could. It was already too late to get anything in the morning edition, but she knew the evening edition would display the banner in fifty-four point type.

It saddened her to think that it might be the last story where she and Clark shared a byline.

Enough of this. Time for her shower, then the email to Perry, then sleep. Her clothes would go into the dumpster as soon as she got up and got dressed. She’d really liked that outfit, too.

And Clark had liked it. So maybe it was appropriate that she dispose of it at the same she disposed of any possibility of a relationship with Clark.

The finality of that thought almost started her tears again, but she forced them back. She would no longer cry for a man she would never have. Clark was out of her life forever.

Chapter Two

Lois walked down the ramp to the newsroom at eleven-thirty the following morning and made a beeline for Perry's office. She needed to get back to work as soon as possible. She had to be distracted, had to have something to occupy her mind and her time, something productive.

She didn't quite make it.

"Lois!" cried Jimmy. "Ain't it great? CK's coming back tomorrow morning! Superman saved him!"

She tried to wiggle past him. "I know, Jimmy, I was there last night. Clark's fine." Then she stopped and frowned at the young man. "He's coming back to work tomorrow? Already?"

"Yeah! He and Professor Hamilton went to STAR Labs this morning and got Dr. Klein to check him out. They both say he's as fine as he can be! The Chief told him to take several days off, but he wants to come back tomorrow, so yeah! Ain't that great?"

Lois allowed herself a small smile as she watched the young man bounce along on his errand, stopping every so often to celebrate Clark being alive. It was refreshing to see someone so singularly enthusiastic about Clark's return.

But now it was time to see Perry.

She tapped on the glass in the door and waited for her boss' bellowed "Come in!" before she turned the door handle. Perry was staring at a mockup of the evening edition as if he were trying to set it on fire.

"Chief, do you have a minute?"

"Can't you see I'm — Lois!" He jumped to his feet and all but ran around the desk to grab her by the shoulders. "Lois, honey, you didn't have to come in today! You were almost killed last night! You need some time to let your mind settle down."

She patted his elbow. "Thanks, but I'd rather get back to work."

"Aw, now, you don't have to!"

"But I want to. And I promise not to go chasing any gangsters for a while."

He leaned back and tilted his head at her. "Does that mean that you're willing to stay in the office for a few days?"

Lois pulled away and sat on the tattered and worn couch, one of the very few relics left from the old building before Luthor bombed it. "It does. But I also wanted to let you know about the ground rules Clark and I discussed last night."

"Ground rules? What kind of ground rules?"

She tried to hold his gaze but couldn't. Her chin tapped her chest and her voice dropped in volume. "I — we decided that we — we're not going to pursue any kind of romantic relationship. But we also agreed to be professional at the paper and in public."

"I see." Perry crossed his arms and leaned back against his desk. "Was this Clark's idea or yours?"

"Well — both of us — I brought it up — it was mostly — all mine."

"Yours, huh? And how did Clark take that declaration of independence on your part?"

Her head snapped up and she glared at him, but there was nothing in his face but compassion. "He — he didn't like it."

Perry nodded. "You know, this is quite a turnaround from the other day. You came in here the morning after the shooting and couldn't stop crying. You told me you were devastated, just torn apart, because Clark was gone and you'd never told him how you felt about him. What's with the big switcharoo?"

Lois turned her head away. "I just felt — I thought that we —

that he and I—"

And now her eyes were damp again. She slapped the couch with both palms. "Blast it, Perry! I'm scared, okay? I'm scared that if I really fall in love with him and he with me and he dies then I won't survive it!" She crossed her arms and turned to her left, away from the glass in Perry's office. "I don't think I'd want to survive it."

"I see. At least, I think I do." Perry paused and sighed, then went on. "Lois, that young man would walk on water for you or drown trying. He'd lasso the biggest bull he could find and hold it while you branded it if it gored his insides out. There's nothing Clark Kent wouldn't do for Lois Lane." He slipped off the desk and sat beside her on the couch. "And it's because he loves you more than he loves life itself."

Her eyes clenched shut and she stifled a sob. "Don't you think I know that? And don't you think I know what he'd go through if I died before he did? I can't do that to him, Perry! I can't put him through that pain." She leaned forward and buried her face in her hands. "I just can't!"

He reached out and gently rubbed her shoulders. "There, there, honey. I understand. One of the reasons I'm an editor now and not an investigator is because Alice didn't want me sticking my head in the lion's mouth any more. It scared her when I'd go on a stakeout or work with the police on a case or go undercover, so I wangled a promotion to the editorial staff and made her feel a lot better." He sighed. "For a while, anyway."

He dropped his hands. "Look, Lois, there aren't any guarantees in life. You could die just as easily from falling down a flight of stairs as you could from some killer somewhere. Clark might get shot by some other gangster or he might get hit by a bus." He reached out and tugged on her arm until she turned her face toward him. "And you both might live to be over a hundred. There's no way to predict when anyone will buy the farm."

She nodded. "My head knows that, Perry, but my heart can't take it. Right now I think I'd rather be stuck up in Rapunzel's tower than ride a horse behind Prince Charming." She looked at the floor. "It's not very brave, I know, but that's about all I can handle right now."

He sighed again. "Okay. I'll see if I can give out the assignments so that you two don't work together too much. Remember that I have to consider Clark's feelings in this, too. You aren't the only one who's going to suffer."

"I know." She pulled a hankie out of her sleeve and blew her nose, then stood. "I'm going to the ladies' room to clean up, then I'll start going through my notes and see what I can give you today. I promise you, this won't affect the quality of my work."

"Good. Now you take your time today. Give yourself the afternoon to find your balance again, and be ready to hit the ground running in the morning."

She nodded and turned toward the door, then stopped with her hand on the knob. "Clark's coming back in the morning, isn't he? That's what Jimmy said."

"Yes, he is. Will that be a problem?"

"Not for me. But you may have to give him a pep talk too."

"I'll do what needs to be done for the Daily Planet, Lois. I care a great deal for both you and Kent, but the paper has to be my primary focus."

"I know. I'm certain Clark will be professional about this whole thing. You might not have to say anything to him."

As she closed the door, she heard something from her boss that sounded like, "Oh, yes I will."

It was his first day back and it was already time to go home.

Clark had survived Perry's sympathetic counsel and nodded reluctant agreement with his editor's admonition that the Daily Planet had to be published irrespective of the personal feelings of its reporters. He'd managed not to pour a second cup of coffee for

Lois before turning on his computer. And he'd somehow been able to keep from embracing her as they passed on the ramp that afternoon.

Clark hadn't been sure he'd make it through the day with Lois just a few desks away, but he had. He hadn't believed he could stay away from her all day, but he'd managed. He was really concerned that Perry would move one or both of them to different parts of the news floor so they'd be farther away from each other, but that hadn't happened either. At least, not yet.

And now that the work day was over and they'd managed to say nothing more than "Good morning" or "Good night" to each other, he was about to blow it all.

The sun wasn't quite down on the horizon as Superman flew past Lois' apartment building. A quick glance told him that her window was closed. That was no surprise. They hadn't spoken personally since the night he'd gone to see her in the Suit after she'd asked Clark to send him to her except to tell her that he'd look for Clark the night he'd been shot. He wondered if cutting off that relationship had contributed to her walling off Clark, but he couldn't know that unless he asked her.

He'd been thinking of a trick that might get her attention without his having to hover outside her window. If he focused his airflow when he spoke, he might be able to make the window vibrate like the fabric of a loudspeaker and reproduce his voice inside a closed room.

He'd practiced on some windows in an unoccupied cabin outside the city with a tape recorder inside, but the results had been mixed. His first attempt had shattered the window and delayed him while he replaced the glass. His second try had resulted in garbled nonsense being recorded. After more experiments, he'd found that it could work if the window was large enough, wasn't cracked, was firmly secured in the frame, and if he spoke very slowly from a ninety-degree angle perpendicular to the window's surface.

So now he'd try this new trick on Lois' window. He waited on one of the few rooftop gargoyles in that part of town, watching her move around inside as she prepared a microwave dinner. He decided to wait until she was finished before he tried it.

He glanced away to the street below, checking for bad people doing bad things, trying to find a reason to delay this conversation, but found none. When he looked back at Lois, he saw that she had cleared the table and was in the kitchen. If she followed her usual pattern, she'd put the dishes in the sink to soak and move them to the dishwasher before she went to bed. He just had to wait —

No. No more waiting. It was now or never.

"Lois?" he called.

She jerked around in mid-step and stared at the window with her hand at her throat. "Don't — be — afraid. It's — Superman."

Her jaw dropped open and she took a step back. "Superman? How — how are you doing this? Why do you sound so freaky? And where are you?"

"Please — open — the — window. I — want — to — talk."

"Um — well — yeah, okay."

She slowly made her way to the window and opened it, then stepped back abruptly. He flashed in, too quick for anyone to glance up and see him.

"Superman! What are you doing? How did you do that? You scared the cr — the daylights out of me!"

He raised his hand for a moment. "I'm sorry, Lois. I didn't want to bring any undue attention on you. I'd hate for anyone to start a rumor that you were Superman's girlfriend."

Her breathing had slowed to something close to normal. "Okay, fine, I get that! But why the slow-motion-mad-scientist-on-downers voice?"

"I was using the window to reproduce my vocal sounds. It doesn't always work, and if I talk too fast the window tries to

vibrate too quickly and it shatters. I didn't want to do that to you."

She put her fists on her hips and scowled at him. "Yeah, well, maybe next time you can just pick up a phone and call like a normal person!"

He almost reminded her that he wasn't a normal person, but decided not to get into that. "Clark told me about your — agreement with him. I guess you know he's not happy about it."

"Of course he's not happy! He's a man and men don't like not being in charge!"

This time he couldn't hold in his irritation. "I see. And, of course, you don't identify with that mindset at all, do you?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Not your business, Superman. What does or does not happen between me and Clark stays between me and Clark."

"No. It doesn't."

His flat declaration seemed to startle her. "What do — are you — why are you here, anyway?"

"What I mean is that what you do affects other people, aside from the obvious ones. I've seen women do stupid things that they wouldn't have normally done if their husbands had treated them with a little kindness or respect on one particular morning. I've seen husbands make stupid decisions because they thought their wives were angry at them for no good reason. I've seen employees punch their bosses in the mouth because someone else said or did something that morning or the night before that set them on edge." He softened his tone further. "And I've seen one particular reporter do some spectacularly dangerous things because she misunderstood what someone was trying to tell her, or because deep down she was trying to gain someone's approval. That ring any bells?"

She assumed an angelic countenance. "I've no idea to whom you might be referring, Superman. I hear no bells."

"Of course not. There is one specific question I wanted to ask you, though. May I?"

She released a long-suffering sigh. "Sure, as long as you're already here."

"I wanted to ask you if there's anything I've done — or not done — that contributed to your problems with Clark."

She lifted her hands to either side. "I don't have any problems with Clark!"

"He seems to think you do. You told him that any kind of romantic relationship between the two of you was off the table." He stepped closer and leaned forward at the waist. "Or did Clark misunderstand what you told him?"

She took a step back and another to one side. "Well, I didn't use those particular words, but yeah, that was the basic meaning."

He straightened and nodded. "Okay, now that that's cleared up, will you answer my question?"

"Which question — oh, if you're somehow at least partly responsible for Clark and me being just coworkers?"

He nodded. "Yes."

She frowned and crossed her arms. "I really wish I could say that you were. That would give me someone to blame besides myself, and I think your shoulders are big enough to carry that load." She shook her head and turned away. "But you aren't responsible. This is between me and Clark and I'm going to ask you — as a friend — not to interfere, no matter how much you might want to." She turned to him and gave him a pleading look. "Please?"

The puppy-dog eyes. He could never resist those soft, round, puppy-dog eyes, whether he was in sweats and sneakers or a business suit or in The Suit. He nodded. "If that's really what you want. I won't interfere."

"Thank you."

He turned to go, then stopped by the window. "If I need to come by to see you again — on some other matter entirely — I

promise to call first.” He pointed to the table. “On the phone, I mean.”

She almost smiled. “Thanks. Although now that I’ve heard you do that, it wouldn’t shock me so badly. And it wouldn’t bother me if you used it to scare away burglars.”

This time he gave her a completely innocent expression. “Come now, Lois, any burglar you allowed to live couldn’t be such a bad person.”

This time she did smile. “Okay, you win. You’d better take off and get in a patrol before the bad guys get away.”

“I will.” An alarm caught his attention. “Uh-oh. Jewelry store robbery in progress. I’m sorry, Lois, but I have to go.”

He flew out the window and was out of sight in seconds, but not before he heard her last words to him.

“Don’t be a stranger, okay, big guy?”

Lois wanted Clark as just a co-worker but she wanted Superman to be her friend? Great. Could his life get any more complicated than that?

And could he keep going the way his life was now?

Chapter Three

Clark was depressed.

He’d waited months for Lois to come around. He’d worked with her as just a partner, just another reporter, and sometimes the role fit. Sometimes it felt natural and easy and smooth.

Other times, not so much.

And there were times when he imagined that he felt like a person with no powers would feel while chewing tinfoil and walking barefoot across red-hot carpet tacks while being beaten with a hungover porcupine. Those were the days when he couldn’t do anything to please her, couldn’t say anything that wouldn’t set her off, when he couldn’t wait to get away from Lois.

He tried to be sociable to her as Superman, but that was difficult in the extreme. Not because of Lois, of course, but because he couldn’t be seen as favoring any one woman over all the rest. It would have made her a target for every crook in the state. And he found that on those days when she and Clark clashed, he would deliberately avoid her as Superman because he didn’t want Superman to take Clark’s frustration out on her.

He didn’t want to punish her for making a hard decision and staying with it, but even Superman had his limits.

Every once in a while, he’d catch her in a wistful moment and see a glimpse of regret in her eyes. Every so often, usually at points of quick progress on important stories, she’d look at him and smile openly and brightly and make the sun shine a little brighter. But she’d always catch herself and withdraw from the moment.

He’d thought he hated her one day.

She’d accidentally met him on the street outside the District Attorney’s office when he was going to give a deposition on Baby Rage to Mayson Drake and deliberately started an argument with him. All he’d said was “Hello, Lois, how have you been?” And she was off on a rant about how he was still obsessing over her. Her shouting had distracted him enough that he didn’t hear the timer on the bomb in Mayson’s car start its countdown and Mayson had died. Then Lois had burst into tears and run away before coming back and giving a witness statement to the police.

He’d tried to hate her. He’d really, really tried, but he couldn’t. There was no way he could do anything but love her and try to be patient.

Then, just days later, when they’d broken the story on the Resurrection drug and caught Mayson’s killer and saved Metropolis seemingly all at once, she’d pulled herself into his embrace and hugged him like there was no tomorrow.

But it didn’t last. After a moment, she’d stiffened and pushed back from him, apologizing profusely while looking away as if

she didn’t want him to see the tears in her eyes. And, as usual, she’d refused to listen to his assurances that not only did he not mind her hug, he thoroughly enjoyed her rare embraces and sincerely wished that they’d become more frequent.

He hadn’t managed to finish a sentence before she’d all but run away from him.

She’d even gone so far as to set up a date between him and Sharon McClure, a dinner and a movie on a Friday night. Sharon and Clark had had a fun time together, but there were no sparks, as if Clark had expected anything different. Sharon hadn’t seemed to mind, or worse, to be disappointed, nor had she seemed to expect another invitation. Clark wondered what she’d told Lois about the date, since Lois had moved on to several other women she’d tried to set Clark up with. He never got up enough nerve to ask either of them about it.

Finally he’d told Lois he didn’t want to date other women, didn’t want her to “help” him in that way. He still wanted to get closer to her. She’d all but bitten his head off and stomped away, tossing “See if I get you any more dates!” over her shoulder at him. It made for some interesting moments in the newsroom as other reporters, several interns, and one associate editor stared at him quizzically as he stalked back to his desk.

That was the pattern for their relationship since the Capone/Barrow/Parker episode. Every time he thought they were about to make a personal breakthrough, Lois backed away. He didn’t know how she had the energy and determination to keep him at a distance because he was worn out.

He couldn’t take any more stress from Lois Lane.

So he’d made the decision. It was a decision he’d dreaded, one he hadn’t wanted to make, one he’d tried to avoid, one he’d consulted his parents about. But it was the only decision he felt he could make and retain his sanity.

He had to leave the Daily Planet and Metropolis.

And he felt it was right for him to tell Lois personally and not hear it through the grapevine or in a group announcement from Perry. He’d tell her himself. If he could get her to come with him to a public place, maybe for a meal, it might make things easier for both of them. They’d be limited in the responses they could give one another — or, at least, the intensity of their responses would be limited.

He hoped so, anyway.

There was a new place he’d thought about trying, a restaurant that he’d heard served a good breakfast. Callard’s, that was it. Maybe he could convince her to join him there.

One last meal with Lois. It sounded so final, so permanent. He held out a slim, tiny, guttering candle of hope that she’d ask him not to go, that she’d break down and confess that she still cared for him, that she’d changed her mind and wanted to explore a relationship with him.

He sighed. That candle wouldn’t heat a thimble of water.

It was the last time. And he knew it.

Lois abandoned the residue of her microwave supper and picked up her phone on the second ring. “Hello?”

“Hi, Lois, it’s Clark.”

“Hello, Clark. How have you been?”

She heard the small sigh before he could control it. “We just saw each other at the office a couple of hours ago, and I was fine then.”

“A lot can happen in a couple of hours.”

“While that may be true, that’s not the purpose for my call. I need to talk to you about something.”

“I’m listening now.”

“This isn’t a conversation I wanted to have over the phone.”

She knew she was being difficult, but she had to be. Somehow Clark still had hope for the two of them, and she couldn’t let him have any encouragement at all. “Clark, if you

don't want to talk to me now, can it just wait until Monday? I have some plans this weekend."

"This is a very important conversation, and before you ask, no, I'm not trying to get you to go out with me."

"This isn't about that stupid lawsuit that guitar player filed against Superman, is it? The case was dismissed."

He paused, and his silent frustration tumbled down the line. A part of her — a really, really big part — wanted to reach out and comfort him, but she ruthlessly shoved it away. There was no way she'd put her heart in danger for him, no matter how wonderful he was.

Finally he said, "I need to talk to you about a personal matter that doesn't involve beginning or continuing a close personal relationship between the two of us. Is that enough qualification for you?"

It wasn't smart. It wasn't the right thing to do. It wouldn't have any bearing on her decision to remain aloof from him. There was no way for him to change her mind on the subject. It was best that they not meet socially.

But before she knew it, she heard her mouth say, "All right, Clark, we'll sit down and have this talk. When do you want to get together?"

"How about breakfast at Callard's tomorrow morning at nine? I'll meet you at your place and we can ride together in your Jeep."

She almost said "no." Instead, she heard herself say, "Is this a formal place? I'm not familiar with it."

"For breakfast on a weekend, it's business casual. You could wear blouse and slacks and fit right in. Fashion-wise, at least."

She almost smiled. It was a typical Clark-style sneaky and subtle compliment, and it made her feel unaccountably pleased.

But he couldn't know that.

She forced her mouth into a firm line, then said, "That sounds fine. I'll look for you tomorrow morning at what, eight-thirty?"

"That works for me. See you then, Lois."

"Good-bye, Clark."

He hesitated, then softly said, "Good-bye."

The click in her ear told her that he'd hung up. She hated being this way with him, hated keeping him at a distance, hated dousing the light she saw in his eyes when he thought she wasn't looking. But it was for his own good. She was sacrificing her own happiness to keep him from being devastated when the relationship blew up. She was denying her own heart in order to preserve his. Why couldn't he see that?

And why did she have to remind herself so often that she was making this sacrifice for him?

It was the first time he'd been to her apartment since before the clone gangster fiasco. It hadn't changed much, and he wasn't sure if he was glad or disappointed by that.

Then he remembered how uncomfortable her couch was, and he was both amused and concerned. How could she entertain anyone with that rock-hard lump of compressed stuffing? He had to admit that it looked good, and with the rug it really pulled the room together, but otherwise it was about as useful as a brick stepladder.

It was three minutes before he was to leave with her. Three minutes he might spend in her apartment. Three minutes in her presence. Maybe the last three minutes he would spend with her alone for the rest of his life.

The thought pained him, but not as much as it once would have. She'd spent so many months pushing him away, building that fortified wall between them, isolating herself from him, that it was hard to remember when she'd smiled freely at him, when she'd looked at him with gentle eyes and spoken with a breathy tone that only he could hear.

A sudden memory washed over him.

It was his first week working at the Planet. They'd been trying to decode Samuel Platt's notes and had taken a break. He'd sat and looked at her, drinking in her beauty and fire and strength. Her face had relaxed for just a moment, then she'd laid the first stone of that wall between them.

<Don't fall for me, farm boy. I don't have time for it.>

At the time he'd assumed that she just wanted to keep him away from her and out from under her feet, but as he thought about it now he heard a different note in his mind. It was almost as if she were telling herself not to let him get close to her, as if she were trying to protect herself.

And it made a twisted, scary kind of sense.

She was afraid. Lois Lane, intrepid investigative reporter for the Daily Planet, winner of three Kerth awards, was afraid to lose her heart to him. Maybe she feared losing that edge that made her such a great reporter. Maybe she was afraid of losing herself in someone else. And maybe she was so afraid of being hurt that she'd decided that the possibility of experiencing pain was too frightening for her.

He sighed. If that were the case, then he certainly understood. He didn't agree with her reasoning — assuming that reacting in such an extreme emotional manner could be called reasoning — but he could see her point. He didn't want to get hurt either.

And that's why they were having breakfast at Callard's.

Time was passing. Soon his last chance would be gone.

He lifted his hand and knocked.

Lois was startled by the knock at the door. She glanced at the clock yet again and saw that it was eight twenty-eight, just two minutes before Clark had said he would be here. He was never late for social occasions, nor was he ever very early.

He was so wonderful about being on time that it was almost maddening. Did he have a clock in his head or what?

She wondered again what the occasion was. He'd said it was a personal matter that didn't involve a relationship with her, so maybe he was going to ask for her advice on a matter of the heart. Maybe he was going to tell her about a woman he'd met who interested him. Maybe all he needed from Lois was her permission to explore a long-term and possibly permanent relationship with this woman. Of course, that was the only kind Clark would ever consider. He just wasn't a one-night stand or weekend fling or even a see-you-next-time kind of guy. If he told a woman that he loved her it would be the truth, and he'd die before he'd turn that into a lie.

And this was no time to start crying over her life choices. He was better off without her, hands down, no questions asked, no discussion possible. Lois Lane would not suffer the way her mother had suffered and continued to suffer, even if Clark was orders of magnitude a better man than her father.

She would not — absolutely would not — open herself to that kind of hurt.

She was ready to go except for her shoes. On Clark's advice, she'd chosen a conservative dark blue pantsuit with a jacket, topped off with small earrings which lay flush against her earlobes. Her hair was clean and brushed, but she hadn't done anything special with it. She didn't want him complimenting her on her appearance other than a perfunctory you-look-nice-today mention.

She would keep her heart in line and not allow herself to say or do anything stupid.

Maybe that source of his who'd called the other day would get in touch with him at the restaurant. Then she'd have a legitimate reason to end the meeting if it got too uncomfortable.

She unlocked her door and opened it. She opened her mouth to invite him in.

And the phone rang.

"Hope that's not important," Clark said.

He shut the door as she walked over to the phone. “Maybe it’s that source of yours that called a few days ago. He wanted to talk to you, thought you were here.”

She stopped with her hand on the phone and looked at his face, waiting for guilt or embarrassment or something that would let her know that he was in on the gag. But all she saw was puzzlement.

Clark had no idea what she was talking about.

She lifted the phone. “Hello?”

“Hello, Ms. Lane. May I speak to Clark Kent, please?”

It was the same voice. He sounded young and a little cocky, as if he thought he knew something no one else did. Lois almost told him that Clark wasn’t there, but the thought that Clark might read more into the statement than her irritation at her schedule being disrupted stopped her.

She held the receiver out to Clark. “This guy wants to talk to you.”

“Me? How did he know I’d be here?”

It was a good question. They’d set up the date just last night — No! Not a date!

They’d agreed to meet for breakfast only last night. So how did this character know Clark would be here now?

And why had he assumed that Clark was there a few days ago?

She handed the phone to Clark and thought back over the previous call. The young man had sounded cocky then, too, and greatly surprised when he’d asked for Clark and been told that he was neither present nor expected. When Lois had suggested that the man call Clark either at his home or the office in the morning, he’d stammered and stuttered and hung up.

She’d forgotten about it until just now.

She turned to tell Clark what she remembered but stopped. His face had gone slack and his entire body was taut. She tuned in to his words.

“You what? No! You hurt them and — what did you call me? No! There’s no way I’m going to — you can’t! I can’t! When? Now?” He paused, then said, “All right. Yes, fifteen minutes. Of course.”

He dropped the phone onto its cradle and leaned against the wall.

Lois was almost scared for him. Clark Kent was the strongest man she knew aside from Superman, yet here he was in her living room, stunned beyond action. What had he—

Why did he remind her of Superman just now?

Then he turned and looked at her. His face was pale and his eyes were filled with fear. “I — Lois, I’m sorry — I have to go. Something happened — I can’t tell you — I have to go!”

He headed for the door, but she braced herself and grabbed his elbow. “Wait a minute! We’re partners, Kent! We share the credit and the danger. Tell me what’s going on.”

His voice was hollow and forced. “I — I can’t. I can’t tell you! He’ll kill them if—”

She waited a moment, then pulled herself closer to him. “Who is ‘he,’ Clark? And who is he threatening? Someone close to you?”

The flicker in his eyes told her that she was close. “He’s blackmailing you, isn’t he? This clown is trying to force you to do something you don’t want to do, something bad. He just told you to do something he knows you won’t want to do and he’s threatening someone — no, two or more someones — to get you to — to — oh, no!”

Clark tried to pull away. “Lois, please, don’t say anything else! Please let me go!”

Her voice lowered. “Your parents.”

A bigger flinch told her she was right. “That’s it, isn’t it? He’s got your parents and he’s threatened to kill them! What does he want you to do?” She yanked on his elbow. “Tell me!”

The color was seeping back into his face, and his voice was closer to normal. “You don’t have to get involved in this. And I’d rather not pull you in.”

She slapped his chest with her free hand and regretted it. Ignoring the sting, she snarled, “You’re not getting this story alone! Lane and Kent are still the hottest team in town and we’re going to bring this jackass to justice together!”

He relaxed and stood tall before her. The thought that she could conquer the world with a man like this at her side flitted across her mind.

Then he said, “All right, Lois, we’ll do it your way.” He hesitated, then added, “One more time.”

And with that cryptic remark, he told her what he was supposed to do.

She couldn’t believe it had come to this.

She’d covered for Clark with the police as he’d robbed Mazik’s jewelry store. She’d lied to Detective Zymak’s face and given him an alibi for the time of the theft. She’d helped him research Jace Mazik and discovered Nigel St. John’s involvement in the conspiracy. And they’d worked together the whole time like they’d never experienced a hiccup in their relationship.

And now the next call had come in.

Maybe the last call.

Mazik wanted her dead body. Or maybe Nigel St. John wanted her dead. Ultimately it didn’t matter. They wanted to trade Clark’s parents’ lives for Lois’ death.

And she knew he’d never agree to that.

“I want you to get out of town,” he said. “Get on a plane, go far away—”

“No.”

She stopped for a moment, then realized that she’d spoken. Why? What could she do to help—

Superman.

“What’s the address?”

“Wh — what address?”

“Where Mazik wants you to take my body! Where is it?”

“It’s 448 South Howard, on the north side of Suicide Slum. Wait — you’re not going there by yourself, are you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Find Superman, Clark. Get him to my apartment as fast as you can. I’ll meet him there.”

“What? Lois, you can’t—”

“Yes, I can!” She reined in her temper. “In fact, I need to.”

“But what can—”

“Just get him there! And you stay out of this!”

She grabbed her scarf and ran out of the conference room. It was a wild idea, but maybe it would work.

It had to work. Or someone would have to update her obituary.

And that would totally suck.

Chapter Four

She faced Superman and all but ordered him to do this her way.

“You know you can’t let Clark’s parents die! And I’m sure Nigel has Kryptonite or he wouldn’t let you know where he was! If you show up without my body it’ll be a bloodbath and you’ll be dead!”

He crossed his arms and glared at her. “What makes you think this nutty scheme of yours will have a different outcome?”

If she could have punched him into agreement, she would have done it. “Because — because they won’t expect it! They’re looking for Clark, not you! And they’re expecting me to be dead! There is no way on God’s green earth that Clark would ever hurt me, much less kill me — even for his parents — and they’re too stupid to see that. This is the best chance we have.”

“It’s dangerous, Lois! You could easily end up dead for real.”

“I can fake it. All I need is some makeup and a little Yi Chi meditation and control and I’ll be a corpse with a kick. We walk in — or, rather, you walk in carrying me like I’m dead, we get close to them, you throw me on Mazik so I can put him down and you take out Nigel, and Clark and I will write it up for the Planet.”

“Why don’t I just zoom in there faster than either of them can react and take them out?”

“Because Nigel St. John is sneaky and dirty and underhanded. It wouldn’t surprise me if he had some kind of dead-man switch that would kill Clark’s parents before you could stop it. I know you’re fast, but unless you know exactly what he’s got set up, you might not be fast enough. This way is better because we’re taking the initiative away from him. He won’t expect that.”

He shook his head at her. “You make it sound so simple.”

“It is simple! That’s why it’ll work.”

“Really? Do we have a plan ‘B’ if something goes wrong?”

“We don’t need one. Look, give me three minutes to make myself look pale and dead and we’ll go.”

“Uh-huh. You can make yourself look dead.”

She all but sprinted to her bathroom. “I took some theater in college, Superman. I thought it would help me when I went undercover and it has. Didn’t ever go on stage, but I learned how to make people up and change their appearance. It’ll hold up unless someone rubs a finger across my face.”

“I don’t want to put you in danger, Lois.”

“Tough tacos, Big Blue.” She paused and turned to face him, ignoring the tiny grin on his lips. “Just — please do this my way. I know it’s a risk, but the only other thing I can think of is for you to freeze me with your cold breath and I think that’s even worse. This way, there are two of us against two of them, and we’ll take them down together.” She resumed putting on the makeup. “Besides, I owe Clark big time.”

She saw a puzzled superhero in her mirror. “Why do you owe Clark?”

She didn’t stop the makeup this time. The clock was ticking and she needed to focus and not cry. “Because — because I’m a horrible person and I’ve been a complete jackass to him for months. I’m terrified that we’ll get involved and that he’ll hurt me even if he doesn’t want to and I care about him too much to lose him to a breakup so I’ve been pushing him away for months and I — I wish now that I hadn’t.”

Superman didn’t speak. He just crossed his arms and leaned against the door frame and slowly nodded as if digesting her revelation.

“Look,” she said, “I know I’ve acted like a love-sick puppy around you at times, but I’ve grown up quite a bit over the last few months. You and I could never be more than friends for more reasons than I have time to list. But it’s different between Clark and me. I could love him so easily it scares me. And I don’t want him to go through this without doing something about it.”

She watched his mouth set itself in a hard line. Then he nodded. “Okay. We’ll do this your way.”

“Good.” She put away her makeup and turned to face him. “See? Now I look like a fresh corpse. And we could have saved some time if you’d just done what I told you to do right away.”

The ghost of a smile played over his mouth again. “Of course, Lois. How silly of me to object to you putting your life at risk.”

“Smart-aleck. Come on, we’ve got to go. Take me to 448 South Howard. You know where that is?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, listen. When you throw me at Mazik, you’re going to have to take out Nigel as fast as you can. His reflexes are like lightning, and if you give him any chance at all he’ll use the Kryptonite on you.”

“I know. I have a little surprise for him, too.”

“Really? What surprise?”

He nodded. “A non-super-powered surprise. He won’t be expecting it from me.”

She didn’t bother asking again what that surprise was. “Good. Pick me up like you’re carrying my body.”

She felt herself lifted from the floor. “Now watch. And don’t try to talk to me because I won’t hear you. I’m going to go for that Yi Chi light trance that will make me look dead.”

“How will I bring you out of it?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll snap you out of it when your throw me at Mazik.”

She hoped.

He lifted her and held her across his arms. It was the closest they’d been to each other for weeks, and he couldn’t help enjoying the contact.

But the enjoyment didn’t last. Her face went slack and her body lost tension, and it startled him so much that he listened for her heartbeat to make sure she hadn’t actually died in his arms.

There it was, down to about eighteen beats a minute, but steady. And she was breathing, too, just very slow and shallow. If she wasn’t examined too closely, she’d convince them.

As he lifted into the air and slipped out the window, a little voice in his head kept screaming, “Bad idea! Bad idea! Horrible idea!”

Oh, yeah, he replied, you have a better one?

The voice shut up.

He landed in front of the decrepit house on South Howard with two minutes to spare. A blast of super-breath opened the front door, and a quick scan showed both Nigel and Jace in the basement. An old book, probably the diary Jace had mentioned, was in Jace’s coat pocket, wrapped in a reusable plastic bag. A lead-lined temporary room to one side probably held his parents, and a shelf behind Jace was home to an ornate bottle, probably some expensive liquor held in reserve as a toast to their joint success.

He also saw a small pistol in Nigel’s right hand and a small lead box in his left.

This was going to be tricky.

There was what looked like a waist-high table built with concrete blocks and a wooden panel laid flat on top between the bottom of the stairs and the far corner of the room where the two men were standing. He knew they’d heard him enter, and as he walked toward the stairs he watched their faces through the floor. Nigel was determined and alert, but also seemed to be fighting a smile, probably anticipating seeing Lois dead. Jace was almost manic, bouncing on his toes and grinning like a possum.

He hoped they were in for a very unpleasant surprise.

As he came into their sight, Jace actually giggled. “You did it. You really did it! Nigel didn’t think you would but you did! Wow! What did you do to her? How’d you whack her?”

Nigel cleared his throat. “Superman, please put Ms. Lane’s body over here.”

He stopped about ten feet from them. “Why? Are you going to make this her funeral pyre?”

“Does it truly matter? Please, place her on this structure.”

He walked slowly toward the makeshift altar. “You both know that you won’t get away with this.”

Jace rubbed his hands together. “That’s what all the good guys say. And yet, here we are, the four of us — oh, I’m sorry, the three of us.”

He was almost there. “I don’t make threats, Mazik.”

Nigel lifted the lead box. “Be that as it may, please do as—”

It had to be now.

He tossed Lois at Jace’s face and saw her eyes snap open. She twisted in mid-air and hit him in the face with her elbow and they

both went down in a heap with Jace trying to ward off the blows Lois was raining down on him.

He lunged at Nigel.

Nigel was ready for him.

The box snapped open and the green poison hit him like a club. His momentum carried him into Nigel's body and made him drop the box, but it didn't close and Nigel didn't fall.

Superman thumped to the floor chest-first. Nigel stumbled away and lifted his pistol and fired twice, but not at Superman. Someone cried out in pain.

Despite his own torment, Superman reached around to his back — under his cape — and pulled out a Taser and shot Nigel with it.

As the electricity surged through his body, Nigel's teeth clamped shut and he stood in place grunting as loudly as he could. When Superman released the trigger, Nigel fell to the floor in a limp heap of expensive clothing and dropped his pistol. Superman crawled to the lead box and managed to close it.

As soon as the box snapped shut, his pain was gone. He climbed to his feet and put the box on the other side of the room from Nigel, then walked over, grabbed the man's pistol away from his fumbling fingers, and tucked it into his waistband. Nigel's eyes glared hate up at him and Superman smirked back. "Sorry, old man. Worse luck next time."

Then he looked across the room.

Mazik was lying on his stomach, his face turned to one side, with a bloody nose and open eyes staring at nothing. A small hole in his forehead told the story.

Jace Mazik was dead, killed by Nigel St. John.

Lois groaned and tried to straighten out. Superman strode to her side and bent down to help her up, but she cried out as he put his hand on her elbow. "No! Don't pull — I'm hit."

She lifted her hand away from her abdomen. It was covered with blood.

Her blood.

A lot of her blood.

He didn't think he'd ever flown that fast with a passenger.

Clark sat in the emergency room waiting area, staring at but not seeing a wildlife documentary playing on the TV. He'd already had word that his parents were generally okay, but his father was being kept overnight for observation and his mother refused to leave his side. The nurses had shooed him out of the room to allow the older Kents to get some sleep, and they had even brought in a cot for Martha to use. Very much against regulations, one nurse explained as she set up the cot. Totally not allowed, another one added as she unfolded the sheets for Martha.

Jace Mazik was in the morgue, waiting for transport to the coroner's office. Nigel St. John had taken advantage of Clark's preoccupation with freeing his parents and getting Lois to the hospital. He'd pulled out the Taser's leads, grabbed the bottle of bourbon from the shelf and the lead box from the floor, and wiggled out through one of the basement windows.

He'd been found three blocks away, dead. The theory Bill Henderson came up with was that the bourbon was for a celebratory toast after killing Superman, but that someone — almost surely Jace — had poisoned it. Preliminary tests had found that it was the same poison used to kill Jace's father four years before. Nigel must have taken a drink to settle his nerves, or perhaps to celebrate his escape, and had accidentally killed himself.

Henderson had come to the waiting room and given the lead box to Clark, saying that it wasn't evidence and looked like someone's private property. He'd also avoided making eye contact with Clark as he did so. Instead of brooding over just how much Bill Henderson knew or suspected, Clark had taken the box

out of the atmosphere and thrown it into a decaying cometary orbit. In a few days it would vaporize in the sun's outer atmosphere with no sign that it had ever existed.

Henderson had also stayed for a few minutes, had asked Clark how Lois' surgery was going, had expressed his relief that Clark's parents were well, and then had given Clark his card with his home phone number written in ink on the back along with an admonition to call if he needed anything.

It was over.

Now all Clark had to do was wait for word on Lois.

He'd called in the story under their joint byline. Perry and Jimmy and Eduardo and Sharon McClure had all dropped by to check on both of them. Sharon had offered to stay with him, but Clark felt like he needed to be alone to process all that had happened. The police had all the information he could give them.

Except the diary and its contents.

He'd lifted the diary from Jace's pocket after he'd come back to free his parents and found Nigel missing. Why Nigel hadn't taken it would forever remain a mystery, unless he feared being caught while searching for it. Or perhaps Nigel hadn't known where Jace had hidden it. Maybe Nigel didn't think he needed it.

Whatever the reason, Clark now held the book in his hands and wondered how much of it he should actually believe.

This Tempus character was a real doozy, assuming he was a real person. If not for the uncanny accuracy of the assertions in the book — at least, up to the incident of the cloned gangsters at Georgie Hairdo's club, after which the narrative diverged significantly from the recent past — and the fact that Tempus had known Clark's dual identity, he wouldn't believe a word of it.

Yet he had to. Somehow he and Lois had inspired — or would inspire — people in the future to build a Utopian society with Superman's ideals driving its development. H. G. Wells had visited that future and come back with Tempus, then somehow dropped him off in Smallville in 1866 and had him committed to an insane asylum. If Tempus had told his story to the authorities then and there, putting him away would have been a slam dunk.

Now he had to figure out what to do with the information.

There was no mention in the book about Lois getting shot or about her dying young. But maybe time wasn't fixed like a mural, but was fluid like a wind-blown Zen garden. A random act or a seemingly insignificant choice could have repercussions throughout history.

A nurse had come out once already to tell him that Lois was doing well, that they'd removed the bullet, and were about to begin repairing the internal damage. She had seemed optimistic, but surgical nurses always seemed to give patients' loved ones the best-case scenario.

He put the diary back in its plastic cover and slipped it inside his sweater. It would keep until later.

Lois slowly became aware of her surroundings.

The first thing she heard was a big, burly guy near her bed who kept yelling, "Breathe! You have to breathe, okay? You want to go home, don't you?"

She moved her mouth and realized that there was a plastic tube in it. She tried to push it out with her tongue, but it didn't budge. And when she tried to speak, nothing came out.

The burly guy stood and grabbed her hand before it got to her face. "Easy, ma'am. Don't try to talk. You have a breathing tube in your throat. The doctor will be here soon to take it out."

She blinked and the guy disappeared. Must have been a long blink, she mused.

Then a short, freckled, perky redheaded girl leaned over her. "Ms. Lane? You're awake! Good. If you have any pain, blink twice, okay? Blink twice for pain and once if you don't feel any."

Lois blinked once and thought that her eyes were all but paralyzed. It seemed to take minutes for them to open again, but

the little redhead was still there, bright-eyed and smiling down at her.

“Good! The doctor will be in here — oh, here he is now. Doctor Richards, Ms. Lane is awake and responsive.”

A tall, slender black man loomed over her. “Excellent,” he intoned. “Do you think you’re ready to breathe on your own now? Blink twice for yes and once for no.”

Lois blinked twice and thought that her eyes moved a little faster that time. And she thought she could hear the clicks and beeps of other medical machines in the background.

“Okay, Ms. Lane,” the doctor said, “we’re going to take the tube out. You’ll feel some discomfort for a moment. You’ll probably be thirsty, but all we can give you for now is a damp cloth to chew. In a little while we’ll give you some ice chips. Are you ready?”

Lois blinked twice more.

“Okay, nurse, let’s do this. You steady the patient and I’ll pull. One, two, three!”

The little redhead held Lois’ head, the doctor put his hands on the tube and counted to three, and the tube slipped out. Lois thought she’d choked on a sword and started coughing. The nurse turned her head to one side and held a small basin under her mouth.

Before she could ask what the basin was for, the nurse took it away and gave her the wet cloth. “Here you go. Don’t try to talk for a few minutes. Your throat is really dry and we don’t want you to cough any more than you have to.”

Lois lifted her hand and tried to draw a question mark in the air.

The nurse frowned slightly. “You don’t remember why you’re here?”

Lois started to blink, then her memories cascaded back.

Nigel and Jace.

Clark’s parents in danger.

Kryptonite.

Had she self-induced a Yi Chi trance?

Had she been shot?

It was all jumbled up in her head.

She felt her eyes bulge. She croaked, “Clark!” before her throat closed up again and she began coughing.

This time it didn’t stop.

And this time her belly hurt like fire and acid.

She heard Doctor Richards yell for a gurney. She felt herself being lifted onto it. She felt time slow down as her vision clouded again.

She hoped Clark would understand if she di—

“No, Mr. Kent. We took out the breathing tube and she said your name and started coughing and then started bleeding internally again. We think the coughing pulled her internal stitches loose. Doctor Richards is working on her now and he’s the best trauma surgeon we have. If anyone can pull her through this, he can.”

He fell back into his chair and dropped his face into his hands. “I — I can’t lose her. I just can’t!”

The nurse sat down beside him. “Mr. Kent, I assure you that we’re doing all we can. Everything that can be done for her is being done.”

He felt her arm reach across his shoulders and her other hand touch his wrist. “Do you want me to call anyone for you?”

He shook his head.

“How about if I pray with you?”

He lifted his eyes to her. “Pray?”

She nodded. “Sometimes the Lord does things we don’t understand. Sometimes He allows things we don’t think He should allow. And sometimes things happen because He wants us to remember who He is.” She patted his wrist. “Do you mind if I

pray? Or would you rather I call the chaplain?”

“I — I don’t know.”

She smiled softly. “Let me give it a shot.”

He nodded. “Do I — should I kneel or something?”

“Not unless you want to. I was going to sit here and talk.”

He nodded again. And as small as she was compared to him, he felt as if she were enveloping him with her embrace.

“Father,” she said, “this man is hurting bad. You know it.

Please, please give him grace to see this through. Give him what he needs to face whatever You have in store for him. We know that bad things happen to people all the time, and we don’t think they deserve them. But You know what’s really going on. You know what’s best. You know how You’re going to use this to make things better down the road, even if we don’t have any idea how that might happen. Father, please take care of this man’s lady. Please bring her back to him healthy and sound. Please mend her body and their hearts. And let them remember You in the times of Your blessing. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

Clark lifted damp eyes to her. “Thank you,” he whispered. “I — thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Kent. Now I need to get back in there and help. You just hang on, okay? I think things are going to turn out for the best.”

He nodded weakly. “Is that a promise?”

Her face crinkled and he thought she was about to cry. “I can’t promise anything, Mr. Kent, except that life comes with pain built-in. The most important thing is how we react to it.” She stood beside him. “We’re doing our best. So is Ms. Lane. Now you have to do your best.”

She took a deep breath, then strode purposefully through the automatic doors leading to Lois’ operating room.

Clark watched her go, his mind still in turmoil but his heart strangely calmer. Whatever happened, he’d bear it, as long as Lois was there with him. With her in his life he could face anything.

He sighed, resigning himself to his future. So much for Superman leaving town now.

Chapter Five

The young, athletic, blonde home care nurse with the unlikely name of Buffy bustled around Lois’ living room, shifting this and moving that and generally making Lois tired just from watching her. But when the girl finally stopped moving and smiled at her patient, the room somehow looked better, with everything Lois might need within easy reach of the hospital bed in the middle of her apartment’s living room.

“Okay, Ms. Lane, I think we’re ready for you to be alone for a while today. There’s your water bottle, a basket of healthy snacks — they taste better than they sound — a pee bottle, your walker — which you have to use if you get out of bed and I mean it — your cordless home phone, your cell phone, TV remote, all on the end table to your right, and the bed controller is right beside your left leg. If you have any questions, or if you need me to come back, don’t hesitate to call my mobile number! It’s at the top of your speed-dial list. And I mean that, too. I won’t have you strain yourself or hurt yourself on my watch.”

Lois leaned back against the raised head of the bed. “Thanks, Buffy. I think that’s everything.”

“Not quite. I also laid out two changes of underwear and three sets of sweats on your bed. And if you start bleeding around your sutures again, call me! Even if it’s just a little bit. Don’t try to change the bandage by yourself. You know what Doctor Richards said.”

“I remember.”

“Oh, I almost forgot! This wheeled tray on the left side has your laptop — fully charged and the power supply plugged into the extension outlet on the cart — three blank notebooks, two

dozen sharpened pencils, your dictionary and thesaurus on the second shelf, and a brand-new remote keyboard and mouse with a lap desk. Also your hairbrush, makeup bag, and a new hand mirror.”

Lois grinned. “For all you do, you should get paid more.”

Buffy smiled back. “Remember you said that when my bill comes due.” She picked up her windbreaker. “I’ll be back in about four hours or so. You want anything special for dinner?”

“How about a big pizza with everything on it?”

The blonde frowned. “How about ‘no?’ Your tummy isn’t anywhere near ready for that much acid.”

Lois’ face fell. “Will it ever be?”

Buffy sat on the end of the bed. “I don’t know, Ms. Lane. Dr. Richards told you that the damage to your liver was extensive. It’s only been nine days since you got shot, and you’re doing very well just to be breathing.”

“I don’t know if breathing is enough for me.”

The girl sighed. “Ms. Lane, you’re alive. You’re recovering from a near-fatal gunshot wound. It’s going to take some time to get back on your feet.”

Lois looked away. “Dr. Richards said I probably won’t ever be a hundred percent again. Not like I was before.”

“You mean when people were trying to blow you up or shoot you or drop you in boiling liquid or strangle you or throw you off tall buildings? A hundred percent like that?”

“Ah, the good old days.”

Buffy chuckled and Lois forced a small grin. “Look, everyone loses something in painful life experiences. But we also gain something. You’ve gained a wonderful cook and caretaker. And—”

“You certainly think highly of yourself.”

“No, not me! I mean that good-looking Mr. Kent.” The girl leaned forward and lowered her voice as if trying to keep the kitchen from hearing her. “If he were the reward, I think I’d risk getting myself shot. Hey, he’s coming over again tonight, isn’t he?”

“If he doesn’t have to work, yes.”

“Great! He and I will do rock-paper-scissors to see who makes the soup and sandwiches. Who knows, I may just let him win.” She dropped a big wink at Lois. “I do enjoy being served dinner by such a handsome man.”

If Lois hadn’t feared popping her stitches she would have burst out laughing.

She couldn’t believe the emails she’d gotten. Her inbox was full and she needed to delete some of them, but going through each one would be a trial. Maybe Clark would help her when he came over.

Then one caught her eye.

She opened it and realized that it was a form notice. Another rejection notice from another publisher telling her that her book idea wasn’t bad but wasn’t what they—

Wait a minute.

This wasn’t a rejection.

It — it was an acceptance form!

They — they wanted to publish a book by Lois Lane!

It was the same company, Putnam, who published those alphabet mysteries by Sue Grafton. The acquisitions editor — scroll, scroll, where was his name? Theresa Franklin. Okay, her name. Ms. Franklin liked Lois’ book proposal and the excerpt she’d sent and wanted to see more of her Wanda Detroit novel! And even more interesting, she hoped that Wanda would become a series character! They sold better, apparently, and Ms. Franklin wanted to know if Lois had outlined the sequel yet.

She sat there, stunned, while the import of the email washed over her. If this worked out, she wouldn’t have to go back to the Planet as a desk-bound copy editor or move to rewrite or do

something else orders of magnitude less satisfying than investigative reporting. She could parlay this into non-fiction books, too, writing about Lex Luthor — whose complete story still had not been told in a coherent manner, despite the badly informed efforts of a dozen amateurs — or about other career criminals and how they were brought to justice.

And another idea blossomed in her mind, one that she’d been playing with off and on for a couple of years.

There was no shortage of tell-all books about athletes and their drug/alcohol/lifestyle problems, but there was very little information presented to the public about their spouses and children after their falls from public grace. Often the fans would rail at an athlete who’d destroyed his (or occasionally her) career with excess and self-indulgence, but seldom would the story remain in the public eye long enough for the fates of the families to be published. There were divorces, of course, and children who seldom saw their absent parents very often, if at all, and many times the athlete would not maintain the child support or alimony ordered by the courts, preferring to blow it on partying and hiding from legal obligations.

People needed to know the human cost of such behavior.

She could expand it — no, make it a separate volume — and write about entertainers who had done the same kinds of things. There would be even more tales of abandonment, betrayal, lies, deception, and the public would eat it up. Maybe she could interview John Lennon’s first wife Cynthia and let her tell her side of the story of their marriage, what really happened with Yoko Ono. The best part about the whole idea, though, was that Lois could continue to campaign for truth and justice in her own way.

Truth and justice. That reminded her of Superman.

She hadn’t spoken directly to him since the day they’d confronted Jace Mazik and Nigel St. John. Clark had delivered a couple of messages to him from Lois and brought one back from him, but the Man of Steel hadn’t come by himself. Poor thing, she thought, he probably blames himself for me getting hurt. She’d have to tell him emphatically that this was totally her own fault for pulling that stunt with the Yi Chi trance. She also wanted to tell him that if he hadn’t brought that Taser with him and used it on Nigel when he did, they’d both be dead.

But that was a task for later. Right now she needed to reply to this email.

It was Saturday morning and Clark stood in front of Lois’ apartment door and raised his hand to knock.

Then he hesitated. He didn’t want to do this.

But he had to. It was past time for him to move on.

It was eight weeks to the day since the shooting. Lois was mostly recovered now, although she hadn’t gone back to the office yet. Perry had advised Clark to talk to her about it and get a feel for her future plans. The editor’s odd manner hinted that he already knew a great deal about Lois’ plans and didn’t want to tell Clark about them himself.

Or, maybe Perry just wanted him to talk to Lois. He’d kept in touch with her by phone over the last six weeks, and on occasion he’d brought care packages of food and research materials and writing supplies to her. But he hadn’t taken the time to sit down and talk with her. Nor had he asked her about the comments she’d made to Superman as she was getting ready for the grand deception to rescue his parents.

He didn’t think he could take it when she told him once again that she refused to consider a long-term relationship between them.

So here he was, carrying today’s copies of the Daily Planet, Metropolis Star, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, Phoenix Herald, and Denver Post, along with the latest copies of Newsweek and The Atlantic Monthly. They were all publications

carrying the byline of Lois Lane, syndicated columnist, and he wanted to prove to her that he was thrilled at her success and more than a little proud of her. And he knew that she'd earned that success, even if Perry had called in a few favors to get her work in the hands of the feature editors of those publications. Even the Chief didn't have enough juice to create a career for her if her work weren't up to snuff.

He also wanted her to autograph each one for his parents. They were also thrilled for her, probably more than her own parents were.

He also intended to tell her that he'd decided to leave Metropolis.

Perry had listened to him, listened to his reasons, heard him out as he laid out his heart and crushed hopes for him and Lois, and refused to accept his resignation letter. "Not until you talk to Lois," he'd said. In fact, he'd said it eight times. That's how many times Clark had tried to hand over his letter.

Clark finally shrugged and agreed. He'd talk to Lois and then give Perry his official resignation.

"If you still want to," Perry had said.

Hence the trip to Lois' front door.

He might as well get it over with.

But his hand held back. He and Lois had never addressed her semi-confession to Superman about her feelings for him as they had prepared to face Nigel and Jace. He'd thought about writing her a letter, but if he was wrong about how she felt about him there was no way to take it back or alter what he said. He'd almost brought it up on one of his visits to her, but he was afraid that she'd think he was offering himself to her out of pity. He'd waited for her to mention it to him, but despite several long and thoughtful pauses in their conversations, she hadn't alluded to it.

He's painted himself into a corner, and the only way to get out was to break through the wall and escape. It was the last time he'd suffer in her presence.

He commanded his knuckles to whack on the door and they finally obeyed.

The knock on Lois' door surprised her. She wasn't expecting company and wasn't dressed for it, but rather than turn away a visitor, she decided that said visitor had willingly risked seeing her in sweats and fuzzy bunny slippers. If whoever it was expected a formal reception, someone was destined to be deeply disappointed.

"Hang on, I'm coming!" She thumbed the 'save document' command on her computer and stood, something that was finally getting easy for her again. As long as she didn't enter any long-distance races or weight-lifting competitions, she felt fine.

She opened the door and Clark stood there looking wonderful.

It took her a moment to remember to inhale so she could speak. "Ah — hi. I — I'm sorry. Come in, Clark. Please."

He slipped in on cat feet and looked around as if waiting for a mad dog to start chasing him. "Hi, Lois. The place looks good again now that the big bed is gone. I don't want to take up much of your time, but I hoped you'd have a chance to autograph these newspapers for me. For my parents, I mean. They're really thrilled that you're getting published so widely."

She smiled and took the stack of documents. "I'll call them this evening and thank them. I assume you're taking these the next time you go visit?"

"Yes. In fact, that's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. If I'm not interrupting you, that is."

"It's okay. I'm due for a break anyway." She walked to her desk and laid the stack down beside a small pile of travel books. "I've heard some good things about you from Jimmy and Perry. And Bobby Bigmouth has called a couple of times to bring me up to speed about you. I understand that you and Sharon McClure

went out to dinner last week. How did it go?"

His mouth fell open for a moment. "You heard about that?" She grinned. "Blame Bobby. He's my source on that tidbit. So?"

"What? 'So' what?"

"How was your dinner with Sharon?"

"Oh. Um, it was okay, I guess. She said — wait. No, it's okay, I can tell you."

"Ooh. Mysterious much?"

He almost smiled. "Not now. The memo went out today. She's moving out to Central City to work in the district attorney's office. Seems some guy calling himself the Flash is running around like a manic vigilante, dropping criminals off at police precincts left and right. They need more people to handle the increased volume of criminal cases, and she decided to help them out."

"I'm sure they're lucky to have her. And what about you, Mister New Partner Kent?"

This time he looked mildly exasperated. "You don't miss a single tidbit of gossip, do you?"

"Gossip? I was asking about your new partner. Her name's Karen, isn't it?"

He sighed. "Yes. Karen DeLong, rookie reporter with lots of street smarts and ambition. She's got a lot of rough edges, but she also has a lot of potential."

"Didn't you list her as a contributor to that story on Lieutenant Governor Liedecker a couple of weeks ago?"

"Yes. We staked out Liedecker at his girlfriend's house upstate. Jimmy found out he was passing information on construction bids to her, and she was giving them to her brother in the mob. Karen and I got him red-handed on both that and cheating on his wife."

"Didn't he claim not to know that she was related to a mobster?"

"He did. I don't know anyone who believes him."

"Good work. When is your next stakeout with Karen?"

He grimaced. "Second Thursday of next week, I hope."

"What? Why? Is she that boring?"

"Oh, no, she's a fount of information, both personal and trivial. She minored in economics at Ohio State, played a year of women's pro basketball in France before the league folded, plays the tiple for relaxation—"

"Wait, what's a — a tiple?"

Clark sighed. "The tiple is a Central or South American stringed instrument with twelve strings in four groupings of three, sometimes referred to as courses. Karen prefers to tune hers like the four upper strings of a guitar, D-G-B-E, which is considered the 'modern' tuning. All of the trios of strings except the highest have the middle string tuned an octave higher than the inner and outer strings, giving it a wider range of sonic palettes. It can be strummed or picked, and is often used in Latin groups like a mandolin is used in traditional American country or bluegrass music. Karen prefers the Columbian style instrument rather than any of the Puerto Rican — what's so funny?"

"Ha-ha-ha! How many times has she told you all that?"

"I've lost count. Karen is bright, hard-working, enthusiastic, willing to take direction, attentive, very intelligent, but I cannot for any amount of money or level of threat get her to shut up!"

She wrapped her arms around her stomach and laughed as hard as she dared. After a moment he chuckled and said, "Yeah, I guess I'm a little sensitive about that subject. Hey, how are you keeping yourself busy? I know you're doing your syndicated column, but what else have you got going?"

"Quite a bit. I was editing the chapter I've been working on this week when you knocked."

"Chapter?"

Her head tilted to one side. "No one's told you?"

“Told me about what?”

“My book deal with Putnam. In addition to the Wanda Detroit mystery I just sent to Teresa — she’s their acquisitions editor — I’m doing a brief history of my career so far, with emphasis both on the bad guys I’ve helped bust and the people who have done so much to help me bust them. Perry and Jimmy are both in it, Eduardo, Cat, Ralph, and Eddie, and my network of snitches — under assumed names, of course — and you figure prominently too.”

He smiled at her. First real smile she’d seen from him for weeks. Maybe months. “I do?”

“Of course, Clark. Without you I’d be dead.”

His smile fled like a rabbit from a coyote. “Without me you might not have been shot, either.”

“Clark, you mustn’t take all — sit down with me.” She took his hand and guided him to her couch, then tugged on his hand until he sat beside her. “Don’t be ridiculous. That was my choice and mine alone. I had to practically threaten Superman to get him to agree. But you already knew that, of course.”

“Well, yeah. I’m still really sorry it happened.”

“Believe me, so am I. This is not a dietary method I endorse.”

They shared a brief smile. “I understand. You sure sound like you’re keeping busy, Lois. The columns, the book deal, your job at the Planet — uh, you are going back, aren’t you?”

She shook her head. “Not full-time, and not as an investigator. I’m on partial disability from the paper now. I don’t have the strength or the stamina for those seventy-hour weeks any more. In fact, my doctor threatened to chain me to my bed if I tried to go back full-time.”

He looked stricken. “What? Oh, no, Lois! I had no idea you — that it — I didn’t know!”

He looked like he was about to bolt, so she took both of his hands in hers. “Of course you didn’t. I didn’t tell you. And before you ask, I have my reasons.”

He hesitated, then asked, “Would you share them with me?”

“Of course. No secrets, Clark. Not anymore.” She released his hands and leaned back. “First of all, you didn’t comment on my new couch.”

“Your new — oh, right, it really is more comfortable.” He shifted on the cushion and nodded. “Hey, that’s a lot better than your old one. Looks just as good, too.”

“It needs to be. I’m going to be spending a lot more time on it.”

He frowned slightly. “I don’t understand.”

She sighed and looked away. “That bullet — it hit me in the liver, Clark. Tore it up pretty badly. Oh, what I have left works well enough for a normal life as long as I don’t exert myself too much and stay on a fairly restricted diet. You know, low acids, reduce my sugar intake, no alcohol, cut way back on caffeine, watch my portions, get plenty of sleep, try not to get threatened by bad guys trying to take out Superman, that kind of thing.”

She watched his face out of the corner of her eyes as she came to the end of her list and noticed a flash of humor in his eyes. That was a good thing. Maybe this would work after all, even if this wasn’t anywhere near the way she’d envisioned telling him.

Her gaze dropped. “Anyway, I’m about fifteen pounds under the weight my doctor thinks I should carry, but I’m going to sneak up on it so I don’t overshoot and get fat, which would be just as bad for what’s left of my liver if not worse. And I’m going to be working from home a lot, even when I get well enough to travel regularly. I’ll live a normal life, but I won’t be able to be an investigative reporter any more. It’s just too much for me now.”

She turned back to look directly at him and was surprised at how pale he’d become. His mouth moved but no sound came out, and she knew he was blaming himself for destroying her career and her health.

“Clark Kent!” she snarled. “This is not your responsibility or your fault! I’ve always known something like this could happen to me. Why, just since you’ve known me, I’ve been almost blown up, nearly drowned, almost dropped in boiling acid, shot at more than once, strangled almost to death, and worst of all, nearly married Lex Luthor!”

Her voice softened and she tried to smile. “And every time I jumped in the deep end of the pool without checking the water level, Clark, you’ve been there to pull me out and help me get through it.”

Some color was coming back to his features, and she thought he’d missed what she’d said about him saving her. Then his face hardened and his voice came out flat. “Some people might say that I’m a jinx for you, that I brought all that down on you.”

“Then they’re stupid! And you’d better not use that as part of your excuse for leaving town because I won’t put up with it!”

His eyebrows rose in surprise. “Leaving town — Did Perry call you this morning?”

“No, but you’re not hard to figure out. When I went to Smallville with you that first time, one of the ladies told me that with you, what you see is what you get. And for the most part she was right. You don’t lie, Clark, except for your one big secret, and I understand why you’re keeping that one. But you are who you are, no matter where you are or who you’re with. You don’t change personalities to fit in or gain an advantage.”

“You don’t either.”

He had to be upset. He’d missed her reference to his ‘one big secret.’

“No, but I make people mad by being myself. You make them comfortable and they tell you things I’d have to pry out of them. That’s part of what makes you a great reporter. And you mustn’t walk away from that.”

“That’s not what I’m walking away from.”

“I know that!” She jumped to her feet and immediately regretted it. The scar tissue in her abdomen caught and pulled and the sudden sharp pain bent her nearly double.

Before she registered it, she was in his arms with her feet off the floor. “Lois! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry! What can I do? How can I help?”

Between gritted teeth, she whispered, “Just — just help me — sit down, please. It will pass in — in a minute.”

She felt herself drift down like a feather until she knew he was sitting on the couch again, holding her in his lap as if she were Dresden china. The pain eased away and she slowly relaxed.

When she opened her eyes, she saw tears in his.

“No, Clark, don’t cry. It’s not your fault. I just moved too fast. That’s one of the things that will take some time to heal. You didn’t do anything.”

He blinked and dripped a tear on her shoulder. “I — it hurts me so much when I see you in pain. I can’t stand it.”

“It would hurt me a lot worse if you left Metropolis. Please don’t go.”

His face contorted and he sucked in a breath. He looked like she’d just asked him to choose between two particularly painful tortures.

She couldn’t let him leave like this.

No. She couldn’t let him leave at all. She had to tell him what was in her heart.

“Clark, I—”

“Lois, I have to go. I have to leave Metropolis. That’s what I really came here to tell you this morning.”

Chapter Six

It was the hardest thing he’d ever had to do, the most difficult thing he’d ever said to anyone. But if he didn’t say it now, he might never be able to say it.

She all but whispered, “Clark, I—”

Just blurt it out! he ordered himself.

“Lois, I have to go. I have to leave Metropolis. That’s what I really came here to tell you this morning.”

For a moment Clark thought he’d twisted her or shifted her wrong. Her face paled and she held her breath as he hesitated, then rushed on. “I — I know you don’t want to hear this but I have to tell you one last time that I love you and I don’t want to go out with anyone else or date anyone else and I can’t take it being her so close to you without being able to talk to you or get you coffee or doughnuts or have breakfast with you or — I just can’t!”

She almost smiled. “And you tell me I babble.”

“You do.” He took a deep, shuddering breath and held it for a moment before letting it out slowly. “I can choose to stay here and continue hurting just from being around you or I can choose to accept that whatever we might have had will never be and leave. I choose to leave.”

She reached up and touched his cheek. “You don’t have to leave.”

“Yes I do!” As gently as he could, he shifted her back onto the couch until only her hand was touching his wrist. “It will be like I had an amputation. The pain will stop quickly and leave a shock of loss in place. But that will fade over time as long as I don’t see you every day or hear your voice or watch you smile. You’ll leave a hole in my heart when I go, Lois, but I’ll live, and I’ll learn to plaster over the hole somehow.”

She shook her head. “Even if you leave Metropolis, you could fly back as often as you wanted to. And I want you to.”

“Airfare is expensive.”

She turned her head slightly but still looked into his eyes. “Not for you.”

“What?”

He was genuinely confused. What was she talking about? Who flew without—

Oh.

She was saying—

Wait. She’d mentioned his “one big secret” a minute ago.

She said he’d already known that she’d all but threatened Superman to get him to go along with her nutty plan, despite never having discussed it with him. With “Clark” him.

She knew.

He sat back and covered his face with his hands. “How long have you known? And how did you figure it out?”

“About a month, I guess. And it wasn’t hard once I had time to put my mind to it.”

“Oh, good, it wasn’t hard.”

“Clark?” she whispered. “Please listen. You were never in the same place as Superman, you both decided to leave during that artificial heat wave, you’re both honest and upright and terribly worried about doing the right thing, the way Mazik went after you — Clark — using your parents to force you — Superman — to commit crimes for him, your horrible excuses to disappear, and all the time I’ve had to think about this, well — it all came together for me. I spent almost a week trying to prove myself wrong and I couldn’t.”

His flat answer took more effort than lifting a mountain. “I see.”

“Don’t worry, okay? The only reason I figured it out is because we’re around each other so much and because I know you so very well.”

“Yeah. That’s a comfort.”

“It was supposed to be. I doubt anyone else has any idea. Except Perry. Maybe.”

“Thanks. Really.” He lowered his hands and looked at her. “How mad are you?”

“At you? Almost not at all. At myself? Furious.”

That was interesting. And confusing.

“Would you expound upon both of those statements, preferably in the order that you made them? Just so I can keep everything straight.”

Instead of giving him back a barbed comment, she dropped her eyes to the floor. “I’m not mad at you. Why should I be? Ever since you got shot at Georgie Hairdo’s, I’ve been pushing you away any time you got closer than six feet.” Her face lifted to his. “But I’m still a little mad at you for letting me think you were dead. That was a pretty rotten thing to do.”

He sighed. “I know. And you’re right, it was. The truth is, though, that I didn’t realize how strongly you cared about me at the time. If I’d had any idea, I would’ve come to you later that night to ask for your help in bringing me back to life.” He turned on the couch to face her. “And that speech you gave me when you took me home that night after I pulled you out of the concrete really tore me up.”

She held his gaze for a long moment, then exhaled and deflated at the same time. “I know. It tore me up, too. And you had no reason to trust me with the secret after that. Before then you didn’t know how I felt, and before that, of course, I was mixed up with Lex, and you couldn’t risk it then, and before that all I was looking for was my next byline. You didn’t know how I’d react if I knew, if I’d print it or sell it or blackmail you with it. I might have seen that as my ticket to a Pulitzer, and even if I hadn’t published it, I might have accidentally leaked it to Lex or someone almost as bad, and that would’ve been a total disaster all around.”

He nodded. “That actually sounds more than fair, Lois. Thank you.”

She shrugged. “You’re welcome.”

He thought about taking her hand in his, but decided that there were still things which needed to be said and he didn’t want to distract either of them just yet. “Can you tell me why you’re mad at yourself?”

“Furious, Clark. Not just mad, but furious. Get it right.”

His mouth curled up on one side. “Okay. Why are you furious with yourself?”

She sighed again. “Because of the way I treated you. I threw so many women at you even after you told me you weren’t interested in anyone else. There were so many times I wanted to — to put my arms around you and tell you how I felt and that I was just too scared to admit that I loved you.” A single snuffle escaped, and she pulled herself together with a visible effort. “I wanted to be strong, to be independent, to be invulnerable to pain. But it just doesn’t work that way. I couldn’t let myself get away with it.”

He’d heard all that she’d said, but what popped out to him was something she’d dropped into the middle of that paragraph. “Lois — did you — did you just say that you loved me?”

She almost smiled. “Yeah. I guess I did.”

“Now — do you — is that present tense or past tense?”

She chuckled lightly. “Present tense, Clark. I love you. And that’s why you can’t leave Metropolis. I’d be abandoned, bereft, cancelled like a used stamp, devastated, empty, forsaken, gutted, halved like a worm in a sliced apple—”

“Please tell me you’re not going to go through the entire alphabet.”

They smiled together. “Wish I could, but I got stuck on ‘Q’ and ‘X.’” She reached out and captured his hands in hers. “Please don’t go. Please stay here with me. I want to make a life with you, Clark. Whatever time I have left, I want to spend it with you.”

That was good to know — wait, she said what? He felt his face pale and slacken. “What do you mean, whatever time you have left?”

“Ah. Another thing Perry didn’t share with you.” She leaned

back but didn't release his hands. "Doctor Richards told me that my liver might fail abruptly one day. I'm on the transplant list, but there's something funky about my blood type or my cell structure or something that makes finding a donor liver a long shot at best. I might have five years left, I might have fifty years left. Of course, the longer I survive, the better the chances are that I'll find a donor. Or that someone will figure out how to clone someone's liver. Maybe Dr. Hamilton can work on that. And, maybe some doctor will find an effective treatment for me."

Okay, this wasn't good news, but it wasn't the worst he could have heard. They could work with this. He relaxed and licked his lips.

She turned to face him and leaned closer. "Did you know that you can donate half a liver and the half that's left will grow back? And the half you donate — well, not you, obviously, but a non-Kryptonian person — the donated half will develop into a complete liver with full function? Assuming, of course, that the donor and recipient are compatible and the liver halves are healthy and the donor doesn't have some other physical issue."

"No, I didn't."

"It's true. Of course, now that you know my big secret, maybe you — you wouldn't want to risk a relationship with someone who's liable to up and die on you any minute."

What? No! He couldn't let her think that. "Lois—"

"And I'm far more likely to have a shorter life than a longer one. You wouldn't want to be a thirty-something widower, would you? Of course not. So — so maybe it's a bad idea for you to stay because of me after all."

"Lois, will you please—"

She pulled her hands back and turned away. "And I wouldn't blame you a bit! I'm headstrong, stubborn, impulsive, high maintenance, and a really bad insurance risk, especially now that I probably won't live out a normal life sp—"

The only way he could think of to shut her up was to kiss her. So he turned her face toward him and did.

And it worked.

Her arms slid around his neck and she pressed her face against his.

And Clark loved it. This was better than flying. He wanted it to go on forever.

She finally inched away slowly, almost panting. "That — that wasn't fair. I wasn't finished ranting at you."

"I know. But I wanted to say that I don't care about your liver or what your doctor told you or what disadvantages you think you have. I love you and I want to make a life with you."

"Make a life with me?"

"Yep. Me and you, together for always."

"Hmm. You know, I think you're plagiarizing me. I've already used that phrase in a sentence."

He touched his lips to hers and pulled back slightly. "I'm not plagiarizing, I'm reinforcing and agreeing."

"Oh. Well, then I don't mind so much."

She pulled him back into a kiss but released him after a few seconds. "Clark? What's wrong?"

He gestured helplessly. "I want to put my arms around you, but I also don't want to hurt you."

She smiled. "Thank you. How about I arrange myself on your lap? Then you can put your arms of steel around me and we'll kiss and go on from there."

He grinned. "Sounds like a plan to me."

She did. And he did. And he held her as close to him as he could.

A long time later, as Lois drowsed on the couch in Clark's arms, a thought came to her and she knew she had to share it.

"Clark?"

"Yes, Lois?"

"Does it — no, sorry, wrong question. How much does it matter that I — that you'll probably live longer than I will?"

She felt his arms tighten protectively. "It matters. But it just means that I — that we don't have any time to waste."

"But — I don't want to leave you alone. And I don't want to miss out on all the years we might have had together."

He shook his head and kissed the tip of her nose. "It isn't the years that are most important, Lois. It's the moments. As long as we have lots and lots of wonderful moments together, it'll be enough for me."

Her hand caressed his face. "Are you sure? Because I don't want you to think that I'd abandon you."

He turned his head and kissed her palm. "I'd never think that because I know it could never be true. You wouldn't stop loving me no matter what. And I'll never stop loving you no matter what. Besides, even though I'm Superman, that doesn't mean that I'll live forever. It may not be likely to happen, but it's possible that I'll die before you do."

The thought shocked her. "Wow. I — have to admit that I never even considered that outcome." She nestled her head against his shoulder. "I guess I'm still pretty self-centered, huh?"

"No. You're just considering the most likely scenario. And there's a third possibility, too."

"What's that?"

"We could go out together."

"Very romantic and more than a little bit dark, but also very unlikely."

"True. But it's still possible. And we'd avoid all this angst that we're dreading right now."

She chuckled deep in her chest, ignoring the small, sharp twinges in her belly. "You always look on the bright side, don't you?"

He brushed her bangs away from her forehead. "I just wish I could do something more. I wish I could donate part of my liver to you."

"I know." She tried to put all of her love into her smile. "But our vital organs aren't compatible."

His eyes focused on hers. "How do you know that? Maybe Earth-humans and Krypton-humans are close enough to exchange body parts."

She shook her head. "Won't work. I already asked Bernie Klein about it."

He went still and licked his lips. "I'm sorry, I don't understand. Why would you ask him that question? And why is he consulting on your case?"

"It's simple, really. Doctor Richards sent for him when I asked if Superman could donate a partial liver. I told him Bernie it was the least that Superman could do, especially since I got hurt saving his life."

Clark's head lifted for a moment, then he shrugged and smiled. "I guess that's true. But what did he say?"

"That quite aside from the problem of how to remove part of your liver without using Kryptonite, your liver functions just a little different from mine. You get a lot of your nourishment from solar energy, and your liver processes the waste products from that function. Bernie has no idea what that tissue might try to do in an Earth-human, but he said he couldn't think of any way that it would be a good thing. And Doctor Richards agreed with him."

Clark's face fell and he whispered, "I'm so sorry. You know I'd do whatever I had to do if they thought it would work."

"I know, darling. I know. We'll just have to deal with it, that's all."

She stroked his smooth cheek and he almost smiled. "That's the first time you've called me that."

"Do you like it?"

"Very much." He bent to kiss her again as her arms snaked around his neck.

After a time just long enough for Lois to have to take a breath, she said, “You know, we’re going to need a family doctor. I think Burt and Bernie would fill that role quite well.”

He frowned in apparent thought for a few seconds, then nodded. “I agree. When do you want to tell them?”

“Soon enough for them to get your blood test for the marriage license.”

He chuckled and gently held her close. “That’s a good idea. How about tomorrow?”

She laughed with him. “If that’s what you really want, then the answer is ‘yes.’ I’m through with waiting for love to fall out of the sky for me, Clark. I love you and I want to be your wife as long as we both shall live.”

“Well, today is Saturday, so how about first thing Monday morning? Contrary to the Mamas and Papas, I think we can trust that day.”

She reached up again and ran her fingers through his hair. “I don’t care about the day. I know I can trust you.”

Their lips came together once again, and she thought about the newspapers he’d brought for her to autograph.

Then she forgot them again for quite a while.

Clark stared into the mirror and fussed with the bow tie on his tux until his father gently took his wrist and lowered his hand. “It’s fine like it is, Son. Besides, the only person who’s going to be looking at you is Lois.”

Clark smiled nervously. “I know. I just want to look the best I can for her.”

Sam Lane patted Clark awkwardly on the shoulder. “You already do, young man. You know, I don’t think Ellen ever looked at me like my little girl looks at you.” Sam sighed and looked at the door of the groom’s room, then back at Clark. “And I haven’t supported the two of you like I should have — but — Clark, you’re the finest man of your generation I’ve ever met. You’ll be a wonderful husband for Lois.”

Jimmy brushed some invisible fuzz from Clark’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, CK, this is the easy part. At least, that’s what they tell me.”

The two older men looked at each other and chuckled. “Young Olsen is right,” Sam added. “The wedding is about twenty to forty minutes of sheer terror that you’re going to say or do the wrong thing and embarrass yourself and your bride.”

“Which you won’t,” grinned Jonathan.

“Your dad’s right, young man. The honeymoon is a time of wonder and bliss and learning about each other. And I don’t mean just sex, either. One of you is going to want the covers a certain way that the other one hates, one of you will squeeze the toothpaste from the wrong part of the tube, one of you will be a morning person and wake up smiling at a growling bear, and that’s when you start figuring out that marriage is a lot of work.” Sam dropped his smile. “I didn’t have the courage to face all that hard work, Clark. But I think you do.”

“Of course he does! He’s a Kent. And he has my Martha’s Clark family heritage on his side, too.”

Sam’s eyes flickered and his lips moved as if he’d thought about mentioning Clark being adopted but decided not to.

“Hey, guys, everything will be just fine!” Jimmy insisted. “I may be the youngest guy here, but I’ve never seen two people who love each other like CK and Lois do.” He gave Clark a soft punch on the outside of his shoulder. “Even if they had to have it hammered into their heads. I tell you what, guys, I’ve never seen two more stubborn people, either.”

Jonathan looked at Sam and said, “Jimmy has a point, Sam. Which one of them do you think is more stubborn?”

Sam leaned back and rubbed his chin with his hand. “Well, I can’t say for certain. Lois is certainly more vocal, and she sends up bright red signal flares when she’s about to argue, but when

Clark sets his feet and leans into an idea, you can’t move him with a bulldozer. Their styles are different, but which is more stubborn? I’d have to say it’s pretty much a dead heat.”

Jonathan chuckled again. “I think I agree with you. Hey, do I hear ‘Together Forever’ on the organ?”

Clark felt himself go pale again. “Yes. That’s the seating of the special guests. Perry and Alice, Pete and Lana, Rachel, Cat and her date of the week, Bobby Bigmouth, and some others I can’t remember right now.”

The other three laughed and covered their mouths. When Jimmy got himself under control again, he asked, “So, would Lois mind if I asked the maid of honor out on a date?”

Sam lifted his eyebrows at Jimmy. “Let me recover from this wedding first, okay, Olsen? No, I take that back. I’ll give you real cash money if you and Lucy elope. It’ll be cheaper.”

It was Jimmy’s turn to blush as Clark and Jonathan chuckled. “Hey, how about we get Lucy’s sister married off first? And then let her decide if she even wants to date me? I haven’t even asked her out yet!”

“Well, if you do marry my younger daughter, young man, I want you to use the same sign.”

Jimmy frowned in confusion. “Huh? What sign?”

Clark pointed in the general direction of the church sanctuary. “It’s mounted on a microphone stand at the back of the auditorium. Lois found a sign that says, ‘This is the joining of two families into one. We ask you to take a seat, not a side, and celebrate this joyous occasion with us.’ I thought it was appropriate.”

After a long moment, Sam and Jonathan each put a hand on one of Clark’s shoulders. “It is completely appropriate, Clark,” said Sam. “And I thank all of you for allowing me to participate in this joy.”

Clark reached up and crossed his arms to grab each older man’s hand. “Lois and I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Lois sat on the stool in the bride’s room, wearing her wedding gown and a frozen smile. Without moving her lips, she said, “Are you done yet, Non?”

“Non?” muttered Ellen. “Who’s Non?”

“That’s you, Mother,” Lucy purred. “Lois can’t pronounce ‘m’ with her lips jacked apart like that. Now, if you are finally finished with Lois’ face, it sounds like we have about three or four minutes to go before we parade in and knock all the men’s socks off.”

Ellen moved back from her older daughter’s face and sighed. “That’s the best I can do.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “Gee, Non, thanks a bunch. What a confidence builder you are.” She turned to Lucy. “And you? I thought the bride was supposed to knock their socks off.”

“No, that’s the bridal party’s job. You, big Sis, are going to walk in in Daddy’s arm like you own the whole place and knock Clark’s eyes right out of his head. And that’s what counts.”

Martha carefully hugged Lois around the shoulders. “Lucy’s right, dear. You are probably the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen.”

Ellen smiled. “I’ve seen your wedding pictures, Martha. You were quite stunning.”

Martha beamed. “Thank you, Ellen. I think any bride’s beauty depends on the man she’s marrying. And you looked pretty good in your pictures too, you know.”

Ellen blushed slightly. “Thank you, Martha. I know you’re sincere. From almost anyone else, I’d know it was flattery, but you’re probably the most honest and straightforward woman I know.” She reached out and took Martha’s hand. “I’m so pleased that your son is marrying my daughter. Now maybe she won’t get shot at quite so often.”

“At least not until after the honeymoon,” Lucy cackled.

Lois' face softened and turned dreamy. "Yes, the honeymoon. I'm really looking forward to that."

"Of course she is, Non," giggled Lucy. "She's got the galley proofs for her first Wanda Detroit novel to work on and she'll have plenty of free time for it."

Ellen sighed. "You two are not going to call me 'Non' from now on, are you?"

"No, Non," Lois answered, "just today."

"Lois, dear, how large is the first printing?"

"Oh, Martha, I don't want to talk about that now!" Then she grinned sideways. "Although Brad, my agent, thinks the first seventy thousand copies should fly off the shelves. That's a healthy number for a debut mystery series. We're getting some really good pre-release buzz, and Brad expects at least two more printings at that volume."

"I doubt if that's the kind of buzz Clark is hoping for, Sis."

"Lucy Lane! That's my son you're making lewd comments about!"

"Don't worry, Martha. See the dress? See the color? I earned this white with my persistent acceptance of Clark's refusals to let me seduce him."

Martha snorted a laugh, but Ellen put her hands on her hips and frowned at her older daughter. "Young lady, if you were still living at home, I'd take you over my knee and spank you for that remark."

"Careful, Non, that's going to be her husband's privilege from now on."

The room suddenly went silent as the other three women stared at Lucy. "Hey," she stuttered, "I — I'm sorry. I — shouldn't have said that."

Lois stood and embraced her sister. "Oh, Lucy! Please don't forget that any man who puts his hands on a woman with anything but tenderness is not a man you want to be around." She pushed Lucy back and looked gently into her eyes. "Clark will never hurt me. I have every confidence in him. He may do something stupid or just make a mistake and hurt my heart, but he will never, never ever touch me because he wants to hurt me. I trust him with my life." Lois' voice dropped in volume. "You understand?"

Lois saw comprehension wash over Lucy's face as the younger girl nodded. "Yes. I understand. And I never — not ever! — thought that Clark would do anything to hurt you. I trust him as much as you do."

Lois smiled. "Good. Now I need something to take my mind off waiting. Tell me about your latest job, Punky."

Out of the corner of her eye, Lois saw her mother roll her eyes, but Lucy either missed it or ignored it. "I'm working with a re-imagining of the play 'Twelve Angry Men.' The new title is 'Twelve Angry People' and I get the part Jack Klugman had in the Henry Fonda movie. There are seven men and five women in the jury, and I get to demonstrate the proper knife-fighting technique to the rest of them. We're due to take it to Cleveland for a full dress presentation in two weeks, and if the audience and critics like it as much as everyone in the play does, we may bring it to Metropolis."

"That's wonderful, Punky! You make sure that Clark and I get some tickets for one of your performances, okay?"

Lucy shrugged. "If we get this far, sure, no problem."

A soft knock on the door forestalled any further discussion. A smiling older lady cracked the door open and leaned in. "Wedding planner butting in! One minute to go, ladies. Everyone ready?"

"Ready, Mrs. Dalton," answered Martha.

Mrs. Dalton stepped partway into the room. "You know, I can't recall a wedding where both the bride's and groom's parents were part of the wedding party, but I think it's a perfectly lovely idea! I'm going to suggest it to all the couples I work with from

now on." She turned and began to leave, then stopped.

"Assuming, of course, that they get along as wonderfully as all of you folks do."

The door closed behind her and Lois took a deep breath.

"Well, it's time."

Lucy leaned in and muttered, "If you want to lam out of here, I've got a getaway car warmed up in the alley. We'll go rob a bank, then drive straight through to the Grand Canyon and park right above a high cliff and let the cops arrest us."

Lois shook her head. "Only my baby sister could come up with a Thelma and Louise getaway plan at this stage of the game."

Martha looked at Ellen, waved one hand in Lucy's general direction, and said, "Incorrigible, isn't she?"

Ellen sighed deeply. "Always has been. At least we're marrying the other one off to a good man."

Chapter Seven

"You know, Lois, house-hunting with you is one part fun and three parts crazy. I think we're about to drive Mike nuts."

"That's a realtor's job, to go nuts so the clients don't look for another realtor. I figure he's about due to start chewing on his eyebrows any minute now."

"Maybe if we actually agreed on the area where we want to live it might help."

"Clark, are you sure you don't want to live in the city? I heard about a wonderful brownstone not far from the Planet."

"I'm sure, honey. Wisteria Lane out here in the suburbs will be nicer and less stressful. And I'm the only one who'll be going to the Planet on a daily basis, so we won't need to find downtown parking for two vehicles."

"Are you sure we can afford two stories, four bedrooms, and two full bathrooms? And a big kitchen?"

"I'm sure. We have my income, your syndicated column — which is still growing fast — your book sales, which also look very healthy, and your disability payments from the Planet's insurers and from your personal insurance. And judging from our recent honeymoon, I think you can handle the stairs just fine."

"Clark Kent, you smooth-talking hero! If the realtor wasn't waiting for us downstairs I'd show you how much stress I can still handle!"

"Mmm, I'd love that myself. But can you restrain yourself until we set up a king-sized bed in that huge master bedroom?"

"Oh, I suppose so, if you insist. But I really want to know what we're going to do with the other bedrooms."

"Simple. One will be your office. You choose the one you want. One will be mine. And we can put our 'spare clothes' in the other one."

"Oooh, that's a super idea. And a rare good use of air quotes."

"Thank you. It's nice to know I'm appreciated."

"You know, I like the neighborhood, too. It's really laid-back. Lots of other young married couples live around here, and I think I'm going to like the sound of children playing in nearby yards. I'm sure the house will grow on me."

"So let's go make an offer and see what the realtor and the builder say."

"Just don't offer too much. We don't want to appear desperate."

Lois burst through the front door and stopped. She was about to change their lives and she didn't know how her husband would react.

Who was she kidding? She knew exactly what he'd do. All she could do now was wait for him to do it.

She followed her nose to the kitchen and put her purse on the table. "Hi, baby," he said. "How did your checkup go?"

Here it was.

“Well — I think — no, I know we’re in for a big change.”
His eyes snapped open wide. “What? Why? Has Dr. Richards found a donor?”

“No, Burton hasn’t found a donor, not yet. Don’t worry, my liver is still working at its normal-for-me reduced rate. And before you ask, the cloning question is still up in the air. Um — you know how we’ve been decorating the house, right?”

His eyes narrowed and his lips thinned at the sudden change of subject. “Of course I do. That’s been one of our most time-consuming activities for the last eight months. Aside from being newlyweds, that is.”

“Yeah. Well — seems like we’re going to need to do something different with one of the rooms.”

“What for?” His face showed his sudden alarm. “Oh, no! Something is wrong with your liver, something bad, isn’t it?” He dropped the cooking utensils on the cabinet beside the stove and all but leaped to grab her. “It’s okay, honey. We’ll get through this.”

From deep within his trembling embrace, she giggled. “No, silly, no change on my liver! At least, not yet.”

He leaned back, obviously baffled. “Not yet?”

She smiled and touched his cheek. “Not yet.”

He took her by the arms and held her back. “Lois, would you please explain to me what you’re trying not to tell me.”

She nodded. “Okay. I’m pregnant.”

His eyes lost focus and his jaw dropped open. “But — but Bernie — Bernie said we — he said we couldn’t—”

She smiled. “I know. He was wrong. And he said he was never so thrilled to be wrong as he was today. Even Burton was stunned.”

His face went from mule-kicked to blossoming joy to caution in under three seconds. “Hang on. What does Dr. Richards think about you being pregnant?”

“He said he wouldn’t have recommended it, but he didn’t know of any reason for me not to be. Pregnancy and childbirth are always stressful on a mother, but he said that he and Bernie would take extra-special care of me and that he believed I’d be just fine.”

Clark nodded slowly. “So — we’re going to be parents?”

“That we are.”

“Do they know when?”

“Oh, I’d say in about seven months.”

He shook his head. “Parents after only fifteen months of marriage. Wow!” He took in a big breath and let it out slowly. “Do you think we’re ready?”

“Well, we’d better be, don’t you think? It’s too late to ask for a refund.”

Clark looked into her eyes and chuckled. The chuckle slowly grew into a belly laugh, one which Lois shared. She drew him into a warm embrace and caressed his powerful back with her hands and buried her face into his massive chest. This was turning out just like she’d envisioned.

The one thing she hadn’t predicted was that they never had dinner that night. They were too busy celebrating their love and deciding which room should be the nursery.

“Breathe, Lois! Breathe! Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo—”

“I’m breathing already! Aaaaah! Go get a cat out of a tree or something!”

“Now, Lois, Clark is here for a reason. He’s going to catch the baby just as soon as he decides to come out.”

“Come on, Lois, you can do this! Doctor Preston, is she ready to push yet?”

“Yes, I think so. Okay, Lois, one more push and—”

“NNNNGGGGAAAHHHH!”

“The head is crowning! The baby’s head is coming out!”

“Get ready, Clark. Here he comes. Lois, one more big one,

okay?”

“EEEEAAARRRRGGGGHHHImgonnakillyouClark!”

“What?”

“Just focus on catching the baby, Clark. Here he comes. Here he comes!”

“I got him! I got him! Oh, Lois, he’s beautiful, just like his mother!”

“Haaaaahghh.”

“Lois? Honey, are you okay?”

“Yes. Yes, I’m fine. Let me see him.”

“Here you go. Do you want a cold cloth for your face?”

“Oh, yes, please, Clark, that would feel wonderful.”

“He’s beautiful, Lois. You did great. As always. No matter what you do, you do it so well.”

“Thank you, darling. Oh, look, he’s trying to latch onto my breast! And he barely cried! Wait, Doctor Preston, is that good or bad?”

“Lois, your son is breathing easily, he’s a nice pink color, he has all his fingers and toes, his cardiac monitor shows a strong heartbeat, and he’s trying to nurse already. According to what they taught me in baby school, that means he’s just fine.”

“Oh, Clark! Our son. He’s our son!”

“Do you still want to name him Jonathan Samuel?”

“Of course! Have our parents arrived yet?”

“Honey, you were only in labor for a little over three hours. That’s pretty fast. Don’t worry, they’ll all be here soon.”

“Okay. Oh, Jonathan Samuel Kent, you are going to be loved so much by so many!”

“You know, Jimmy and Darla are seeing her doctor. Something about their premarital health screenings. I know they’d love to see you if you feel up to it.”

“Maybe after I get some sleep. But if I’m not awake, let them see little Jon. I want to show him off to everyone I know.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Oh, Clark, this is so wonderful! If I’d known all this would happen, I would’ve let Nigel shoot me a long time ago!”

Dr. Burton Richards goggled at his friend. “She said what?”

Bernie Klein sat back in his chair across from his friend’s desk and laughed. “You heard me! She didn’t mean it literally, of course, but that’s our Lois. I don’t think Clark knows from one minute to the next what she’ll say or do.”

Burton shook his head. “She is definitely my best and worst patient. Best, because all I have to do is tell any new liver patients that I treat her and they automatically perk up. She’s been a terrific morale boost for both my patients and their families.”

“And how is she the worst?”

Burton sighed. “Because she’s crazy. She needs to stay on a fairly strict schedule, but good luck getting her to stick to that. She’s already talking about a second child, and she won’t listen to me when I tell her that her liver probably wouldn’t tolerate a second pregnancy so well. I don’t know how to get it through her head that she’s not as strong as she once was and never will be.”

Bernie nodded. “Yes, well, she still thinks Superman will rescue her if she gets in real trouble.”

“If he doesn’t — never mind.”

Despite being socially inept most of the time, Bernie wasn’t medically dense. He picked up on what Burton had just said.

“What do you mean? If he doesn’t what?”

“Nothing.”

“Burt?”

“Never mind!”

Bernie leaned forward. “This situation concerns not only our mutual patient but one of my few truly close friends. If you have any ongoing concerns about Lois’ health, I think you should share them with me.” Bernie’s voice, normally soft and bland,

hardened. “Now.”

Burton looked into Bernie’s eyes for a long moment, then sighed. “Okay. I’ve consulted with my brother Reed on this — without revealing any names — and he agrees that my conclusions are unprovable but may very well be right.”

“What conclusions?”

Burton reached for a folder on the small table behind him. “You shared this information about Superman with me when we found out Lois was pregnant.”

“Yes. With their permission, if you recall.”

“Of course. Anyway, I was very interested in Superman’s aura. I agree with your conclusions about it, that he unconsciously extends it to include Lois whenever she’s close enough, which is most of the time.”

“They’re married, Burt. What did you expect?”

Burton lifted his hand. “Easy, Bern. I wasn’t criticizing. Besides, that aura keeps anyone flying with Superman from being burned by friction or asphyxiated by the speed of his passage through the air. It’s a semi-permeable energy membrane that allows air to pass through without transmitting the energy or pressure from his speed.”

“It’s not actually a membrane, it just acts like one. And I haven’t figured out exactly how it works yet, not in detail.”

“I know. And that’s one of the factors which keep my conclusions from being far more definite.”

“What conclusions, Burt?”

Burton sighed again. “Okay. When they’re together, Clark’s aura prevents Lois’s organs from deteriorating, right down at the cellular level. That’s a good thing, and it’s probably what helped make this childbirth relatively stress-free.”

“You say it helped?”

“It was almost certainly a major contributing factor, combined with Lois’ own youth and vitality. But the aura is also causing problems for her liver and the rest of her body.”

“What? How is it doing that?”

Burton wiped his face with his hands. “Look, here’s where we leave relative certainty and venture into uncharted realms. You remember those old maps that stopped where the old explorers stopped and beyond that the legend often read ‘Here be dragons’? Well, this is dragon territory, and I don’t know for certain what’s beyond this point.”

“Tell me your best guess.”

“You may not like it.”

“I already don’t like this. Tell me your best guess, Burt.”

Burton licked his lips. “My best guess is that not only is Clark’s aura sustaining Lois’ liver and preventing further damage, but it’s keeping it from healing on its own. I also believe, but can’t prove, that it would interfere with any kind of major partial or full liver replacement. His aura isn’t completely under his control, like a regular human’s reflexive reaction to sudden heat. We put out fingers on a hot burner and snatch it back before our brain actually registers the heat and pain.”

“Sure. That reflex originates at the spinal cord.”

“Right. Well, whatever the Kryptonian equivalent is in regards to his aura, he envelops her with it without thinking about it. I seriously doubt that he could turn it off even if he wanted to.”

Bernie frowned in thought for a long moment. “If I understand what you’re telling me, that means Clark would have to stay away from Lois long enough for her to receive a donor liver and settle into a regimen of anti-rejections drugs.”

“That’s right.”

“So couldn’t he just keep away from her for a few months? Until her new liver settled down and her body got used to it?”

“I don’t think so. Lois would have to take those anti-rejection drugs for the rest of her life. And because those drugs artificially suppress the recipient’s immune response to foreign bodies, Clark’s aura would try to protect Lois from both the drugs

and the new liver.”

“That means — that means we can’t give Lois a new liver. She’d reject it as if she weren’t taking any drugs at all.”

Burton nodded. “Right. As long as they want to be married to each other, no transplanted liver for Lois. You know them better than I do, but I don’t see them divorcing over this.”

“But Clark’s been around people with similar health problems before. I don’t understand why — unless — unless this is something cumulative?”

“I think it is, given what you know about his aura. He’s never apart from her long enough for her liver to either fail or heal on its own. You could use the analogy that he’s both propping up a condemned building and not allowing any contractors on site to either fix it or replace it.”

Bernie rubbed his chin. “I’m still not clear on why his aura isn’t letting her liver heal. It doesn’t work on him that way.”

“We’re still in dragon territory, remember? So all I have is a theory supported by some evidence, a lot of educated guesses, and some logical but weird deductions. Human tissue has to break down in order to trigger the healing process. You don’t get a scab on a cut unless there’s a cut first. So what I think Clark’s aura is doing is keeping Lois’ liver from deteriorating to the point where her own natural healing process would try to take over.”

“Could he stay away from her long enough to let her liver heal naturally?”

Burton shrugged, his ebony face drawn and sad. “I don’t know if it would heal or collapse without his aura to sustain it. There are more dragons down that road than I care to take on any time soon.”

“What about cloning her liver?”

Burton shrugged again. “I know what Hamilton and Mamba and a few others have done with cloning, but it’s different when you’re talking about just one organ, especially the liver. It should be simpler, but it’s not. An adult’s liver has grown up with and adjusted to the other organs around it and has learned to work within the endocrine and digestive systems, and those systems have grown up with it. You’re talking about a major stress event to introduce a new liver into the body, even a cloned one. You know, in some ways, transplanting a heart is easier. Hearts are basically just a bundle of muscle fibers that pump blood. Livers filter that blood, inject enzymes and hormones into it, add chemicals to the digestive system, and do some other things we don’t fully understand yet. And Superman’s liver does all that and even more stuff I can’t explain, so a partial transplant from him is out of the question. I wish I could say that cloning was a viable option, but given Clark’s aura and the complications that brings in, I have less hope for a cloned liver than for a donor.”

Bernie’s eyes opened wide. “What if we bring her father in on this?”

“Sam Lane? I don’t think he could help us here. His expertise is in prostheses and limb replacement. I don’t know near enough about that field to delve into it, and I seriously doubt Sam has done enough research and study to come up with something we haven’t tried or discarded.” He looked down. “If Lois had lost a leg, yes, he’d be one of the first I’d call. But not with a liver.”

“Wow.” Bernie rubbed his scalp with one hand. “Do you have any hope at all for using a cloned liver?”

“The only way I think of to get a viable cloned liver would be for us to clone Lois entirely and let Superman hang around the clone enough to get its liver used to his aura and then do a partial transplant. But I don’t have any real idea how long that would take, and I can’t see Clark being away from his family and his jobs — both of them — long enough for that to work. And that doesn’t begin to take into account the ethical problems of cloning a person for the purpose of harvesting vital organs. The clone would eventually become a person in her own right, totally separate from Lois, and what would she do with her life? What

rights would she have? Who would she be? How would she live? And all that assumes that both Lois and the clone would survive and thrive.”

“Not to mention getting both Clark’s and Lois’ permission to go ahead with that plan.”

“That is not a conversation I would want to have with either of them, much less with both at once.”

“I think I’d rather learn to tap dance in a mine field.” Bernie leaned forward and put his face in his hands. “If she did get a donated liver, how long would she have?”

“Dragon territory, remember? All I have is some almost-informed and somewhat wild guesses.”

Bernie perched his chin on his fists and his elbows on his knees. “So give me your best wild guess. And before you say it, I’m already pretty sure I won’t like it.”

Burton sighed and shook his head. “Assuming it would be possible to acclimate another liver to Superman’s aura, with a transplant there’s no time for that. We couldn’t keep it viable outside the body that long. I would estimate that Lois would reject a donor liver within a month of living with Clark. And that leads us — or me, actually — to another difficult question.”

Bernie looked at his friend with compassion. “The question of what you’re going to tell them about this. Assuming you tell them anything.”

Burton nodded again. “On the nose, Bern. I really don’t know how accurate this diagnosis is. I’m not some legend-in-my-own-mind doctor character in a TV show who thinks he knows the right thing to do all the time. I know I don’t have all the answers. I don’t even know if I’m right.”

“Which is why you didn’t want to tell me about it.”

“And now you get to carry this burden along with me.”

“Lucky me.”

“Lucky both of us.”

Bernie snorted. “Yeah, lucky. What’s the probability of you being right about this?”

Burton frowned. “I don’t think I can put an accurate number on that. There are just too many variables. I might even be totally, utterly, completely wrong.”

“Let’s say you’re on the right track. What’s the probability that your final diagnosis is accurate? What odds would you give Lois on getting a new liver and thriving?”

Burton blew a breath out through his nose. “If you held a scalpel to my jugular vein, I’d have to give myself a seventy percent chance of being right.”

“So — that’s a thirty percent chance of a successful transplant, whether full or partial.”

“I’m afraid so.”

After a long moment of silence, Bernie stood and walked around the desk, then put his hand on Burton’s shoulder. “If you decide to talk to them about this, I’ll be there with you. For the moment, though, I think you’re right not to share it. This would be too much for them at this point in time.”

Burton nodded. “Thanks, Bern. I just hope I’m wrong about it all.”

“So do I. But assuming you’re not way out in left field, and assuming Lois’s liver did fail, what’s the most likely scenario?”

Burton leaned back in his chair and looked at the file folder on his desk. “Most likely? Given her current lifestyle and their shared circumstances, I think her liver would fail suddenly and catastrophically, probably after a very high-stress event.”

“Like having another baby?”

Burton closed his eyes and turned his head away from Bernie. “Yes. Like having another baby.”

Bernie chewed on his lip for a long moment, then asked,

“What if she doesn’t have any more children? What then?”

“I assume you want to know how long I think she’ll live?”

Bernie sat on the edge of the desk. “Best guess.”

“Again with the guesses you want from me.”

“Stop being Yoda’s Jewish cousin and give me the straightest answer you’ve got.”

Burton looked at his friend and smiled sadly. “Okay. My best guess is that Lois, assuming a normal lifestyle from here on out, has a life expectancy of thirty to sixty years. She should see her son graduate from college and tell her grandchildren bedtime stories.”

Bernie relaxed visibly and nodded. “Now factor in what you know of Lois Lane’s lifestyle, her penchant for hard work and skating on the razor’s edge of disaster, and her tendency to dive headfirst into whatever she’s doing.”

“She might not live another five years.”

Bernie gulped aloud. “That’s — a little abrupt.”

“You wanted my best guess, Bern. The other side of that is that she might outlive all of us non-Kryptonians. If we factor in her previous lifestyle, there’s really no way to calculate how long she might live. And if she doesn’t make major changes, her liver might be the least of her worries.” Burton leaned forward and put his elbows on his desk. “So how do we proceed from here?”

Bernie stood and crossed his arms in thought for a long moment. “First, we don’t tell them anything specific because we can’t be specific between ourselves. Second, we strongly advise Lois to dial back her 007 lifestyle just for her general health.

Third, we put in as much time and effort as is reasonable, given our other responsibilities, into solving the transplant problem, whether from a live donor or a clone.”

Burton stood and walked around the desk, then put his hand on Bernie’s shoulder. “That’s a good summation. I think that’s our best plan. And hey, if we can’t solve this, it might be unsolvable.”

“I don’t like to think about that.”

“Neither do I, but it’s a fact that doctors always lose patients in the end. We’re born, we live, we die. Nobody gets out of life alive.”

Bernie turned rheumy eyes to his friend. “Which is why I moved into research. It rips me apart to lose a patient, especially when that patient is also a friend.”

Burton squeezed Bernie’s shoulder. “Then we’ll do our very best to put off that event as long as we can. Come on, let’s go see the baby. I’m a sucker for little kids.”

Chapter Eight

Lois sat down across from her agent’s desk, wondering why he’d insisted on this meeting. Like every author, she’d followed the sales figures released by Putnam and tracked how well her books were doing. Wanda Detroit had hit some kind of nerve among both mystery fans and casual readers of fiction, and she was working on the treatment for the next novel now.

Maybe that’s what Brad wanted to talk about. Kenneth and Carl — she’d renamed the Kent and Clark characters as fast as her fingers could activate the global search-and-replace option in her word processor — had begun the first book competing for Wanda’s affections and had progressed to almost enemies in the second. She wasn’t sure what to do with that dynamic, even though it seemed that the relationship triangle was one of the big selling points. Many of the critics had identified Wanda’s dilemma as the driving force of the romantic side of the mysteries.

But it was time to find out why she was here.

Brad Thompson, followed by his assistant Maya, both breezed into the office wearing huge smiles. Brad sat in his chair while Maya set out a bowl of grapes, coffee, a small plate of sweet rolls, and a transparent carafe of orange juice. She silently offered Lois a glass, which Lois declined.

“Anything else?”

“No thanks, Maya.”

“Tummy upset?”

Lois smiled at her. “No. I’m not having as much morning sickness with this baby. I’m just not hungry right now.”

“Okay, Ms. Lane. It’s there if you want it. And no cyanide in it, I promise.”

She giggled as she trotted out of the room. Lois looked at her agent. “Cyanide?”

Brad shook his head. “Last Wanda book, remember? Maya really liked the surprise of the cyanide in the OJ and how Wanda refused to drink it even after she got the confession unless the bad guy drank some too. Would you rather have a grape or two?” As Lois shook her head ‘no,’ he said, “I’m pretty sure I can get Maya to scare up some yogurt if you want some.”

“No thanks, Brad. I just want you to tell me what this meeting is about.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, I thought you already knew.”

“Nope.” Then a horrible notion sneaked into Lois’ mind. “Tell me Putman isn’t dropping me!”

“What? No! No, absolutely not! Where did you get that evil thought?”

“Nothing, never mind.” She blew a breath out her nose in frustration. “So why am I here?”

“Ah. I have good news.” He turned in his chair and picked up a folder from the desk behind him. “First thing, the second book, ‘The Pigeon Coos At Midnight,’ has hit the Daily Planet best-seller list.”

“So did ‘Birds Of A Feather Die Together.’ That’s good news, but I can’t say I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Ah,” he smiled, “I see you’re watching your sales figures!”

“Doesn’t every author?”

“Every author I’ve ever dealt with does. They even check magazine sales if they’ve got an interview or an article being published that month, although I don’t pay much attention to those even if they do pay real money. They’re blips on the radar, not long-term trends.”

“Fair enough. So I’m going to be on the best-seller list again? Why is that so significant?”

“Because, my dear hot new property, you are going to open at number nine. ‘Feather’ never made it past seventeen.”

“But it was on the list for thirteen weeks.”

“Yes, and that’s why Putnam is rolling the dice on a fifth printing of ‘Feather’ as a companion to ‘Pigeon.’ And there’s one more thing, too.”

“Well, tell me! Don’t keep me on tenterhooks!”

He looked at her for a moment as if puzzled, then smiled widely. “I hope that phrase makes it into the new Wanda book. Do you have a title yet?”

“The working title is ‘Wanda’s Third Adventure.’ It’ll change before you see it, I promise. I also promise that Kenneth and Carl are going to save each other’s lives and become grudging friends.” She brushed her hair back with one hand. “That will make it even harder for Wanda to choose between them. I think it sets up the resolution in the last book very well.”

“Well, Lois, you have a great incentive to come up with a good title and to keep that relationship dynamic going. Putnam wants to extend Wanda from four titles to ten.”

Lois’ eyes widened and her mouth went slack. “T-ten titles? You’re kidding, right?”

Impossibly, Brad’s smile grew even larger. “I never kid about such things. They want to increase your advance by thirty percent and get you to commit to a total of ten Wanda mysteries in the next twelve years.” He pulled a contract out of the pile of papers he was holding. “Here’s a copy of the contract. As usual, you’ll want your lawyer to look it over before you put your name on the dotted line. And as a bonus, I’ve negotiated a nice perk for you.”

She shook her head. “There’s more? What’s the perk?”

“You’ll like this. You have the option to give them three non-fiction titles of your choosing, subject to editorial review, of

course. And they know you’re having another baby — because I practically screamed the news at them — so you get a total of one year of maternity slack in this schedule. If you want to delay any title, you can, as long as no publication date has been officially announced.”

A monster grin grew on her face. “Brad, if I wasn’t already married, I think I’d kiss you!” She stood and shook his hand. “Thank you so very much for all your hard work for me.”

“Don’t forget about my agent’s commission, Lois. That’s what keeps me in business. Besides, you’re a professional, and you’re very easy to work with. You wouldn’t believe how some writers turn into whining toddlers when they get one book in an editor’s hands, much less when they get a single volume published.”

“We’ve argued about things before.”

“We have. But they’ve always been about the books or the characters or the best way to style the writing, not about each other. I wish a third of my clients could be more like you.” He poured himself a glass of orange juice. “If they were, I’d have far less stress in my life, I wouldn’t have chronic pre-ulcer symptoms, and maybe this would be a screwdriver instead of the pure stuff from Florida.”

They shared a laugh, but it was a short one. Lois couldn’t wait to tell Clark her wonderful news.

Lois lay in the hospital bed, exhausted. This delivery had been longer and harder than the first one, and she barely had the strength to keep her eyes open. Bernie Klein and Burton Richards had just left the room. Both doctors had smiled and congratulated her on the birth of her beautiful baby girl. They had also told her in no uncertain terms that she’d come close to total liver failure over the previous two weeks. Both men had also insisted that, since Superman couldn’t have a vasectomy, she needed to get her tubes tied.

She was going to use some of that maternity slack in her publishing schedule after all.

Clark silently padded in and sat beside the bed. If he hadn’t blocked some of the dim light from the recessed wall fixtures, she wouldn’t have known he was there.

She reached in his direction. “Clark?” she croaked.

“I’m here, Lois. Your throat sounds dry. Would you like something to drink?”

She nodded and he moved. She took a long blink and a small cup of ice water materialized in front of her mouth. Her lips needed only to open to accept the end of the straw.

A long sip later, she felt slightly better. “What did Burt and Bernie tell you?”

He smiled. “That you’re going to be okay in a couple of weeks, and that our daughter is healthy and yelling her head off for her mommy.”

She smiled and took another long blink. “How’s Jon doing?”

“He’s fine. He’s with your dad. I think our son might become a doctor.”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Don’t you think it’s a bit early for him to decide that?”

“Your dad doesn’t think so. He was grilling Jon on the central nervous system when I left them.”

Lois frowned. “Tell Daddy to stop that. Jon’s not quite four yet, too young to go to medical school.”

Clark shrugged. “I will if you really want me to, but it wasn’t your dad’s idea. It was Jon’s. That boy can barely say ‘medulla oblongata’ but he can tell you where it is, how big it is, and what it does.” He bent down and kissed her forehead. “Our son is a genius.”

She smiled in spite of her exhaustion. “He takes after you.”

“You, too. Of course, your father thinks Jon’s brilliance is from his grandparents on both sides. He and my dad are planning

to take Jon fishing and to a couple of museums while you're recovering."

"Oh?" she breathed. "And who's taking care of little Marta JoAnne?"

"Her grandmothers, of course. They're at the nursery window drooling over her. They both keep picking out features they say are from each other, and when my mom reminds your mom that I'm adopted, your mom insists that I must have absorbed their DNA through my mom's cooking. Marta couldn't be in better hands. Unless those hands were yours, of course."

She reached out and entwined her fingers with his. "Thank you, darling. How long do they say I'll be here?"

"Burton says three or four days, maybe one or two more. Bernie agrees. They want to make sure your liver doesn't go on strike again."

"Yuck. I don't want that either. Dialysis is four hours of no fun at all and it doesn't take care of all the problems. It hurts, too, no matter what they say."

He smiled and gently patted her arm. "Oh, I almost forgot. Brad came by with the news that 'The Hawk Circles at Dusk' is number twenty-one on the Planet's best-seller list and climbing fast. He told me that your difficult pregnancy has helped boost Wanda Detroit's sales, and that if you pull a publicity stunt like this again he'll clobber you himself."

She almost laughed. "That's Brad. And that's good news. Did he mention the Luthor biography? What do the editors at Putnam think?"

"He said, so far so good, and he thinks they'll publish it as soon as you can finish it."

She yawned. "Oh! It's pretty close to finished now, but they're going to have to wait a bit. I want to enjoy my family for several months, at least."

"Yeah." He averted his eyes for a long breath, then looked back at her with a firm expression. "Burton and Bernie also said that you need to slow down. Not just a little, either. Part of the stress you put on your liver came from the on-site research you did for Luthor's biography, and part of it from that other book you're working on, the one about the fallen athletes and their broken families. You have to dial it way back."

Her voice came out sharper than she'd intended. "That story needs to be told, Clark. People need to know how devastating drugs and alcohol and sudden wealth can be to the innocents involved. If I can save one family from coming apart under that stress, it'll be worth it."

Clark's eyes narrowed. "Not if we lose you."

She tried to compose a suitable response but realized she didn't have the energy, so she decided to put off the discussion until later. "Okay, fine, I'll slow down. But I'm the best judge of how much I back off, not you."

He shrugged. "Maybe the rest of my news will be more pleasant."

"Can't be much less pleasant."

She saw that her words hurt him, but he didn't pursue the subject. "In addition to winning my third Kerth last month, I have a new job. A new job title, actually. You are now married to the online editor for the Daily Planet."

Her smile was genuine. "Really? Clark, that's wonderful! When do you start? Officially, I mean."

"As soon as I get you back home and settled in with Marta. A month, maybe less. Perry told me that technology changes, but the truth doesn't, and that's what I'm going to put on my office wall so all of my underlings can see it and fear me."

"Fear you?" she snorted. "You couldn't scare a mouse. They'll walk all over you and you'll smile at them while they do it."

"Not if I tell them that I'll send you to see them if they don't behave."

She glared at him for a second, then grabbed her stomach and laughed aloud.

He cleared his throat. "I have one more question for you, and this is not me trying to make a decision for you, okay? I'm only asking because I need to know."

She took another long sip of water and handed him the cup. "I'm sorry. I'll treat it like a request for information which may or may not generate follow-up questions."

His soft chuckle warmed her heart. "Thank you. Now, I know that both Burton and Bernie suggested that you get your tubes tied because mine are harder to snip. Have you had a chance to think about that suggestion?"

"Yes. And I think it's a good idea. I already love little Marta so much, and I wouldn't trade her or Jon for anything, but this was really hard. And it hurt a lot more than the first delivery."

"So, no more children for Clark Kent and Lois Lane?"

She hunted for his hand with hers and found it. "I think we've gotten our quota of joy, don't you?"

He lifted her hand to his lips and held it there for a long kiss. "I didn't think I could be happier than the day we married. But now we have two wonderful, beautiful children, and you did such a great job bringing them into the world. I doubt that any man could ever be more blessed than I am right now."

She felt sleep tugging at her mind, but she fought it off for the moment. "Even with all the wonderful things Superman can do, that's what you treasure the most, isn't it? Having a family. Loving and being loved. You were right."

"About what?"

The call of the land of Nod was irresistible now, but she needed to say one more thing. "When you told me that Superman was what you do but Clark Kent was who you are." A deep breath escaped and she could barely form the next words. "And I love who you are."

The world faded away. As if from a great distance, Clark's voice came to her ears. "And I love you too, Lois."

"We're — we're making some — some great moments, aren't we?"

"Wonderful ones. Simply wonderful. Moments that make up a great life."

She drifted off wearing a soft smile.

Just before Marta turned five, Perry finally retired for good. Clark slipped into the general editor's chair as if he'd been born to it. Even though his management style was softer and gentler than Perry's thunder and bluster, he got similar results. Of course, he always had the threat of a visit from the Mad Dog in his back pocket.

Jimmy, who had become the Planet's Chief Information Technology Officer, married one of the Planet's staff writers and settled down into domesticity as if born to it. Darla Peters-Olsen had proven herself to be a solid reporter and an excellent wife, keeping Jimmy on the straight and narrow and guiding him to handle their money like a pro. Jimmy even took over the Kents' retirement planning, and all of them grew their net worth as if it were kuzu. Neither the Kents nor the Olsens were mind-bogglingly rich, but neither would they lack for material goods. And the two couples became fast friends.

Unlikely as it had seemed when Clark and Lois first met, Lucy became a Tony-nominated stage actress who built a reputation for being on time, always knowing her lines, working well with other actors and most directors, and never being a diva. She accomplished the difficult feat of separating her job from her life, and she never appeared on any of the celebrity ambush shows or the police blotter. Jimmy also took over handling her finances, and before she was thirty she was a millionaire.

Lois walked in the front door from her latest book signing

tour and wondered where the family was. “Hello?” she called.

Ten-year-old Jon appeared on the upstairs landing and waved to her. “Hi, Mom! I’m glad you’re home!” He bounded down the stairs and jumped at her as if to hug her, but then he stopped and slowly floated to the floor.

Her jaw hit her chest and she dropped her suit bag. “Jon! You — you’re flying!”

His grin widened until it almost split his face. “Not quite. It’s more like falling in slow motion.” He jumped up and spun half a dozen times as he floated back down. “Or falling with style.”

She laughed. “That’s wonderful! I’m sure your father is thrilled.”

He grimaced at her. “Not so much, really. You should have heard all the rules he laid down for me.”

She reached out and embraced her son, then kissed his forehead. “They’re for your own good and you know it. Speaking of your father, where is he?”

Jon motioned with his head. “He’s upstairs with Mart. She’s all broken up about a grade she got on a test.”

“Really? Why? Are you sure it’s the grade, or is she feeling like the baby in the class again?”

“No, Mom, it’s not because she’s two years younger than any of her classmates. Besides, you know I’d take care of it if any of them were to pick on her.”

“Okay, I’ll go check it out. But how hard can a third-grade test be?”

“You’ll have to talk to her about it. And remember that she’s just seven.”

“Almost eight, remember?”

“Go on up, Mom. My sister needs her mommy.”

Lois nodded and walked up the steps. She was tired and hungry and so very glad to be home, but she missed her family and Brad was going to have to cut back on the signings. She understood going to Los Angeles and Dallas and Chicago, but some of those cities weren’t big enough to justify her time and effort. Of course, Brad was right when he told her that the smaller cities rarely got famous authors on their tours, so she was picking the low-hanging fruit whenever she went to Lawton, Oklahoma, or Minot, North Dakota, or Burns, Oregon. Every one of the stores in the smaller towns had sold out of their current stock of ‘Track of the Snowbird,’ Wanda’s seventh adventure, and only one hadn’t sold out of all the copies of her previous books as well.

She reached the top of the stairs and felt unusually out of breath. She was probably extra tired because of the book signing trip, she thought. Maybe she should tell Burton about it.

Or maybe not. She didn’t want him to worry about her too much.

As she approached Marta’s room, she heard the girl’s soft sobs and the low hum of her husband’s voice. She pushed the door open and stood there for a long moment, just watching her husband hold their young daughter in his lap and drinking in the sight.

She was so tired. And hungry. And so desperately glad to be home.

But couldn’t rest just yet. It was time to be Mom again.

“Hi,” she whispered. She knew Clark would hear her but was surprised when Marta jumped up, ran to her, and plastered herself to Lois’ legs.

“Momma, I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! I’ll do better, I promise!”

Lois peeled Marta off her slacks and knelt down in front of her. “Baby girl, what’s wrong? What happened?”

Between sobs, Marta said, “I — I took a test and — and it was world history and — I got mixed up on when the French Revolution happened and — and I missed a question and got a 95!” She threw herself into her mother’s arms and held on for dear life. “Oh, Momma, I’m so sorry!”

Lois gently pulled her back to look at Marta’s face. “Honey, you got a 95 on a test? That’s wonderful! You did very well! You have no reason to be sorry. So why are you crying?”

“Be—because I — I wanted to make you p-proud of me! And I didn’t!”

Lois slowly knelt and enfolded Marta in her arms. “Baby girl, did you do your very best?”

“Yes, Momma.”

“Did you study hard?”

“I studied with Daddy and I got everything right but I got mixed up and—”

“Shh, shh.” Lois stroked her soft blonde hair and signaled Clark for a handkerchief. “Let’s dry your eyes and get you to stop crying because you didn’t do anything wrong. In fact, I’m very proud of you.”

Marta stared at her mother with unbelieving eyes. “But — but I didn’t get a hundred percent! How can you be proud of me if I don’t get a hundred percent? Grandpa Lane says he’s proud of Jon when he gets a hundred percent!”

“Oh, sweetie, I’ve always been proud of you! And I always will be. You don’t have to do anything to get me to be proud of you or to love you. You’re my very bestest little girl in the whole universe and I will always love you and be proud of you.”

“But — I don’t understand. Jon always gets hundreds on his tests and you and Daddy always tell him how proud you are of him.”

“We are proud of him. We’re proud of both of you. But we’re not proud of you because of the grades you get. We’re proud of you because you’re doing your best.” She pulled Marta’s hair away from her face and dabbed at the girl’s eyes. “If you did your very, very best, you studied hard and worked hard, and you got a 75, we’d still be proud of you.”

“What? How could you be proud of a 75?”

Lois smiled and kissed Marta’s nose. “Because if that happened we’d know we were pushing you too hard and trying to get you to do things you weren’t ready to do. That would make it our fault, not yours. You have to remember that you’re two years ahead of everyone else your age, and you’re in the advanced section of your class. You’re doing so well that you’re almost perfect. Hey, did anyone get a hundred on the test?”

Marta’s tears had stopped and she took the handkerchief to blow her nose. “No. Sue Lin and I both got 95s and nobody beat us. And we missed different questions.”

“See? You’re in a difficult class, working hard and doing very well, and your father and I are proud of you.”

She almost smiled. “Daddy already told me that.”

“You should have believed him.”

“Yeah, but you know Daddy. He always makes everything sound positive. You tell the truth even when it hurts.” Marta’s expression suddenly changed and she grabbed Lois’ shoulders. “Momma, you need to lie down. Right now.”

“What for? I still have to greet your father and get unpacked and take a shower and—”

“No, Momma! You have to lie down! Daddy, come help her!”

Lois would have protested further, but she noticed that the edges of her vision were graying out and Marta’s voice had moved far away from her. It was easier to let Clark pick her up and lay her on Marta’s bed than to push him away and tell him she was fine.

The next thing she saw was her husband leaning over her face, gazing into her eyes with some real fear in his. She put her hands up to push him away, but he caught and held them. “Don’t try to get up, Lois. Marta went to get a glass of water.”

“Okay. Can I sit up when she gets back?”

“I don’t know—”

“Momma’s fine now, Daddy. She just needed to faint. Here’s your water.”

Lois couldn't remember "needing to faint" before, but apparently Marta was right. Her vision and hearing were back to normal already. "Let me sit up, Clark. I don't want to spill that water all over myself."

She drank half the glass, paused to take a deep breath, then finished it. "Thank you, baby girl. I feel much better now."

"Good. You need to go to sleep soon. And don't get up to see us off to school tomorrow. You need your rest."

Lois glared at Marta. "We're getting a little bossy, aren't we?"

"No. I just know that's what you need." She gently hugged her mother and kissed her on the nose. "And I understand what you meant. You're telling me I don't have to be perfect for you to love me."

The glare softened to a warm smile. "That's exactly right, baby girl." Lois ruffled Marta's hair. "Hey, how did you know I was about to faint? I thought your brother was going to be the doctor in the family."

"He is. But I just knew."

"How did you know?"

"I just knew in my head. Something told me you were going to faint."

Lois glanced over her head at Clark, who shrugged as if puzzled.

Clark leaned close and hugged both Lois and Marta. "You know, it's getting late, and it's about time my two favorite girls in all the world went to sleep. I'm going to take Mommy to our room and get her tucked into bed, then come back and make sure my favorite third-grader gets all the sweet dreams she can handle. Marta, how about you give your mother her goodnight hug and kiss now?"

Clark's "girls" embraced tightly. "Momma, can I ask you something?"

"Of course, baby girl. What is it?"

Marta pulled back and looked into her mother's eyes. "I don't want you to get upset, and I know you're doing it because you love me, but can you not call me 'baby girl' from now on? I'm almost eight and I'm getting kinda too big for a baby name."

A wave of emotion broke over Lois' heart. It was a roiling stew of thrill and pride and sadness, along with the recognition that her little girl was starting to grow up. She'd known it would happen someday, but she wasn't ready for it.

She steeled herself and smiled. "Of course, Marta. What do you want me to call you?"

Marta's face twisted into a very adult frown. "I'm not sure. I'll have to think about it and get back to you." She wrapped her still-young arms around her mother's neck. "Good night, Mom. Get some good sleep."

Clark swept Lois up in his arms and kissed her on the forehead. "I'll carry you to bed."

"Oh, I love a man with a smooth line and big muscles."

Marta made a gagging noise and grumped, "If Daddy wasn't already taking you to bed, Mom, I'd ask you two to get a room."

"You're just jealous because I have such a good husband."

"Yeah, well my daddy is the best daddy in the whole world!"

Lois laughed at the old banter. "Can't argue with that. I'll see you tomorrow when you get home from school, big girl."

"Okay, Mom. Good night."

As Clark pushed the bedroom door open, he smiled at Lois. "This was a good mommy moment for you, honey."

"No." She shook her head and stroked his hair. "It was a good moment for all of us."

He laid her atop the comforter and slipped her shoes off. "I agree, but the moment I need now is the one where I watch you fall asleep and wake up tomorrow all refreshed and ready to sleep some more."

She chuckled. "You drive a hard bargain, mister, but I'll take

that deal. Will you bring me my yellow PJs?"

"Of course. And I'll help you change into them, too."

She reached out to run her hand over his chest. "How about you wake me up tomorrow morning and help me change out of them then?"

"That's a deal, as long as we make that an early afternoon appointment. I want you to rest. And I don't want you working on anything for the next twenty-four hours, okay?"

She sat up to unbutton her blouse. "You're a cruel taskmaster and a mean old man. I'll do it, but only because you asked so nicely. Wait, that won't interfere with the Planet, will it?"

"As long as no one declares nuclear war, Superman is taking the next two days off. And Clark Kent is working from home. I've already alerted Clyde and Bonnie that they're in charge until Thursday."

She shivered. "I still can't get past those names. They give me the chills every time I hear them."

He grinned and unfolded her pajama top. "I'm sure the Bennetts and the Powells didn't intend to make us uncomfortable. Clyde Bennett and Bonnie Powell are both hard-working, dedicated, skilled, and happily married to other people. And we don't have any Depression-era Ford roadsters parked at the paper."

"Good. Now if you'll help me get these slacks off, I'll go brush my teeth and get in bed like a good little girl."

"There's a first time for everything, I guess."

She stopped and gave him a seductive smile. "Put a bookmark in it, Farm Boy. I'll be here all week."

He bent down to kiss her gently. "And I'll be here as long as I live." After another kiss, he whispered, "That's not a contest, it's a promise."

Sudden tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. "I know. I love you, Clark Kent."

He helped her stand, then wrapped his still-massive arms around her. "I know. I love you too, Lois Lane-Kent."

She hoped the dreams she knew she'd have tonight would approach the reality of their time together tomorrow.

Chapter Nine

By the time Wanda's fifth adventure was published, it was an extended family ritual to spend the Thanksgiving weekend with Clark and Lois. Both the Kents and the Lanes, Lucy included, made times in their schedules to visit, eat, watch football, talk, laugh, and catch up on each other's lives. Despite the difference in temperament and their diverse interests, Jonathan Kent and Sam Lane had become good friends. Each man learned from the trials and tribulations of the other, Martha and Ellen grew close as fellow Grannies, and over the years the quick animosity between Sam and Ellen that for so long had seethed just below the surface faded away. Lois sometimes wondered if her own injuries had contributed to that reconciliation, and if so, how much.

If they had, she always came down on the side of 'good coming from bad.' The prayer that the surgical nurse had shared with Clark the day she'd been shot bubbled up in her memory at such times, and she would offer up her own silent — and sometimes not so silent — prayer of thanks for the good.

The only thing that produced friction in the family on a regular basis was Lois' penchant for getting in trouble when she was investigating something. She was doing background research for her latest Wanda Detroit novel by riding with a patrol officer and got caught in a crossfire after a simple traffic stop. She wasn't hit by any bullets, but one round smashed into the pavement in front of her and kicked dirt and metal fragments into her leg. That necessitated a four-day hospital stay and some physical therapy to regain strength and flexibility once she'd healed.

Once she was interviewing an athlete's ex-wife for one of her

non-fiction books and the ex-husband, jacked up on meth, took Lois, the ex-wife, and two small children hostage for several hours until Superman got tired of waiting and swooped in to save her. Following that incident was another lengthy argument between Clark and Lois on the dangers of being too involved with her research.

When she was doing background research for her Lex Luthor book, she was kidnapped by yet another child of Luthor's, this one a daughter who insisted she was Lois' child by Lex. Lois got out of that one by herself and made certain the girl got quality psychiatric care. But Jon and Marta both alternately tearfully hugged and yelled at her for exposing herself to such danger as Clark stood back, frowning silently and watching with his arms crossed.

And every time one of those incidents took place, Clark insisted more vehemently that Lois slow down and back off. All it made her do was dig in her heels even deeper.

As it had to, the breaking point finally came.

When Lois walked through the front door of the house after yet another three-day hospital stay following yet another brush with violent criminals, she expected a raucous welcome from her children. Instead she got silence. Neither of them got up from the kitchen table where they were doing their homework. She turned to Clark and lifted her eyebrows to silently ask what was going on, but he refused to make eye contact.

Always take the initiative, she told herself. "Marta, honey, we need to start planning your birthday party. It's not every year my little girl turns nine."

Marta tolerated her mother's hug and started on the next arithmetic problem. "We've got almost three months, Mother. I think we can get the job done in time as long as you don't get yourself killed first."

Clark's sharp but quiet "Marta!" ended the conversation.

The girl's cold tone stunned Lois. She looked at Jon, but he didn't lift his eyes from his reading, nor did he comment. He couldn't have shut her out more convincingly had he given her a "talk to the hand" gesture. Lois felt her insides constrict.

She stood and followed Clark up the stairs to their bedroom. He dropped her suitcase on the bed, flipped it open, pulled out her clothes and piled them on the comforter. They didn't look at each other as Clark picked up the suitcase and moved to put it away.

She put her hand on the small stack of clothing and quietly said, "Welcome home, Lois. I'm glad you're okay. I'm glad you got the story, too. You did a great job. Perry would have been proud."

A sharp crack interrupted her sarcastic monologue. She spun and saw her husband standing in front of the closet, holding the top of her hard-shelled suitcase in one hand and the bottom in the other.

He'd snapped it in two.

He didn't look at her as he spoke. Through gritted teeth, he said, "Don't start that, Lois. I won't listen to you try to justify what you did. You violated our agreement and you know it."

"I found out who was kidnapping homeless people and why. The police arrested them. They won't be killing people while running illegal experiments to go around the FDA approval process any longer."

He dropped the pieces of suitcase and turned to face her. "Wonderful. Great. You broke the story. You get a prize. You might even get a Kerth out of it." He took two deliberate strides closer. "But you also broke your word to me. You told me you would stop doing fieldwork. You promised the kids that you'd never do the dirty work on any investigation again." He leaned down into her face. "And the worst thing of all was that you involved Marta! I never would have found you in time if she

hadn't led me to you! And she saw you tied to that chair, all beat up and bloody and groaning! I thought you were dying and our daughter saw you like that!"

"That's the risk every investigator takes—"

"You're not supposed to take that risk! You're not even supposed to be an investigator anymore! You're supposed to be a wife and a mother and then a writer! You're not supposed to be found dead in some basement because you stuck your neck out too far and someone chopped your head off!"

"I'm fine now—"

"You know they were going to kill you, don't you? There was a syringe on the dresser ready to inject potassium chloride into your arm! I could take you dying if I had to, Lois, but it's not just us! We're a family! We have children! You can't take those kinds of risks anymore!"

"This was an important story—"

"NO!" he bellowed. "The STORY is NOT—" He stopped and forced himself back under control. Lois was shocked to see the effort on his face and in his shoulders.

He straightened and moved back a half-step. "The story is not as important as you being a wife and mother. If I weren't Superman you'd be dead right now and I'd have to raise Jon and Marta by myself. If you and Marta didn't have that empathic link, or whatever it is, I couldn't have found you in time. And we would have spent months, if not years, wondering where you were or if you were even alive, and all that time you'd have been buried in the basement of some abandoned house in southeast Pennsylvania."

Lois had always known the danger she'd been in, but for the first time she began to understand — and most importantly, to admit — the impact of what she'd done, the terror she'd instilled in the hearts of the people she loved the most. She backed up and sat down on the bed, then put her head in her hands and began to cry.

Clark put his hands in his pockets and stood where he was. "I love you, Lois," he said, more gently than before. "But you're over forty now and fifty will be here before you know it. You don't move as well as you used to. You don't hit as hard as you used to. You don't recover as quickly as you did when you were twenty-seven. And you saw the steam coming out of Burton's ears. You put a lot of stress on your body, and he was afraid your liver was going to fail."

He finally sat beside her but didn't touch her. "Do you remember your interview last year with Richard Carpenter? He told you that he understood that Karen's anorexia was what ultimately killed her. He said he accepted that anorexia nervosa is a disease and not a lifestyle choice and that she didn't deliberately die so she could leave him. But he also told you that he was still angry at his sister for starving herself to death and robbing him of her talent, her ability, her love, and her presence. That's kind of what I've been feeling over the past three days. I know you wouldn't deliberately choose to die and leave us. But if you don't slow down, if you don't back away from these situations, that's essentially what you're going to do. You're going to leave us."

He reached out and enveloped his weeping bride in his arms. "And I don't want you to leave. I want you to stay around for a long, long time. I want you to see our son become a successful doctor with a family of his own. I want you to see our daughter become a teacher, maybe a college professor or maybe even president of a big school, or do something else and be wonderfully successful, and get married and have her own family. I want you to bounce our grandchildren on your knees and laugh when they pee on your leg."

She laughed and sobbed at the same time, then nodded. "I — I want that too!"

He hugged her tighter. "Then you have to make a choice and

leave the dangerous stuff to the younger reporters. Please, Lois.” He kissed her on the cheek. “Please?”

Her eyes caught his and held them. “Yes. I promise. No more being stupid. No more field work, no more hands-on investigations for me. Not ever.” She shifted her arms around him. “I don’t want to miss any more moments with you.”

And this time she kept her word.

No family is without conflict or misunderstandings or miscommunications, but aside from Lois’ trouble magnetism, the Kent-Lane clan seemed to manage with far fewer hiccups than any other family they knew. Lois and Clark learned to move in high society, not just in Metropolis but all over the nation. Lois appeared on half a dozen late-night talk shows to push her books. Clark put out a best-selling book of his own containing a selected number of the editorials he’d written since he’d replaced Perry. Lucy Lane, who had become a multiple Tony-nominated Broadway actress, publicly credited her sister’s family with keeping her grounded and aware of reality outside the artificial world of the theater.

Life had come to treat Clark’s family very well. And every once in a while, he would recall the prayer the nurse had shared with him that night at the hospital when Lois had almost died.

Clark and Lois sat down with the principal of Jon’s high school, wondering why Mrs. Jameson had called them in to talk. Surely Jon wasn’t creating a problem in class!

Instead of sitting behind her desk, Mrs. Jameson seated all three of them around a small table to one side of her office. “I’m sure you’re wondering why you’re here, Mr. and Mrs. Kent. Let me assure you that there are no problems concerning Jon or his schoolwork. In fact, he may be the best student we’ve ever had at Harding Memorial High School. I wish we had several dozen more just like him.”

Clark nodded. “That’s good to hear.”

“But — and you had to know there was one somewhere — Jon is so smart and so accomplished that we’re running out of things to teach him. We project that by the middle of his junior year of high school, he will have passed every science course which we are accredited to teach, and if he keeps up with his extra studies he’ll have enough credits to graduate a year early. We have to come up with a game plan to keep him scholastically engaged and on track for college.”

She paused as Lois put her hand to her mouth and burped. “I apologize. It must have been something I ate that’s disagreeing with me.”

Mrs. Jameson smiled. “I understand. I wouldn’t want you to talk to my doctor about my digestion. The stress in this job combined with my poor eating habits makes her a little bit crazy about my health.”

“We’re sorry that Jon is contributing to that stress.”

“Oh, please, Mr. Kent! We don’t get many positive problems like his. I wish every student presented us the same kinds of choices to make for his future. You two have done a bang-up job raising him so far.”

“He just turned twelve a few months ago. My friends keep telling me that the hardest part is coming up.”

“Oh, they’re right, it is. But I think you won’t have a lot of the same problems with Jon that other parents of teen boys have had. Your son has taken the best character traits of both of you and worked hard to become a fine young man, and he’s quite fortunate that he’s had such good role models.”

“So, at the risk of being rude, why are we here?”

“Because, Mrs. Kent, we need to help Jon succeed. And I believe the best way to do that is to get him into the pre-med program at New Troy State. It’s fairly close, the tuition is as reasonable as tuition can be these days, and they’re willing to let

him enroll part-time using a program for new doctors. I think it’s our optimum solution, but of course I can’t make the decision for him. Or for the two of you.”

Clark goggled at her. “You mean you want him to start his pre-med program now?”

“Now? Oh, no, I’m sorry! I was not speaking clearly. The program wouldn’t take Jon until the beginning of his junior year, and because of legal requirements he couldn’t take some of the advanced labs until he reaches his sixteenth birthday, but if he does as well as I think he will, he’ll graduate from high school as a college sophomore. Maybe even a junior, if he pushes hard enough.”

“Is that what you want him to do?” snapped Lois. “Is he going to be a trophy on your wall, something you can point at and gloat about to the other principals?”

Mrs. Jameson’s face fell. “Not at all, Mrs. Kent. No, please, that’s not what I meant at all. I assure you, I’m doing this so Jon will succeed in his career and in his life. After all, he’s doing this for you.”

Lois’ own face lost all expression. “Wh-what?”

“I’m sorry. I thought you already knew.”

“Knew what, Mrs. Jameson?” Clark asked softly.

The older woman sighed in resignation. “That his ambition to be a doctor is partly — perhaps even largely — fueled by his desire to help his mother. He told me last spring that you have a liver that isn’t working as well as it should, and that his goal is to find a cure for you.”

Clark and Lois turned and stared open-mouthed at each other. “Lois, believe me when I say that I had no idea.”

Lois shook her head. “It’s okay, honey, neither did I.” She turned to her son’s principal. “Mrs. Jameson, could you do us a huge favor? Whatever else comes out of this meeting concerning Jon’s future, please don’t let him know what you just told us.”

“Of course not. I apologize for breaching his privacy. If I’d had any idea—”

“You wouldn’t have told us, I know,” Clark said. “But that’s behind us now. And I think it’s a good thing that we know. It will help us when we suggest this course of study to him.”

“Thank you for your understanding. I think I’ve—”

Lois burped again, louder this time, and took several quick breaths to steady herself. Mrs. Jameson leaned forward. “Mrs. Kent, are you unwell? If you need to use the ladies’ room, it’s through the hallway door and two doors down on your left.”

Lois swallowed and sat up straight. “I don’t know. I haven’t felt like this for years.”

“I think we’ve covered everything, unless either of you have any questions for me. No?” Mrs. Jameson stood and shook hands with both of them. “You two have important things to do, and I have a school to run. Thank you both for coming in on such short notice. And thank you for being so understanding.”

Clark stood and helped Lois to her feet. “Come on, honey, let’s go home. I think you need some antacids and some rest.”

“Y-yes. I think you’re right. Mrs. Jameson, thank you for all the nice things you said about Jon. We’re very proud of him.”

“As well you should be. I anticipate meeting his sister before much longer, too.”

Lois turned to leave, then grabbed her stomach with one hand and Clark’s arm with the other. “Oh, wow. That’s just weird.”

Mrs. Jameson moved to her other side. “At the risk of being indelicate again, Mrs. Kent, is there any possibility that you’re pregnant?”

Lois shook her head. “Uh-uh. I had my tubes tied after Marta was born.”

“Well, I had mine tied after my third child. It didn’t stop me from having twins six years later.” As she saw the alarmed faces of her visitors, she added, “Sometimes they heal by themselves.”

Lois turned to her husband. “Do you think—”

"It's your stomach," he replied.

Said stomach suddenly lurched again and Lois covered her mouth with her free hand. "Bathroom! Now!"

"Okay, Dad, what's for dinner?" Jonathan looked around the table and saw his sister and mother already in their seats. "Maybe I should ask 'where's dinner?'"

His father pulled Jon's chair out and said, "We need to have a family council first, son."

Jon didn't move. "Is there a problem?"

His mother smiled. "No, son, there's no problem. We just need to talk with both of you."

Jon nodded. "Okay." He put his book satchel down against the wall and cautiously sat.

Mom took a deep breath and let it out. Then she looked at Dad. Jon got the impression that she was slightly embarrassed, but he couldn't think of any reason that would be.

His sister put her hands out palms up and said, "If we're going to talk, let's talk!"

His parents laughed. "Okay, kids," said Dad, "here it is. Your mother is going to have another baby."

"What!" Jon burst out.

"Mom!" Marta wailed.

"Hey! Your father had something to do with it!"

"Another baby? Do you know what the kids on my class are going to say? I can't go back to school now!"

Dad put his hand on Marta's shoulder. "Honey, it isn't that bad. A lot of your classmates have younger siblings. You—"

"Yes it is that bad! You don't know how much they're going to tease me now! 'The baby has a baby sister!' 'Hey, shrimp, don't your parents know what causes that?' I might as well move to Smallville with Grandpa and Grandma Kent!"

Jon's mother tried to look stern, but Marta's outburst was making her want to laugh, and his dad's stunned expression wasn't helping. And Jon understood. He wanted to crawl under his bed and hide, or tell his classmates that his parents had found the new child under a cabbage leaf.

He felt his face heating up, but he couldn't talk yet. He'd read enough medical texts to know where this new baby had come from. The fact that he and Marta had arrived via the same process didn't bear thinking about.

Marta folded her arms together on the table and dropped her face down atop them, then breathed out something inarticulate which conveyed her exasperation, her shame, and her perplexity. Her voice was muffled against the table, but he still heard her groan, "I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead! Somebody bury me now!"

His mom reached over and started rubbing Marta's back. "Sweetheart, I know this is a shock to both of you, but think of the shock your father and I had. We didn't think we were going to have any more children."

Like tumblers in a lock, Jon understood what had happened. "Dad's aura healed your Fallopian tubes, didn't it? Isn't that what Dr. Richards said?" He turned to his father. "You just had to be Superman, didn't you? You just had to make her all better when she was just fine the way she was!"

His father's mouth dropped open. "Jon, you don't—"

"If it weren't for you being Superman she'd be fine! Her liver would never—"

His mother's hands slapped the table and she snapped,

"That's enough!"

"But Mom, he—"

"I said 'Enough!' I will not allow my son to attack his father for being the best man alive! If you weren't Superman's son you wouldn't be here to make such idiotic accusations!"

Jon knew he wasn't an idiot. His parents knew it, too. Even Marta knew it, although she'd never admit it. So this was the first time ever that his mother had implied that he wasn't a genius, or

at least close to it.

He tried to think of a response, but nothing came to him that didn't risk more of Mom's anger directed at him. So he shut his mouth and leaned back to sulk.

His mother nodded once. "Now I can finish. Yes, your father's powers obviously healed my tubes, even when we didn't want them to. And yes, we're going to have another baby. But because I'm older now than I was when I had you two, I'm going to need your help with a bunch of things."

"Like what?" Marta asked.

Mom smiled at her. "Like the laundry, the dry cleaning, the dishes, the grocery shopping, the cooking, cleaning up around the house—"

"But Dad already does a bunch of that. And so do Jon and I. Not all of it, sure, but we do a lot of stuff."

"That's true, sweetie, but he's going to need some help. My doctors want me to do a whole lot of sitting and waiting for this baby to get here. So I'm going to do a lot of writing and make a lot of phone calls and sleeping and going to appointments. That's why my favorite frame rocking chair is in the front room now. I want to be with my family as much as possible while I nurture this new child. Oh, and I've picked out a new baby doctor. Jon, I know you'll want to check her out, so look up Evelyn Marshall. She's a qualified OB-GYN and pediatric surgeon, and I trust her."

"I'll check her out, Mom."

His mother chuckled. "Just remember that I already have and I approve of her. Now, let's talk about names for this new baby. Your father and I will take just about any questions or suggestions. Reasonable ones, anyway."

Marta sat back and crossed her arms, but Jon leaned forward. "Dad, do you want a son or a daughter?"

Clark smiled and put his hand on his son's shoulder. "It doesn't matter to me, Son. I just want our new baby to be healthy."

"It matters to me, Dad. If Mom has a boy, we'll be in the majority, but if she has a girl we'll have to swim against the estrogen tide. Ow!"

"And I'll kick you again the next time you smart off like that too!" snapped Marta.

Clark gently put his other hand on his daughter's upper arm. "That's enough of that, both of you. This is a peaceful family conference, not a combat zone."

"She caught me right under the kneecap, Dad!"

"And you're going to drop it because your sister is going to apologize. Aren't you, Marta?"

The girl turned her head to the side away from her dad. After a long moment, he tugged lightly on her arm. "Come on, honey, your brother's waiting."

Marta slowly turned and glowered at her brother for a few seconds, then said, "I'm sorry you're such a donkey's butt—"

"Marta."

"Okay, Dad. Jon, I'm sorry you're insensitive and sexist and —"

"Wrong again, Marta. Come on, do it right."

"Will you please let me go, Dad?"

"When you apologize and not one second before. I don't want to have to chase you through the house again."

"Grrr. Okay, Jon, I'm sorry I kicked you in the knee."

Dad released her. "Jon?"

"Accepted. Now can we get back to my question?"

Mom chuckled. "That's already decided, Jon, and you know it. Now, can we discuss potential baby names?"

Both kids creased their faces in thought, then Jon said, "How about Julia Halle Jennifer Elizabeth Amanda Zoe Emma Caroline?"

Marta giggled. "And her nickname will be Pumpkin Blossom!"

Jon watched as his father fought off a smile of his own, then said, “Come on, let’s be a little bit serious, okay?”

Marta nodded. “Okay. I have a unisex name. Is that okay?”

Mom nodded. “It’s fine for a suggestion. What is it?”

Her eyes brightened, but before Jon could cut off what he knew was about to be an inspired but very impish evil thought, she said, “We’ll call the baby ‘Oops!’”

Just as Jon knew they would, his parents exploded into laughter. Marta caught his eye and winked, and he knew they’d be okay.

“Jon, I’m not sure your parents would approve of you seeing me in my office without them. And I don’t think it’s appropriate for you to see me professionally without their consent.”

“Probably not, Dr. Richards, but they tend to filter the medical stuff for me. I want to hear it from the expert.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere with me, young man. I absolutely do NOT want either of your parents coming to see me and asking for an explanation I cannot give.”

“All right. How about if I make some statements which may or may not be true? Then you can let me know if I’m right or wrong.”

“Jonathan Samuel Kent, I will not be a party to your end run around your parents. Besides, I have no doubt that you will simply repeat anything I might tell you to your sister, and I refuse to alarm either of you without a very good reason.”

“Okay, I’ll start. Mom’s Fallopian tubes healed because of Dad’s aura.”

“Hmm.”

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes.’ Dad’s aura isn’t healing her liver.”

“Hmm.”

“Hey, we’re going for a record. Next question, once again cleverly disguised as a statement: Mom can’t tolerate a transplant or you would have tried it by now, and I’m guessing it’s at least partly because Dad’s aura would increase the rejection factor by suppressing any anti-rejection drug therapy.”

“You’ve been studying more than you should.”

“Three for three, we’re on a roll.”

“Or a biscuit.”

“With butter and sour cream, if you like. Next statement. Mom’s liver isn’t going to get better by itself, again probably because of Dad’s aura.”

“Now where did you come up with that one?”

“My mother taught me to do research on the web, and my father taught me to put those facts together in a logical order. Do I get another ‘hmm’?”

“You get a free ride home.”

“Before you toss me out on my ear, let me hit you with one more. All this is theory and speculation. None of it is fact. And it’s the kind of thing that you might refer to as ‘unknowable’ if you weren’t personally involved with the patients.”

“Jon, I’m only going to tell you this once. Your mother’s liver is, as you well know, weaker than it might be — no, weaker than it should be. Extreme stresses can damage a weakened liver. You already knew all that, so I’m telling no tales out of school. But I’m going to do my dead level best to make sure nothing happens to her and that you and Marta grow up with a mom and not a memory.”

“Why can’t you clone her liver? Because of Dad’s aura, at least partly? Or is that in the land of dragons also?”

“Where did you hear — you sneaky little hacker! You broke into my notes! Do you have any idea how much legal trouble you could get into? Not to mention what your parents will do to you!”

“It was Dr. Klein’s work computer, actually, but I’m right, am I not?”

“Go home, Jon! And the next time you try to hack either one of us, you’ll find a firewall from James Olsen bristling with angry

Orcs! Get through that if you can!”

Jon finished his explanation and waited for his sister to react. He didn’t usually allow her in his room, but this was a special circumstance. Marta hugged herself and looked at the floor. “I want to ask you what all that means but I’m too scared.”

Jon wrapped his arms around her and pulled her head to his shoulder. “I know, Mart, I’m a little scared too. But I wanted to know everything I could know about Mom.”

“Does all that mean that she — she’s gonna — gonna — die?”

He tightened his grip. “I don’t know. But I think we should be prepared for it.”

She sobbed. “And how — how am I — supposed to — do that?”

He rubbed her back. “I don’t know. Just — just don’t be too surprised if it happens, I guess. And if it doesn’t, then it doesn’t.” He dropped a kiss her hair. “And you keep that link thing going with Mom, okay? I want us to be there if — if she needs us.”

Marta sobbed again. “I don’t want to see her die! I don’t!”

“Shh, it’s okay. I know. And she’s not dying tonight, Mart. We have at least a few months left with her, and maybe lots of years.”

“I did all my chores. I even got dinner stuff out for us.”

“You did great, Mart. If I have to be saddled with a sister, I’m glad it’s you.”

She leaned back and smiled through damp eyes. “Yeah, well, as a brother, you’re not completely intolerable yourself.”

“Thanks. You know, even if the worst happens, we’ll still have Dad and Grandma Ellen and Grandpa Sam and Aunt Lucy and Grandpa and Grandma Kent. They’re not going anywhere.”

“True dat,” she sniffed. “And we’d have to take care of Dad, too. He’s helpless without Mom.”

“Mmm, maybe not totally helpless, but close to it.”

The siblings shared a quiet laugh, then Marta said, “Hey, how about you and me having an argument tonight? Mom and Dad should feel needed.”

“Yeah, they’re about ready for it. Just let me pick the subject this time.”

“My figure is off-limits!”

“Then so is my facial hair.”

“What facial hair? Mom and Dad should have named you ‘Peach’!”

Jon picked up a pillow and hit her in the face with it. She jumped on him and started pulling his ears away from his head. He responded by tickling her in the ribs. She chopped her elbows down onto his fingers just as their martial arts instructor had taught her. He snatched his hands back, then grabbed her by the hair and pulled her down on the floor on top of him. She landed with her knee in his stomach.

“Ow!” “Leggo!” “You leggo!” “No tickling!” “You started it!” “No, you did!” “Get off my knee!” “Let go of my hair!” “I’m telling Mom!”

“Ahem!”

They froze in place and slowly untangled, then looked at the doorway to Jon’s room. Both Dad and Mom were standing there with stern expressions on their faces. As Jon opened his mouth, Dad raised his hand and pointed at them.

“I do NOT want to hear it! Marta, go to your room and put away your laundry. Jon, you stay here and straighten out your bed. Both of you are confined to your rooms after supper.”

Marta gave him a shove as she walked by, then looked back and winked. It was all he could do to growl at her and not smile. Mission accomplished for tonight.

Chapter Ten

Doctors Bernie Klein and Burton Richards met Clark in the

maternity room waiting area. “How is she?” asked Bernie.

Clark smiled nervously. “She’s already in the delivery room. Dr. Marshall is with her.”

Bernie nodded. “Evelyn Marshall, right?” Clark nodded back. “Good. Evelyn is one of the best OB-GYNs in the country. Lois is in excellent hands.”

“I know,” Clark replied. “Lois checked her out and interviewed her and then decided to use her. I have complete confidence in her.”

Bernie put his hand on Clark’s shoulder. “As well you should.”

“Where are the other children?” asked Richards.

“Jimmy and Darla are at the house with them. Jimmy said that since his and Darla’s kids were already at Darla’s folks’ house for the night, they’d stay as long as we needed them to, up to and including taking them to school tomorrow.”

Bernie smiled. “I’m sure Marta and Jon were thrilled with that announcement.”

Clark ran his hand through his hair. “I told them they could stay home tomorrow, that someone would be there with them. There’s no way they could focus on classwork anyway. For that matter, I’m not sure they’re going to sleep tonight.”

“Well,” said Richards, “as long as Lois isn’t there to feed them, they should be fine.”

Both Clark and Bernie slowly turned to look at Burton, who lifted his hands in total innocence and asked, “What?”

Clark leaned back in his chair and laughed softly. “You guys are terrible. Lois keeps telling me that Burton and Bernie should do stand-up comedy, and I think I agree with her.”

“We’d starve,” Bernie said.

“Very quickly,” added Burton.

“Not if you did lots of medical conventions. You could do doctor material, like that group of singing anesthesiologists Jon told me about.”

Burton snapped his fingers. “Oh, right! They call themselves The Laryngospasms. I saw them last year at a trauma surgeons’ convention in Chicago. They were hilarious.”

Clark shook his head. “You’d think that serious medical professionals would be more sober and dignified than that.”

“You might think so,” offered Bernie, “but you’d be wrong.”

“Have you called the rest of the family?” asked Burton.

“Of course I have. My parents plan to take a flight in as soon as they can get a non-stop leg from Wichita. I called Sam in Paraguay and left a message on his voicemail. He’ll pick it up as soon as he gets back from the field. Ellen is in Chicago with Lucy, who’s appearing in a new stage play by some famous writer, and Ellen said that they’d be here as soon as they could. Lucy’s understudy is as ready as she can be. Seems that everyone but Sam was on the verge of flying back whether Lois had the baby or not.”

“So you still don’t know the baby’s gender?” asked Bernie.

“No. We’re both a lot more concerned with having a healthy baby than which sex child we have. And with Lois’ continued good health, too.”

Bernie reached out and squeezed Clark’s shoulder. “I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

Before any of them could say anything else, a tall nurse in surgical scrubs burst through the door from the operating theater. “Which one of you is Burton Richards?”

Burton all but leaped to his feet. “What’s wrong? Is it Lois?” “Scrub up and get in there,” the nurse barked. “Dr. Marshall needs you right away.”

Over his shoulder, Burton called out, “Bernie, stay with Clark!”

Then they were gone.

Bernie, who had risen to half-standing, sat down again and gently tugged Clark back to his seat. “Lois couldn’t have better

care, Clark. And neither could the baby.”

Clark didn’t speak. He only turned a suddenly sallow and terrified face to his friend.

Darla Olsen was getting frustrated. “No, guys, we’re not going to the hospital! I promise your mom will be fine.”

“You can’t promise that!” sobbed Marta. “Nobody can promise that! Please, Uncle Jimmy, you have to take us! We have to be there for Mom!”

Jon hugged his sister and looked up at the couple as if he were trying to reassure them. “I don’t know why Marta’s upset, but she’s never like this without a good reason. If you don’t drive us to the hospital we’re going to run there. And you know you can’t catch us if we don’t want you.”

Darla put her hands on her hips and scowled at them. “Your parents put us in charge, young man! That means you do what we tell you or you answer to them!”

Jimmy touched his wife’s shoulder. “Honey, let’s talk about —”

She spun and glared at him. “There’s nothing to talk about! It’s past their bedtime and they need to sleep!”

“Aunt Darla?” said Jon. “Marta knows something’s wrong with Mom. She always knows.”

“How? How can she know? No phone calls, no news bulletins, no emails, no tweets, nothing to tell you that something’s wrong! How can she possibly know?”

“I don’t know how. She just does. She’s always known when Mom was scared or worried about Dad or when she was sick or when she used to get kidnapped. In fact, she was the one who knew how to find Mom the last time one of Lex Luthor’s kids took her.” He shrugged. “She just knows.”

“Well, I don’t know! And that’s the end of this discussion! Now go to bed before I call your father!”

Jimmy put unaccustomed steel in his voice. “Jon is right, Darla. Marta knows something and they need to be there with their parents. We’re taking them to the hospital.”

“What! What do you mean, we’re — James Bartholomew Olsen, do NOT contradict me!”

It was the first time in Darla’s memory that her husband hadn’t backed down from that tone of voice. “I’m taking the kids to the hospital. And you’re coming with me. I have a hunch you’ll be needed.”

“But — but Jim — we — Clark said—”

“Now, Darla! Get your coat and get in the car. Jon, Marta, go get dressed now. Jeans and pullover shirt is fine, and wear shoes and socks.”

“We’ll put them on in the car!” Jon shouted.

“Make it quick, you two.” Jimmy turned to his wife. “Don’t even start, okay? If I’m wrong, I’m wrong, and I’ll take the heat. But if Marta’s right, they need to be with their mother.”

“You’ve never talked to me like this before,” she marveled.

“We’ve never face a situation like this before. We’ve always worked really well together, and there’s no reason to change that.” He grabbed his coat and fished his keys out of his pocket. “I’ll get the car started, you herd the kids out as soon as both of them are ready.”

“Sure, honey.” He turned away but she called to him. “Jim?”

He turned back. “Yes?”

She hesitated, then asked, “Are you — mad at me? About this, I mean?”

He shook his head. “I’m not mad at you about anything, honey. This is different from anything we’ve done before.”

“Good.” She stopped and took a breath. “We’re going to have to talk about this. Later, I mean, after we bring the kids back.”

He almost smiled. “Dar, if all we do is turn right around and bring them back here because everything is just peachy-keen, I’ll kneel in front of you and beg your forgiveness and you can say

anything to me you want. But you have to remember that when it comes to the Kent family, sometimes all the usual rules are thrown out of the window.”

She nodded. “Got it. I’ll have them out there quick.”

Burton Richards slowly walked to the waiting area. As he stopped and leaned against the doorframe, Bernie Klein stood and took a step toward him.

“Burton?” he asked. “Is Lois — I mean, how is she?”

Burton lifted his head and looked around. “Where’s Clark?”

“He just stepped out. Seems his babysitters brought the kids and he’s down there dealing with a very upset daughter and a very tense son.” Bernie touched his friend’s elbow. “What is it? What’s happened? Is it — is something wrong with the baby?”

“Baby? No, no, the baby’s fine. Evelyn says their new daughter is perfect, all her vitals just like they should be. Lois wants to name her Ellen Lucille, assuming Clark agrees.”

“That’s a good name. And that’s very good news. About the baby — Ellen Lucille.” He cracked a one-sided smile. “Just don’t look at her initials.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because the initials of Ellen Lucille Kent spells ELK. I’d hate for her to be considered a target for some young hunter when she’s a teenager.”

Instead of wisecracking back, Burton pulled off his surgical cap and rubbed his face with his free hand. “I have to see Clark.”

“Why? What’s going—” Bernie’s eyes bulged and his face paled. “Oh, no, no, please tell me there’s not anything wrong with her! Come on, Burton! You’re the best in the country! You can help her!”

The sounds of a frightened family echoed along the hallway. Burton’s eyes misted over and he whispered, “Not this time, Bernie. Not this time.”

Dr. Marshall was on the verge of tears as she led Lois’ husband and children to her door. She put out her hand and stopped them. “Listen to me, all of you. I want all three of you to promise me something.” She waited as Clark and Jon nodded. “Marta? You too, honey.”

The girl threw herself against her father and tried to squeeze him flat. After a long moment, she nodded through her own tears.

“Okay. Kids, your mother knows everything. She knows just as much as you and your father do. She’s going to be a little groggy because of the painkillers we’ve given her, but she still wants to see all of you. And if her sister or mother or in-laws show up in time, she wants to see them too. But mainly — mainly she wants to say goodbye to you because out of all the people she loves, you three are the most special to her.” The doctor knelt down in front of the kids and wiped her eyes, then said, “I want you to remember that for the rest of your lives. The three of you are the most special people in the world to her, along with your new little sister Ellen Lucille. Will you do that for me? Will you remember that?”

Jon’s eyes were damp, but he seemed to be in control of himself, which Evelyn knew didn’t necessarily bode well for the aftermath his father would have to deal with. Marta was crying so hard she was almost unable to stand, and might have slumped to the floor if not for her grip on her father and his grip on her.

The doctor stood and put her hands on Clark’s upper arms. She felt the strength and the power resting there, and it surprised her just as much as it always had. He was the strongest and gentlest man she knew, and she’d seen him walk beside Lois every step of this difficult and unexpected pregnancy, always smiling and supportive and rock-solid.

Now, though, his foundation was being ripped from beneath him. She hoped he was strong enough to withstand this pain.

She looked into his eyes and saw fear and determination

warring against the inevitable. Then he focused on her and gave her the slightest nod.

It was time.

“I’ve turned off the audio on the monitors, but they’re still hooked up to the nurse’s station. They’ll know when she — they’ll know.”

“How — how long?” he whispered.

Evelyn squeezed those rock-hard biceps again and fought for control of her voice. “Not long. No more than a couple of hours, probably less.”

Clark closed his eyes and took a breath, then looked at her and nodded once more. They were as ready as anyone could be.

She pushed open the door and led them into Lois’ room. Jon walked to the left side of the bed, away from the fresh surgical wound on the right side of his mother’s stomach that they’d all known would be there, and laid his head down on his mother’s chest.

The moment her hand wrapped around his head, the tears he’d been holding back exploded in deep, throaty sobs.

Marta stopped a couple of paces from the near side of the bed and stood still. She remained there until Lois extended her other hand and smiled softly. The girl took two unsteady steps and gently put her arms around Lois’ neck.

Clark stood a pace behind Marta, his own tears pooling in his eyes.

Evelyn almost couldn’t take it. She’d become an obstetrician because she desperately wanted to be a doctor but couldn’t face dealing with patients who only aged, got worse, then sickened and died. She wanted to bring life into the world, not watch over those who were leaving it. And she loved the innocence of babies, the rapturous joy of new mothers, and the gentle love of the fathers. All of that didn’t happen every time, of course, but it happened often enough to give her a great deal of satisfaction. And this family had promised to be one of her all-time favorites.

Now Lois was dying. And no one could keep her from it.

She wanted to leave the room, to protect herself from the pain they were broadcasting, but her feet wouldn’t budge. She had to witness this, to record it in her memory, to keep it close to her heart. A love such as this family shared didn’t come along every day.

Clark wanted to snatch Lois up in his arms and hold her as long as she had breath in her lungs, for as long as their wedding vows had promised. He wanted to protect her, to save her, to take her away somewhere and care for her until she was better.

But there was no place to take her where she’d be safe from the betrayal of her own body.

And he refused to take any second of their children’s last moments with their mother from them. The kids would be hurt tonight — badly hurt — but he knew that, in the long run, they would have been hurt more deeply if he’d kept them from their mother. They needed to say goodbye, to hear their mother tell them one more time that she loved them, and most especially they needed to know that their father was right behind them, supporting them, loving them, and suffering right along with them.

How could he support his children? He was barely holding himself together.

He watched as Lois stroked Jon’s hair and kissed the side of his head. “Jon,” she said weakly, “I need to see your face. I need to look at you.”

He turned his head and faced away from her. “I — I’m sorry! I can’t! I can’t look at — please! I’m sorry!”

She reached out and rubbed his back. “I understand. I just wanted to tell you that I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom! I don’t want you to die!”

She shook her head and patted him. “I don’t particularly want

to die either, honey, but that's not my decision. Or yours."

He snapped his head around. "Have they tried everything? Dialysis? Organ cloning? One last look at a transplant? Even a half-transplant? Can I give you part of my liver? Please?"

She ruffled his hair again. "Dr. Richards told you everything, didn't he?" Jon nodded without breaking eye contact with his mother. "Then he told you that they tried all that and more. There's just something about me that can't accept anyone else's cells. And he tried cloning my liver, more than once, but it never worked." She stopped and took a couple of breaths as if gathering her remaining strength. "You're going to be a doctor one day — a very, very good doctor — but you won't be able to save everyone. As good as you're going to be, this final enemy is one you can't beat. No doctor can hold off death forever. No one can — not even your father."

Jon's tears came again, but evenly this time. "I know," he managed to say. "I still hate it."

"And you should. I love you, son, and I can tell what a wonderful doctor you're going to be. And no one can be a — a good doctor without hating to lose a patient." She paused and seemed to gather strength from somewhere. "Will you promise me something?"

He nodded. "Of course, Mom. Anything."

"Just promise me that you'll do your best and be satisfied with it. Not happy — satisfied. There's a huge difference. And when you're ready to talk it over with your dad, he'll try to explain it better than I can."

Clark almost lost it. No one can explain it better than you, Lois, he thought to her.

"I'll listen, Mom. I promise."

Lois smiled at him and touched his cheek. "I know you will. Can you scootch up here and let me kiss my son? You aren't too big for that, are you?"

"No, Mom, I'm not too big."

Clark closed his eyes for a moment, then forced them open again. He needed to see this and remember it so he could remind their son how much his mother had loved him.

Jon finally broke the lip-corner kiss — even now he was too much a young man to kiss his mother straight on the lips — and put his head back down on her chest as Lois turned to her daughter.

"Marty? Hey, baby girl — oh, I'm sorry, honey. I forgot you don't — don't like for me to call you that."

Marta sobbed twice as she shook her head without lifting it. "Mom, you can call me whatever you want. I don't care. I love you and I don't want you to go either."

Lois reached up and gently rubbed the back of Marta's neck. "I don't want to go, baby girl, but like I told your brother, I'm not in charge this time."

"I know. I heard what you told him."

"Good. Remember it and remind him when he needs to hear it."

Marta lifted her head and wiped her nose on Lois' blanket. "How will I know that?"

Lois smiled. "Oh, baby, you'll know. You'll know, I promise you that."

The girl shrugged. "If you say so. Wait, I don't mean it like that! I just mean — I mean I believe you even though I don't completely understand what you're telling me."

"It's okay, sweetie. That's what I thought you meant. Now listen. I have something special I want you to do for me."

She sniffed and rubbed one eye. "Anything, Momma."

"I want you to help your father with your little sister."

"Well, yeah, I would have even if you — even if you were going to be here. I can make bottles, change diapers, all but the really gooey brown ones, play with her — I've been reading those books you and Dad got about taking care of babies. And

I've been babysitting with Aunt Darla when the twins get to be too much and Uncle Jimmy's at work or something."

Lois chuckled gently, then ruffled her daughter's wheat-blond hair. "I know that. And I know you'll be a wonderful sitter for Ellen while she's little. But I'm talking about when the two of you get older and she needs a friend to talk to. Your father is a brilliant man, but he doesn't know things about women like other women do. You'll have to help him in that way."

"But I'm not a woman yet, Mom! How can I tell someone something I don't know?"

"Baby girl, by the time she needs to know those things, you'll know them as well as anyone could. You've got plenty of time."

"Mom — I don't know. You know how much I don't like school but I think I'd rather be a doctor."

Lois laughed, then flinched slightly. Clark didn't think the kids noticed.

Her laughter died but her smile remained. "Marty, remember when you were going into kindergarten and you were worried about math?"

Marta scrunched up her face and half-nodded. "Kinda. I think I was afraid of not knowing how to do the math stuff."

"Even if you already knew a lot of math?"

"Yeah, but I was just four! I didn't know what I was supposed to know."

"Right. Someone had told you that you'd learn all that math after you went to kindergarten and you thought that meant that all you were going to do is walk into the classroom and boing! You'd automatically know everything you were supposed to know. You didn't — whew — you didn't understand that you'd have to study to learn, or that the teacher knew you'd have to learn it."

"Of course I — wait. I think I get it. You're telling me not to worry about not knowing what to teach Ellen because I still have to learn it myself?"

"That's right!" She reached out and hugged the girl.

Only Clark saw the strain and suppressed pain in Lois' face.

Marta and Lois slowly separated. The girl nodded. "I understand, Momma. I'll be the best big sister there ever was. And if Jon isn't the best big brother ever I'll beat him up."

Clark smiled through his own tears and caught Lois' gaze. She nodded as if telling him that she was satisfied.

She gave her son and daughter another kiss each, then patted them both on the back. "Okay, kids, now I have to talk to your father."

Dr. Marshall stepped forward. "I'll take—" She stopped and closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again. "Come on, kids. Your parents need some time together."

"Don't they always?" muttered Jon.

Marta slapped him on the upper arm. "You hush, Jon Sam Kent! Stop being so mean!"

"I'm not being mean, I'm being accurate! It's embarrassing the way they kiss and stuff!"

"You just wish some girl would ever like you half that much!"

Dr. Marshall herded them out the door and tossed a befuddled glance over her shoulder as the two continued their low-voiced non-argument. Both Clark and Lois shared a soft smile as the door closed behind her.

Clark gently sat on the left side of the bed and took Lois' hand in his. "I don't believe those two."

Lois smiled. "I do. They were doing it for us, darling, at least partly. They wanted me to know that they'd be okay." She smiled and tried to tug him closer to her. "And with you there, I — I know they will. You'll watch over them every moment of every day."

He turned his head and tried not to cry again. "Who — who'll watch over me?"

He felt her fingers brush his cheek. “You know the answer to that one.”

It was too much. He moved toward the head of the bed and gently embraced her, and his tears began again as her arms rose to rest around his neck.

They sat like that for a long time, softly rocking back and forth.

Finally Lois leaned back. “I’m sorry — I have to lie down.”

“Of course. Can I — sorry, dumb question.”

“What?”

“I was going to ask you if I could get you something.”

“Actually, you can. I’m starting to hurt again and my morphine button got pushed down close to my knee and I can’t reach it. Would you—”

“Of course.” He handed it to her and she pressed it once.

After a few seconds she exhaled and relaxed a bit.

“Thank you. That’s so I don’t have to call for a nurse to give me a shot for the pain.”

“I know. I’ve seen them before. The computer in the dispenser monitors the dose and limits it so you — I mean, it — limits it.”

Lois looked into his eyes. “They turned off the limiter on mine. Just in case I — in case the pain got too bad.” She smiled sideways. “But I won’t need it again as long as you’re here with me.”

His throat tightened up and had to force out the words. “I’ll be here as long as you want me to be here, baby.”

She closed her eyes and smiled. “Thank you.”

“For what, the button or the endearment?”

“The moments.”

He gave her a puzzled eyebrow. “Sorry, I’m going to need a little context.”

Her eyes opened and she blinked slowly. “Years ago when I told you how bad my liver was and you told me you still loved me and wanted to spend the rest of our lives together, I warned you that our being together might not last too many years. Then you said—”

“That it wasn’t the years. It was the moments.” He smiled back. “I remember. You know, we’ve both used that quote quite a few times.”

“I know, but I needed to know that you remembered it. I wanted two things from this conversation, Clark. I want you to know that I love you and — and that I’m thankful for all the moments we had together. Every one of them.”

“Even when I contradicted you?”

She smiled wider. “Yes, even those. They meant that you weren’t just staying with me to be with me. They meant that you — you loved me enough to challenge me, to push me to be better, to be more honest, to do a better job on whatever I — I was working on at the time. And you were wonderful. A wonderful husband, a wonderful father, a wonderful companion, a wonderful friend, and a wonderful lover.”

He took her hand and kissed her palm. “Thank you. You weren’t so bad yourself, you know, except for the part about being a father. But you made up for it by being the best mother any family could have.”

She smiled, then exhaled deeply and closed her eyes. Clark shot a frantic glance at the heart monitor, but it was still tracing an even rhythm, and a moment later she inhaled again. “It’s getting hard for me to stay awake, Clark. Would you mind lying next to me and holding me?”

He stretched out beside her as best he could, given all the wires and tubes connecting her to the machines. “Of course I will, Lois. I love you. I’ll do anything for you.”

Her voice was weaker now. “I love you too. Wish I’d admitted it sooner.”

“Your timing was perfect, as always.”

“Yeah, right.” Her face squeezed into a frown. “I’ve forgotten something, something I was going to tell you.”

“It’s okay. You’ve already said so much.”

“Yeah. But something else. Important. Got to remember — the other thing—” Her voice strengthened and her eyes popped open. “Got it! Clark?”

He kissed her cheek. “I’m right here.”

“Listen to me. If you find a woman you love, a woman you trust to help you raise the kids, who you trust to — uh — right, to help you as Superman, and you want to marry her, you — you have my blessing.”

“Lois, please—”

She tried to punch him on the arm, but her hand flopped loosely on the covers. “Uh-uh! Listen to me. You shouldn’t be alone. Don’t — don’t be alone — because of me. Okay?”

He didn’t speak. He couldn’t. Not now. And not about something he knew he’d never do. There was no other woman in the world he could ever love like he loved Lois.

She took two long breaths and he thought she’d gone to sleep, but her head turned and her eyes sought his. “Answer me, Farm Boy. Don’t be — alone. You shouldn’t — shouldn’t be alone.”

He had to tell her what she wanted to hear. “All right, Lois. I’ll think about it.”

“Good,” she breathed. “That’s — that’s all you can do, think about it. Don’t promise. Can’t promise that. No one can. Just don’t — don’t turn away from her if you find her. Don’t rob our — our kids of a mother if — if one shows up.”

He thought she was finished talking but she fooled him. “And don’t you — don’t you refuse to be loved, Clark. If she’s good enough — for you — I’ll be fine with it. I promise.”

What a woman. What a wonderful person. She was — she was — dying — and all she thought about was her family’s future. What other woman could compare to that?

He licked his lips and nodded. “Thank you.” He wrapped his arm around her chest and far shoulder as lightly as he could. “I’m so blessed that you love me so much. And the kids are so blessed to have a mother like you.”

She smiled, then tilted her head and brushed her lips across his cheek. After several long moments, she whispered, “I’m really tired, honey.”

“I know.”

She closed her eyes and settled back against the pillow.

“Think — I’ll just — go back to sleep.”

He brushed her hair away from her face. “Okay.”

She took two shallow breaths. “Uh. Call Perry and — tell him — I’ll be in late today.”

“I’ll take care of it. You just rest now.”

She didn’t speak again.

He was still holding her thirty-two minutes later when the nurse came in and touched his shoulder. He looked at his wife’s face, her cheeks damp with his tears, then at the flat display on the cardiac monitor.

Lois Lane-Kent was gone.

Chapter Eleven

The day of Lois’ funeral dawned dark and grim, but by the time the service began the clouds had thinned and the spring temperature had risen to almost warm. Lucy looked around and thought, You get a nice send-off, Sis, and it’s a really pretty day for it.

The church was already packed. Perry and Alice were seated near the front and Lucy’s mother was beside them. Despite his recent artificial hip replacement, Perry had insisted that he present Lois’ eulogy, and Clark had overridden the pastor’s objections and agreed. It was really the only decision he’d made since Lois’ last moments.

Lucy almost smiled. Lois had spent so much of her youth taking care of Lucy, making decisions for her, trying to guide her, to advise her, and now Lucy was taking care of Lois' final arrangements. Instead of resenting the task, Lucy was pleased that she could contribute to her sister's family. She loved those kids almost as much as Lois had. And she didn't think there was another man as fine and good and kind as Clark in the world.

Maybe that, Lucy mused, was part of the reason she was still single and planned to remain so.

She made one last circuit of the building to verify the arrangements. Everyone was in place and ready for his or her part. Having done all she could for now, Lucy sat down beside Jonathan and Martha, then turned and asked, "How are you folks doing?"

Jonathan continued to stare at the wall behind the pulpit. His only reaction to Lucy's words or her presence was to clench his fists and cross his arms over his chest.

Martha dabbed at her eyes and patted Lucy's hand. "It's a very painful day for us, dear, just like it is for a lot of people, but I want to thank you for making it a little bit easier with all the work you're doing. I'm sure Clark couldn't have taken care of all these details himself."

Lucy nodded. "He needs to be with the kids, not listening to coffin pitchmen or settling disagreements between the musicians. Besides, that folder Lois made to outline her funeral desires shut up a lot of people."

"It did at that." Martha opened her mouth, then closed it, took a breath, and said, "I have to ask you something."

"Anything, Mrs. Kent."

"Please, dear, call me Martha."

Lucy smiled softly. "Of course, Martha. What were you going to ask me?"

Martha took in a breath and let it out slowly, then looked at her hands. "Did Lois really want these postcards distributed at her funeral?"

Lucy looked down and snickered. The card in Martha's hand had a pink cloud background with the words "Having a wonderful time!" printed at the bottom of one side. On the other, the Bible verse from First Corinthians, the second chapter, "But as it is written: What eye did not see and ear did not hear, and what never entered the human mind— God prepared this for those who love Him." was printed across the cloud scene in Comic Sans font. Balloons and exploding fireworks surrounded it.

"Yes, that was Lois' idea. She shared it with me the last time I was here, not long after they found out little Ellen was coming. I don't think Clark knew about it." She hesitated, then said, "I hope you don't think it's too inappropriate."

Martha smiled and wiped her eyes again. "For Lois? No, not at all. We all have to go sometime, and being able to look forward to seeing our loved ones again is comforting." She leaned closer. "Jonathan and I may both be closer to that day than anyone would like to think."

Lucy felt her face try to fall, but her acting skills kept her expression locked in place. "Um — is this something definite or just a general knowledge?"

Martha patted her hand. "Something in between, I think. But don't worry about that right now. We're almost ready to start, and I believe your mother needs you."

"Of course. Thank you, Martha." She leaned closer to Jonathan and touched his elbow. "I'll see you both later."

As she turned to rise, Jonathan caught her hand. "Lucy — thank you. I know you — you lost a sister but — but we've lost a daughter and — and you've been wonderful. Thank you so much." He patted her hand and tried to smile. "You've become a wonderful woman. Lois would be — no, that's not right. She told me she was proud of you. She knew what a fantastic person you

were — you are. You remember that, okay? Lois was so proud of you she almost exploded when she was telling us about — about what you were doing and how well you were doing it. If you forget everything else about her — you remember that."

Years of theatrical training and experience had taught Lucy how to control her emotions and channel them into her performance, how to overcome bad news and perform comedy, how to set aside elation and perform a tragedy, and how to pretend that she didn't have emotions of her own while on stage. But Jonathan's brief speech had knocked her back on her heels. Her throat closed and she couldn't speak. Her eyes clouded over and she couldn't see clearly. She couldn't even trust her legs to hold her upright.

Two strong hands came to her rescue, one holding her left hand and the other around her waist, and they guided her across the aisle to the seat beside her mother. Her hand found Ellen's and they leaned on each other for support as they each poured out their grief.

Jim Olsen slipped back into his seat beside his wife. She caught his hand and squeezed it. "Good save, honey. I doubt that Superman could have done any better."

He turned to face her, then brushed a tear from her cheek with his free hand. "Thank you. That means a lot to me."

"I'd rather be married to you than to him anyway. I like him but I love you." She burrowed closer to him and hugged his arm to herself with her free hand. "I'm really going to miss her," Darla choked out.

Jim nodded slowly. "So am I, sweetheart. So am I."

He let his eyes roam over the rest of the room. Except for a small space on the two pews down front reserved for the immediate family, there was barely an open seat anywhere. He recognized the mayor, two of the city council members, the state's attorney general, and the city's district attorney. The thought that Lois' passing would make their jobs more difficult crossed his mind and he almost smiled.

At least the bad guys didn't get her, he told himself.

Jim's gaze ran over the sides and back of the room. There were a couple of suspicious characters sitting near the back corner, faces he recognized even though he couldn't put names to them, and he thought about signaling to someone to watch them. But then he saw a hard-faced young man in an expensive suit rise from his seat beside Metropolis Police Chief William Henderson and glide to the back, where he whispered to two uniformed officers. The men nodded, then eased along the wall until they bracketed the end of the pew where the two suspicious characters sat. Then they folded their hands in front of them and nodded at the men. The men in the pew returned the nods and shifted uncomfortably.

Message sent and acknowledged.

Seeing that, Jim knew everything would be fine. Besides, his wife had a death grip on his arm and he doubted he could pry her loose for the duration of the service. Not that he wanted to.

He turned and kissed Darla on the side of her head and she clamped down on his arm even harder.

But Jim didn't mind. Her reaction meant that she needed him. And his own insecurities bequeathed to him by his father, the ones he could never quite vanquish despite his family success, his business acumen, his modest wealth and the financial help he'd given to those closest to him, were battered down once again by the love given to him by the woman he loved most in this life.

Through their example, Clark and Lois had taught him that such a love was more valuable and precious than all money and fame anyone could accumulate. It was one more item on a long list of things he owed to them.

Through his amber-lensed Cartier sunglasses, Bruce Wayne

observed the interaction between the officers and the two men he knew were from Intergang without looking directly at them. The thugs were low-level messengers who knew nothing significant and bore no threat to anyone, but Chief Henderson's message to them was clear and unambiguous: Do not misbehave in this city, and most especially, do not misbehave at this funeral. The "memorandum" would be passed up the line to the mid-level bosses in the organization, and Bruce would have an opportunity to track the ripple effect. He was sure that was Henderson's reasoning also. Former Commission Gordon of Gotham City would have been much more subtle but just as firm.

Henderson was no Jim Gordon, but he was very good at his job.

Beside him, Diana Prince shifted slightly and whispered, "Is this number of politically important personages normal at the funeral of a civilian?"

"Depends on who the civilian is," he whispered back. "If she'd been just some hack romance writer, we'd see her family, someone from her publisher, and a few die-hard fans. But Lois Lane was much more than just a writer. She campaigned for truth and justice and against bad guys great and small. On top of that, she was a wonderful wife to Clark and by all accounts a terrific mom." He paused, then said, "I hope Clark can go on without her."

Diana nodded. "I met her once, at a diplomatic event hosted by my mother. I admit that I was impressed with her charm and self-assurance."

"I'm not surprised. She was an impressive woman."

"I see." After a long breath, she said, "At the risk of being indelicate, it appears that you held her in higher esteem than you do most other women."

"I did." When Diana didn't respond, he added, "We were never more than friends, but if not for Clark being in her life and Selina in mine, maybe we could have been something more. Of course, nothing ever happened between us, except that book she wrote."

"Ah, the book. I wondered if you were going to bring it up."

He glanced toward Diana, an almost-smile sneaking onto his chiseled jaw. "When you get quoted in a deep investigative work on Wonder Woman, we'll talk about how it feels to have the second-best detective in the world looking into your life. All I can tell you now is that I was a little concerned that she was going to write that I might be, or in fact was, Batman."

"And the fact that you did not know what she would write convinced you that she was not the woman for you."

"Well, that, along with her own marriage and my relationship with Selina. But you're right. I didn't know what she was going to do, and because it made me nervous, it pretty much evaporated any embryonic romantic feelings I might have had for her."

"Yet you and Clark have remained friends for all those years."

He leaned back and adjusted his perfect tie. "The friendship of another person who's living the double life and keeping the same kind of secret as me is precious. I have never, nor would I ever, do anything that would threaten that friendship."

"I understand the 'fellowship of the cape,' as Ms. Lane so aptly put it in one of her books." She reached up and brushed his hand away from the silk Windsor knot in his eight hundred thread count tie. "I take it that you also think very highly of Clark Kent."

"I do." He turned and faced her directly. "I can't think of anything I'd not sacrifice to keep him safe, except my relationships with Selina or Alfred."

She met his stare with a challenge of her own. "And that is why you have asked me to accompany you, instead of Selina. Unlike her, I can perform as a surrogate for — you-know-who — for a short time."

"Yes. Thank you for volunteering."

She held his gaze for a long moment, then gave him an almost-smile to match his. "I am trapped by your manipulations once again. Very well, I shall give of my time as long as you feel it is needed." The organist began another song and began playing louder. "I am still uncertain of the purpose of this gathering, except, perhaps, making certain the one being mourned is actually dead. Is the service about to begin?"

He nodded and straightened in his seat. "Yes. This is our last best chance to offer respect and deserved accolades to the deceased, even though she won't hear it. Her family, however, will, and they need to know how we all felt about Lois."

"I — believe I understand. Perhaps I will grasp its purpose more fully when we are finished."

The organ stopped and Perry White, Lois' former boss and close friend, slowly shuffled to the podium.

"I hope you do. The major portion of the service is about to start."

Perry leaned his cane against the podium and pulled his notes and glasses out of his pocket. I shouldn't be doing this, he thought. If I hadn't pushed her to do better, if I hadn't told her over and over again that a reporter is only as good as her last story, maybe she would have taken better care of herself. Maybe she would have lived to attend my funeral.

He shook his head and pushed the thought away. He knew that Lois would have lived her life pedal to the metal no matter what she did, irrespective of Perry's counsel. If Clark's steadfast and constant love combined with the joy she'd reaped from her kids hadn't mellowed her, nothing he could have done would've worked.

He took a moment to look over the packed auditorium. So many people were there to say goodbye to Lois, so many were there to support Clark and the kids, so many were there to celebrate her life and her achievements, and a very few were there to make sure she was actually gone.

That last thought almost made him laugh.

He shuffled the paper before him, but he knew he wouldn't present all of his carefully prepared remarks as written. This might be his last public appearance, but he was going to go out in a blaze of glory.

He took a deep breath and began.

"Folks, we're here to say goodbye to a wonderful person. We've already heard about her family and her career and her life and how many people will miss her. And that's something we should all strive to emulate. We should all — every one of us — live so that good and honest people will miss us when we're gone, 'cause it's a sucker bet to think any of us will get out of this life alive.

"But there are some others who think they'll be safer with Lois gone. They think that no one will turn over the rocks under which they hide, that no one will shine a light on their greed and corruption and foulness. They think that no one will chase them like Lois did."

He leaned forward and glared. "They're wrong."

Perry straightened and adjusted his stance to ease the pain in his new hip. "The pastor would have told you how Lois is in a better place now, that she's beyond pain and sorrow and loss, and that she's being comforted by the One who loves her the most. He would have been right.

"But I want to remind you of something else. We don't know what evil is without comparing it to good. Lois Lane-Kent stood for goodness and light and righteousness just as powerfully as Superman ever has. She just did it a little differently — she revealed the details of what the evil people did and let the whole world see them as they really are.

"My days of turning over slimy rocks are done, but there are

so very many other younger men and women who are taking up the banner and fighting just as hard as Lois did, just as hard as Superman still does, just as hard as I ever did. You folks are going to remember Lois in different ways, but you had all better remember that she stood for something good, something right, something that was better than just lining her pockets or making herself famous. She fought for something worthy, tried to build something to pass on to her children, something that others could latch onto and continue working for.

”The Bible talks about a city built by God, where the righteous will live forever. I’m looking for that city, waiting for it, but I’ve also spent my life trying to make this world a much better place, a safer place, for people to live in peace and harmony. Lois worked for that. Her husband is still working for it. I believe that when her children get mature enough, they’ll work for it too, each one in their own way, as they follow their own life paths.”

He grabbed the sides of the podium. His strength was not what it once had been, and he couldn’t stand up much longer. But he knew he had to finish.

“Some of you are following the evil path. Don’t worry. We’ll get to you eventually, assuming you’re worth the effort.

“Some of you have already dedicated your lives to make the world a better place, even if your influence is mainly in your own home. And that’s not a bad thing. Without good homes, very few of us would be truly good people. And you give other good people a safe place to live, to love, and to grow. Those are all very good things.

“Many of you do right, at least for the most part, and you don’t do big wrong things. But by itself, that’s just not enough. If Lois were able, she’d sit up and yell at you to straighten up and fly right! If you’ve read her Wanda Detroit books, you know that’s what she was always pointing to. Just read the titles!”

A chuckle tiptoed shyly around the room as people remembered the bird-themed Wanda mystery titles. He joined them, remembering his favorite: “If It Quacks Like A Duck, It Ain’t a Robin.” It had been the only humorous book in the series, and was the second-best seller of them all.

Perry waited for quiet, then continued. “If you’ve read Lois’ non-fiction books, you know how she always talked up the good people and exposed the bad ones. And if you knew her personally, you know that she never let anyone get away with doing wrong — not even herself.

“Don’t wait for an opportunity to do good. Go back to your daily lives determined to be the best you that you can be! Don’t be passively good, be aggressively good! Project it like a dancer with an attitude! And be that best you, that righteous you, with everyone you meet, from the cop on the beat to the bored grocery store clerk who short-changes you to the nincompoop who cuts you off on the Curt Swan parkway.”

Another laugh came, this one a bit louder. Perry waited and laughed with them, then said, “If you will do that, then Lois’ life will not have been lived in vain. Her battles, whether she won or lost, will have been worth the struggle and the effort. And, to misquote Shakespeare, the good she did will not be interred with her bones.”

The pain in his hip suddenly went from a background reminder of his condition to a near scream. He’d managed to finish just in time.

He grabbed at his cane and took as much weight off his bad hip as he could. “Thank you for listening to this old man.” Then he caught Clark’s eye, grinned, and said, “Thirty.”

An usher helped him off the platform. He knew a few others would catch the old reference to the end-of-column slug once used to mark the end of a story for the linotype operator, but he didn’t care. His message had gotten through to Clark, and he’d explain it to the kids later.

Behind him, the pastor walked to the podium. “Folks, Lois’ friends and family want you to remember her as she was in life. You are free to pass by the casket, but it won’t be open, which is what the family has requested. Instead, we invite you to share a brief moment with the people who will remember her most fondly as we display this video of Lois and her life.”

The line would have moved much slower had not Commissioner Henderson stood at the head of the line, gently encouraging the mourners who passed by the Lane and Kent families to allow others to express their sorrow as Lois’ passing. The video showing above the platform held scenes from Lois’ life from her birth to a surprise baby shower the ladies from the Planet had thrown her for Ellie. There were photos of her singing, of her holding her high school diploma and then her journalism degree, shots from parties at the Planet where her successes were celebrated, scenes from her wedding, a few from her honeymoon, lots of pictures of the children, shots with Brad and Maya and her royalty checks — with the amounts blanked out, purely for modesty’s sake — scenes from her book signings where she laughed and joked with her fans, and a few Lois never knew had been taken.

Those showed her leaning over a computer or furiously writing down notes for one of her projects or smiling with Lucy or her in-laws or laughing with her children. There were two which Bill knew were Clark’s favorites — one of her playing with the kids in the back yard, and one Jon had taken of her sitting on the couch and leaning against her husband’s shoulder, an empty bowl between them and their hands entwined as she slept, a soft smile lighting her face.

Henderson watched as Marta lifted her hand to her face to wipe her eyes, then look up at the screen. The girl silently mouthed, “I love you, Mom. Good-bye for now.”

The staid, unflappable, bucolic police commissioner had to look away before he lost it.

Bruce felt Diana’s hand on his wrist before he knew she’d moved. He’d been so wrapped up in Perry White’s words and the images from Lois’ life that he’d lowered his guard and lost his total awareness of the situation.

His self-rebuke melted away as he turned and saw her eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

“I — I did not realize how — that Lois Lane was so much a force for good. I will petition my mother the queen to set aside a feast in her memory when I return home. The life of such a woman must be celebrated by those who admire her as well as those who loved her.”

Bruce smiled softly. “I knew you’d understand.”

Clark walked into the house with one hand around his son’s shoulders and the other enveloped by his daughter. Behind him, Lucy carried little Ellie — the nickname seemed to be a part of her already — and the baby’s diaper bag. He hugged his son tighter and was rewarded with a return embrace.

He was thankful that his children didn’t seem to blame him for their mother’s death.

Lucy bustled past and headed upstairs. “I’m going to change Ellie and see if I can put her down for a nap. Either way, I’m coming back down to put the feed bag on all of you, so everybody go change into something comfortable.”

As Lucy disappeared into Ellie’s room, Clark kissed Marta on top of her head and whispered, “How about you go get changed now, sweetie? Come on, do what Aunt Lucy said.”

“I’m not hungry, Dad.”

He knelt before her. “I know. I’m not all that hungry either. But your aunt needs to do something to serve us, and us having a meal together will help.”

She looked at him and sighed. “I’m still not hungry.”

He grinned and stroked her hair. “It’s okay. Just taste a couple of things and thank your aunt. It will make her feel like she’s helping.”

“She is helping, Dad. She’s been a big help. The — the funeral happened so smooth because of her.”

“So let her keep on helping, okay? She needs to feel like she’s contributing more than just good feelings.”

Marta sighed dramatically. “Okay. I’ll get changed and eat something. Maybe it’ll even taste good.”

He stood and gave her a wan smile. “That’s my girl. See you in a few minutes.”

Jon slowly trudged upstairs following his sister. “You’re right, Dad. But it doesn’t make this easier.”

Clark sighed. “I know, son, but remember, if this were easy, anyone could do it.”

The young man stopped and turned to face his father. “I don’t feel very heroic right now.”

Clark closed his eyes and forced them not to leak. “I know,” he said. “Neither do I. But we don’t have a whole lot of choices.”

Jon nodded. “I’m making one anyway. I’m going to get through this afternoon and not break down. Tonight, though, I’m going to cry until I’m too dehydrated to make tears.”

Clark couldn’t keep the catch out of his voice. “That makes two of us, son.” One corner of his mouth turned up slightly. “Maybe we can all do it together.”

He watched his son nod slowly, then climb the stairs as if carrying a dozen pianos in each hand. This was hard for Jon, he knew, even though his son understood Lois’ medical situation in far more detail than Clark did. Maybe, instead of making it easier for him, Jon’s knowledge made it harder.

And somewhere along the line Clark would have to deal with his unresolved anger at Lois for leaving him.

Clinically, he knew he was already in the second stage of grief. As often as they’d discussed how short Lois’ life might be, he’d had a lot of years to get past the denial stage. Now he was working on his illogical, irrational, loss-induced anger at Lois’ early departure.

Early departure? Maybe he wasn’t done with the first stage after all.

But he was angry. He’d have to find some way to release it where he wouldn’t hurt anyone, especially his children. They were dealing with their own pain — they didn’t need to carry his also. Maybe a screaming session in the central Antarctic would help.

The front door opened and he turned to see Sam supporting Ellen across the threshold. Behind them were his parents, both grim-faced and red-eyed but standing tall and strong.

Thankfulness for their presence warred with resentment for their intrusion into his grief within his heart. Yet they were hurting too, in some ways more than he. Sam and Ellen had lost a daughter, just as Jonathan and Martha had. He couldn’t deny them the same comfort he needed.

He went to Sam and Ellen first. “You two come on in and sit down on the couch. We’ve got enough food to feed everyone who showed up today, so Lucy’s changing the baby, and then she promised to prepare something to eat.”

As she and Sam sat down, Ellen’s head snapped up. “Why is Lucy taking care of little Ellen? How long is she staying?”

“As long as I’m needed, Mother,” Lucy answered from the stairs. “I’m taking as much time as Clark and the kids need to land on their feet. I can afford it.”

Ellen made as if to stand, but Sam put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Ellen, darling, please let Lucy help Clark. It’s her way of giving back to them.”

Ellen’s head spun around toward her husband. “Then why — why is she serving me? Why am I just sitting here as if I were a

useless female? I can help too! I want to help!” A sob forced its way to the surface. “She was my daughter!”

Sam’s arm slid around her far shoulder and he softly pulled her close to him. “I need you right now, Ellen. If you weren’t here with me right now, I — I don’t think I could keep it together.”

Clark’s eyes widened as Ellen leaned into her ex-husband and wrapped her arms around him. Through her sobs, she said, “Oh, Sam, please hold me! I love you!”

Sam embraced her as Lucy knelt beside them, one hand on each parent. “Oh — Mom, Daddy, I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to shut anyone out.”

Sam’s big hand brushed his daughter’s hair. “It’s okay, little Princess. I understand.”

Lucy’s eyes shimmered but she kept her composure. “Uh — Daddy? Where were you? And why did it take so long for you to get here?”

Sam heaved a deep sigh. “I was in South America, Lucy. I was researching some herbs and leaves the natives thought might help your sister.” He turned away and pulled back from his family. “But I couldn’t — I couldn’t find anything — there wasn’t time to—”

Lucy and Ellen both hugged him tightly at the same time, Ellen around his chest and Lucy around his neck. “You did your best, Daddy! Everyone knows you love Lois. And she knew it too.”

“Yes, Sam,” Ellen added. “You have your faults — just like the rest of us have faults — but no one can say you don’t love your daughters. You always have and you always will.”

Clark quietly guided his parents to the love seat and perched on the arm next to his father. Jonathan reached out and grasped Clark’s hand, then whispered, “Even from something bad, something good can come. Even in our worst pain, we can be comforted.”

Clark felt, rather than saw, his son and older daughter silently join them at the love seat. Jon knelt before his grandfather and grasped that big loving hand in both of his, while Marta curled up in her grandmother’s lap as if she were still three years old. They all remained that way for as long as it took to release their pain.

Ever since he’d developed his hearing, Clark had used it to keep from walking into rooms and interrupting the conversations of others, especially when he knew those talks were not meant for his ears. So he didn’t mean to eavesdrop on Lucy and her mother. It just happened.

“No, Mom! I’m not leaving yet. They still need me.”

“But it’s been more than two months. Surely you have to go back to work some time.”

“I will, I promise. Just not now.”

“Lucy. Please listen. You’re a wonderful aunt, a terrific housekeeper, a good cook, and you’ve helped bring a sense of normal life back to those kids. They’re doing very well, especially little Ellie, and it’s largely because of you.”

He heard Lucy sigh. “Thank you, Mother. What’s the rest of it?”

“What makes you think there’s more?”

“I’ve heard it often enough. ‘Oh, Ms. Lane, you are a very strong performer, and you’re certainly qualified, but you’re just not the type we’re looking for.’ And when I ask what type they’re looking for, I usually hear something like, ‘We’re not sure, but we’re afraid you aren’t it.’ So give me the rest of it.”

“That’s a bit harsh, don’t you think, comparing me to a Broadway producer?”

“Except for the fact that you can’t fire me, I think it’s appropriate. Now please tell me the rest of what’s on your mind.”

Ellen huffed. “Very well. You know that I really do love you and the kids and Clark and I know you you’re giving a great deal

of your time and money right now, and I — I don't think you should make it a lifetime investment."

Lucy's voice sounded as confused as Clark was. "What?"

Ellen's voice softened. "Sweetheart, I — I don't want to see you try to replace Lois."

"Replace — Lois? You mean — as Clark's wife? And the kids' mother? Oh, Mom, you don't—"

"Please! Please listen! Lucy, if you want to get married and settle down and have a family, that's what you should do, even if you marry into a ready-made family. But I don't think you should marry into this one, and that's what I'm afraid you're thinking about."

"Oh, wow, Mom, you are so far off base—"

"Please listen! Do you know why your father never made a home with any of the women he took up with after he left us? Do you understand why he never stayed married very long to any of the few he did marry?"

"Yes! It's because Daddy is incapable of commitment!"

"No, Lucy. It was because none of them could measure up to his memory of me."

Clark was sure Lucy's mouth was hanging open just as his was.

"I don't mean the drunk me, the nagging me, the horrible harridan me! I mean the young and loving me, the me who couldn't wait for him to come home so we could wrap ourselves up in each other. We were really in love when we were young, sweetheart, and we were happy together. If I had stayed in love with him that way, he wouldn't have — have cheated on me — on us."

He heard Lucy's teeth grinding together. "Are you telling me that it's your fault he ran out on us? That you drove him away? That you pushed him into the arms of those other women? That it was your fault and not his? Because I'm not about to—"

"No! Lucy, no, that's not it. I didn't push him away. It's just that — that I didn't — I didn't give him a good reason to stay with me."

Neither of them spoke for several seconds, then Lucy said, "Okay, I can understand that. But what does that have to do with me?"

"Your father didn't give himself the time to really separate from me emotionally. When he took up with those other women, he was looking for that younger, loving me all over again. If you were to marry Clark, especially now, he'd be looking for Lois in you, and as fine a woman as your sister was, she wasn't you."

"Oh," Lucy said in a small voice. "I thought you were going to say it like — like I could never be her."

"You can't be Lois, any more than she could have been you. If she had gone on stage, she would have been good, but she wouldn't have been you. She couldn't have played the roles you've played, or at least not as well, she wouldn't have had the kind of success you've had, and she wouldn't have been where you are now in your career. And it's not because either of you lacked anything the other one had in abundance, you just had those things in different proportions." Clark heard them shuffle closer and embrace. "Oh, Lucy, you can't replace Lois! And she could never have replaced you! I just want you to understand that before you get too emotionally committed to Clark and the kids."

At least one of them sniffled before they separated. "I understand what you're saying, Mom. I promise that I'm not planning on marrying Clark. He's a great man, and the kids are wonderful, but I'm not leaving my life for them. I have too much time and heart invested in what I do to give it up. I love Clark, but I'm not in love with him. Sharing his life forever and always isn't in the cards for me." She sighed. "It's about time I got back to the salt mines anyway. I called my agent yesterday and he said he had a standing offer for me to join a company based in Chicago. I told him I'd probably be free in about two weeks or

so. I just need to talk to Clark and the kids about it."

"Good. Not that you'll find a man any better than Clark, of course, but if you really want to get married, you can find the best man for you."

"Thank you, Mom. Hey, along those lines, this is the third time you and Daddy have been here together. Does that mean anything?"

"Well, I wasn't going to say anything just yet, but—"

Ellen giggled like a teenager and Clark blushed. They were about to share some very private information that he didn't need to know, didn't want to know, and he spun around to retrace his steps to wherever he'd been before he'd listened in to the conversation.

He sighed in relief as he silently walked away. Asking Lucy to stay as his wife was something that had crossed his mind, mostly for the sake of the children, but it wasn't a thought that had found fertile ground. The reasons Ellen had listed for Lucy to remain uncommitted to him were similar to the ones he'd had for not getting closer to his sister-in-law. And he had other reasons that Ellen hadn't mentioned.

He didn't want another woman in his house to replace Lois. He didn't want his children to have another mother. And he couldn't visualize waking up to another woman's face every morning. He wasn't ready to replace Lois.

He feared that he might never be ready for that.

Chapter Twelve

Diana sat before Lois' grave, holding her sketch pad before her. She knew she would never be a great artist, but she could copy a scene from real life if she had the time and the motivation.

And this project was close to her heart. Her mother, the queen, had listened to Diana's urgings to commemorate Lois' life with a special feast day. Diana did not believe she would have succeeded had not four other Amazons reinforced her report and presented the same suggestion to the throne. Diana was fortunate that the four, all of whom were part of the royal guard, had agreed with her opinion that the Amazons celebrate the life of a woman who was not one of their own.

That had been almost a year before. Now Diana was working on a design of a banner for the second feast, one which would tell in more detail just whose life was being celebrated and why. It was something she had not shared with Clark, nor did she plan to do so.

And then Clark said, "Hello, Diana. I haven't seen you since the last League meeting."

She tried not to jump from her seat, but he chuckled as she flipped the sketchbook shut. Clark and Bruce were the only two men in the world who could sneak up on her like that.

"Hello, Clark. I hope you have been well."

"I have. That's a very nice outfit you have on. Of course, it's not your usual garb."

She stood and smoothed the purple calf-length coat. "Thank you. I was concerned that I might be recognized, so I attempted to disguise myself."

He smiled back at her. "And the rakish wide-brimmed hat worn at that jaunty angle? Reminds me of someone."

She knew he was teasing her, and she took it as a good sign. "Several have informed me that I resemble a woman named Carmen San Diego. I assume she is some sort of celebrity, but I have not yet found an address for her, nor have I met her, so I cannot — why are you laughing?"

He covered his mouth. "Carmen San Diego is a character in a geography-based game intended for young people. Jon never got into it, but Marta thinks it's great fun. She loves to play it with her grandparents and she usually wins."

Diana pressed her teeth together. "I resemble a fictional person?"

“Only because you’re wearing that particular coat and hat. For what it’s worth, I happen to think it looks good on you.”

“Thank you.” Mollified, she hesitated, then said, “You are surely here to visit Lois’ final resting place. I have no wish to disturb you or interfere with your — your customs, so I will leave you now.”

He shook his head. “You don’t have to go. I’m not going to do or say anything that would embarrass myself or anyone else. Please, go on with your drawing.”

She went still. “You were not intended to see that.”

He pointed to his glasses. “I have a really good prescription.”

Ah. He was teasing her again. It would be rude to return a rebuff. “Very well. I thank you for your permission to remain. I shall endeavor not to disturb you.”

He nodded. “You’ll have to tell me about that drawing someday.”

She canted her head to one side. “Perhaps I shall, Clark.”

He nodded and walked to the side of the headstone, then knelt and put one hand on it as if for balance. She heard him softly say, “I’m here, Lois.”

Despite his assurance that she was not intruding, she felt as if she should depart. Then she realized that capturing this scene was the way to the heart of the Amazons — a man kneeling beside his wife’s grave, not in agony of loss but in celebration of her life. It would surely touch all of their spirits as it now touched hers. No one in Themyscira could refrain from shedding tears over such a life lived so well. Lois Lane would be celebrated and praised, and surely many Amazons would dedicate their lives to the betterment of both their own society and of the society of man’s world.

Diana sat silently and resumed sketching. Even as her pencil flew over the paper and the sight of Clark and his love for Lois flowed onto the paper, she knew it was the best thing she had ever drawn — or would ever draw.

Jon knocked softly on his sister’s door. “Mart? You awake?”
“Come on in.”

He slipped in and closed the door. Marta was sitting on the bed, looking through a photo album. “You know we have all those on the family server, don’t you?”

She didn’t look at him. “I like to touch the book. Sometimes it feels almost like — like Mom is still here.” She slowly folded it shut. “And then I remember what happened a year ago.” A sigh escaped her lips. “And Daddy’s so lonely. He misses her as much as I do.”

Jon sat on the beanbag chair across against the wall. “That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

She moved the book to her bedside table. “Can you be more specific?”

“Sure. But it’s a touchy subject for me and I don’t want to rush into it too fast.”

“How touchy are we talking about?”

“Very.”

“So what are we talking about?”

Here comes the explosion. “A new wife for Dad.”

Jon had anticipated his sister throwing things at him, running out of the house at near super-speed, jumping on him and hitting him with real anger, or even screaming at the top of her lungs and threatening him with bodily harm. But she fooled him completely.

She sighed and nodded. “I’ve been thinking about that too. Any ideas?”

“You mean like candidates for our new mommy? No. I wanted to talk to you about the concept first.”

“You mean you wanted me to talk you into thinking it was a good idea.”

He ducked his head. “Yeah. Intellectually, I know Dad will

probably marry again someday, but I’m not sure I’m emotionally ready for it right now. Or that I’ll be ready any time soon.”

“Me neither. So what do you suggest?”

“You’re a smart kid, Mart. I was hoping you might have something.”

“Huh. That’s a surprise, you asking me for advice.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not as in touch with my feelings as you are.”

“How about Dad’s feelings? Are you in touch with them?”

Her question surprised him, but it shouldn’t have. Given his sister’s emotional link with their mother, it would have been a natural thing to assume that he had a similar link to their father.

Sometimes he thought he did. Sometimes he knew when his dad had been on a tough Superman mission before the rest of the family did. Sometimes he knew when, as a reporter or an editor, his father had run across a difficult or trying story where he couldn’t fix the problem or help the people involved other than reporting the news. It just didn’t seem to be as strong a link as Mom and Marta’s link had been.

“Kinda,” he answered Marta. “I know he’s started laughing occasionally. And Uncle Jimmy took us to a baseball game last week, and Dad seemed to have a lot of fun. But that’s beside the point. Do you have any suggestions for helping Dad find a new wife when he’s ready to start looking?”

She frowned in thought for a long moment, then said, “I don’t think we should help him look. But I do think we should help him screen them.”

“Screen them how?”

“Well, how about this? If he brings some woman home to meet us, I give her a hard time and you play peacemaker. That way we both get to evaluate her, and if I can scare her off by myself she doesn’t need to be part of this family.”

“Hey! Are you saying we’d frighten the Addams Family?”

She gave him a lopsided grin. “We probably could if we put our minds to it. What do you think of that arrangement?”

He nodded. “Good idea. Let’s shake on it.”

Wonder Woman and Catwoman landed softly in the evening shadows outside Dallas Alley and stepped back against the wall. Satisfied that no one was watching, Diana spun in place for a moment, then stopped.

“Keep watch while I change,” said Selina. “I can’t do that super-spin thing like you and Spicurl.”

Diana frowned. “Who is Spicurl?”

“The Big Blue Boy Scout.”

“Who — oh, you mean Superman.”

“Who else? I like your outfit, by the way. What are those boots made of, calfskin?”

Diana was pleased that the other woman approved of her attire. “Thank you. They are sharkskin, actually, from animals raised and kept for the Amazons’ use. But should anyone inside ask, I will say that they are calfskin. I am aware that many people in man’s world do not understand the difference between wild sharks and domesticated ones.”

Selina threaded her belt through her jeans and shrugged. “Not sure I do either, but I’m glad you’re not taking them out of the Atlantic ecosystem.”

“Amazons do not take a life, even an animal life, without a valid reason.” Diana frowned. “Selina, are you certain that these clothes are appropriate for this venue?”

Selina sighed. “For the sixth time, Diana, they’re fine! If you see dress slacks in this club, you can be sure the wearer is a dumb cop of some kind. Everyone else, including the smart cops, will be wearing jeans, and most of them will have Stetsons on, too.”

Diana ran her fingers through her hair. “Would it not be better if we wore similar headgear?”

Selina’s hands found her hips. “You tried on a Stetson. You wore it like it was a tiara. No good. Me, I don’t much care for

cowboy hats or for limiting my field of vision. No hats tonight.”

“As you say. You have more experience in this sort of thing.”

Selina stomped her left foot once and tugged at the boot top, then slid her jeans down over the boot. “Okay, that’s good. You ready?”

Diana frowned. “Tell me once more why we are here and not in either Metropolis or Gotham.”

Selina sighed again, then lifted her hand and began counting on her fingers. “One: If you want genuine country, western, western swing, or country rock music, you can’t get it from a house band in either Metropolis or Gotham. Those guys are good but they just don’t have the right kind of soul. You might as well look for Motown in some little bar in New Mexico. Two: You need a night out on the town and more first-hand information about how real people have fun than you can get from reading books or talking to me. Three: No one knows us here. We’re anonymous women just looking for dance partners and good country music. Four: Mary Chapin Carpenter is not appearing in Metropolis or Gotham. She’s here and I want to hear her perform live. A greatest hits CD just isn’t the same thing.”

“Bruce told me some weeks ago that one cannot find authentic Tex-Mex food in North Dakota. Is your reasoning analogous to that?”

Diana wondered why the corner of Selina’s mouth twitched, then she decided to ignore it. “Yes,” Selina answered. “That’s correct. Now let’s get in there before all the good tables are taken.”

To her surprise, Diana discovered that she enjoyed country music, or at least she enjoyed the music she was hearing. Mary Chapin Carpenter was a talented blonde with a pleasing appearance, a powerful and textured voice, and what Selina had described as a “rockin’ band” playing in support of her vocalizations. She wondered if her mother would approve of the songs, then she decided that she would purchase a selection of the artist’s recordings and present them to her staff as gifts. Hippolyta would certainly be brought up short by “Passionate Kisses,” a tune which had startled Diana at first but which she quickly grew to like.

She took another sip of her beverage and smiled. Whatever else a “Hurricane Warning” was, it tasted wonderfully sweet.

Selina was, at the moment, busy dancing something called the “two-step” with a young man wearing the uniform of a “drugstore cowboy,” which Selina had explained meant a man who dressed as a ranch worker but was almost surely an accountant or computer programmer or some other office worker. The two of them seemed to flow well together, and both of them seemed to be enjoying themselves. Diana smiled and tapped her foot on the floor to the rhythm of the song.

As the tune ended and the audience applauded loudly, a tall slender man stepped up to Diana’s table. “Ma’am, would you like to dance this next dance with me? I’d sure take it as a personal favor if you would.”

She blinked twice. “Ah — I thank you for the invitation, sir, but I am not certain I know these steps well enough.”

He held out his hand and smiled widely. “Can’t know that unless you try.”

She was torn. On one hand, she really knew nothing about the steps in these dances, and she did not wish to embarrass either herself or Selina. On the other hand, the man was as tall as she, appeared mature and composed, and she found that she wanted to give herself permission to have fun tonight.

Yet she did not wish to spend the dance stepping on the man’s toes. “Perhaps I am not the best choice—”

She got no farther as Selina suddenly appeared at her side and pulled her upright. “Come on, Diana! Loosen up and give the man a dance! Ain’t that what we’re here for?”

It took Diana two seconds to decide that yes, having fun was what they had come here to experience. “Very well, sir. But I warn you that I truly do not know this style of dancing well.”

“Your name’s Diana?” She returned his smile and nodded. “My name’s Jerry, and I’ll have you to two-steppin’ before you know it.”

The band began playing a syncopated four-beat and Jerry whirled her onto the floor. By the time the chorus began, she’d caught the rhythm of “I Feel Lucky” and was following Jerry around as they had rehearsed the dance beforehand. She was able to translate some of her Amazon folk dance steps into movements akin to the steps other women in the club were making, and by the time the song ended Jerry pulled her close and spun her around and laughed in her ear.

“What are you saying, you don’t know these steps? You’re terrific!”

“Thank you, Jerry. Shall we try the next one also?”

The drums began, followed by the fiddle and lead guitar. Jerry took her hands and showed her the basics of the fast two-step and she caught them almost immediately. They danced and skipped and spun across the floor, and Diana realized that she was having real fun for the first time in a very long time, and she was more than glad that Selina had insisted that she come to Dallas. She was sorry when they finished singing about the “Twist and Shout.”

“Are you tired?” Jerry asked.

“No! I believe I could dance to this music all evening!”

Jerry laughed. “I’m not as energetic as you are. How about one more and we take a short break?”

“If that is your wish. Oh, they are starting again! Is it permitted for me to attempt some other dance moves?”

“Whatever your feet desire, Diana! Let’s go!”

This time the drums began, followed by the piano and the lead guitar. Diana got on her toes and spun with the beat as if this were an interpretive ballet, then she stepped in a circle in a combination of an Amazon hunting dance and the hip-shaking displays she had seen from some of the other women in the club. She didn’t know how it looked, but it felt good.

Jerry laughed aloud and followed her as well as he could, and sometime during the second verse he caught Diana and led her into a cross between the two-step she had just learned and something resembling a polka. They missed a step at least every other measure, but Diana didn’t care. She was having fun!

At the end of the song, instead of following the advice of the singer to shut up and kiss her, he let her slip out so that her hands were in his as the spun around leaning back. When the music finally stopped, he pulled her to him and hugged her briefly. Astounded, Diana could only return the hug.

“The band is taking a break, Diana. Let’s go see if your friend is thirsty, okay?” Jerry asked.

Diana laughed. “That is a good idea. I find that I desire liquid refreshment myself.”

They walked to the table, and Jerry surprised her by pulling out her chair for her. “Thank you,” she said, then turned to the other couple. “Selina, you were quite right about this venue. It has been a most enjoyable evening thus far.”

Selina stuck her hand out. “Hi, I’m Selina. And your name is?”

“Sorry, ma’am, I’m Jerry. Your friend is a wonderful dancer. I could hardly keep up with her.”

Selina smiled. “She’s a better dancer than she told me, too. Oh, before I forget, this youngster here is Matt. Matt, be polite and shake hands with Jerry and Diana.”

Matt stuck his hand out and shook hands unenthusiastically. “Hi.”

“Howdy, Matt. Ms. Selina, your friend Diana is quite a dancer.”

Selina smiled. “You already said that.”

“It bears repeatin’. I can’t believe how fast she picked up those steps. And whatever she was doing on that last tune was downright inspired!”

“Don’t tell me, tell her. Those were her feet out there.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched as a man who seemed to have imbibed a good deal of liquid courage walked in their direction, his thumbs in his belt loops and his face set in an expression he probably believed was charming. Before he came within a few feet, however, another man stepped in front of him and spoke urgently in his ear.

The first man’s countenance fell and he turned away more quickly than he had approached. Diana wondered what that was about for a moment, then turned back in on the conversation.

“No,” Selina said, “Matt didn’t insult me. He just put his hand where it wasn’t supposed to go.”

“Oh?” Jerry said. “I don’t imagine he plans to do that again, does he?”

The pitch and tone of Jerry’s voice had changed. It was lower, almost menacing, and his pronunciation was more precise than before. Diana looked closer at Jerry, trying to recognize him, but decided anew that she’d never seen him before.

Selina laughed, her voice quicksilver and cotton candy. “No. We had a discussion about it and we both decided that we were dance partners and nothing else.”

Jerry’s smile softened his expression. “That’s the ticket, Matt. Like me and Diana here. Maybe we’ll be friends someday, maybe we’ll never see each other again, but I’ll always remember being out-danced here tonight. Hey, is anyone thirsty? I’ll stand for one round of refills for each of us.”

Diana smiled. “That is kind of you, Jerry. I believe I would like another ‘Hurricane Warning’.”

Jerry’s eyes widened. “Uh — sure. Ms. Selina, what would you like?”

She laughed again. “Just call me Selina. Or Lina. I’ll have another Sam Adams.”

“Sure enough. Matt, how about you?”

Matt turned up his beer bottle and drained the last few drops. “How about a Lone Star?”

Jerry stood. “Coming up. Matt, why don’t you come with me and help me carry the drinks back to the table?”

Matt’s hat nodded and he stood. “Sure.”

As they strode to the bar, Diana said, “Has Matt created problems for you?”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle. How about Jerry? He try to kiss you yet?”

Diana blinked. “Why — no. He has behaved as a gentleman with me.”

“Good. Incidentally, you have the option to slug him if he gets too personal with you.”

“I do not believe I will need to resort to such action. But why did you not tell me that earlier?”

Selina smiled. “I didn’t think you’d get hit on at all, and if you did I didn’t think you’d respond. You’re full of surprises.”

Diana frowned, confused by the idiom. “I’m sorry, what is being ‘hit on’? Is a prelude to combat?”

Selina guffawed. “No, no! It’s a prelude to inviting you to spend the night with a guy.”

“Oh. Well, no, Jerry has made no such suggestion to me.”

“I wouldn’t expect him to. I didn’t want him to know I’d been doing research on him, but I found out that he owns this place.”

“Really? He owns Dallas Alley?”

“Not all of it, no. But he does own Bud’s, which is where we are. That’s why that one guy headed off his buddy a few minutes ago. Jerry wants all his patrons to have fun, but he doesn’t like for people to try to split up couples or friends. He’s been known

to throw out some troublemakers and even ban a few.”

“I see. Then it is an honor for him to dance with one of his patrons?”

Selina looked around the room and smiled. “I don’t know about ‘honor,’ but they tell me that he doesn’t like to see women sitting alone. He likes to make sure they feel welcome. On top of that, I think he likes you.”

“As a good dancer, you mean.”

“Well, that too. But he figured out that you’re not from around here and that you’re not a hooker looking for a mark — he tosses those girls as soon as he sees them — but that you needed to have a little fun tonight. And he’s had a good time too.”

“Oh.” Diana was suddenly struck by a disturbing thought. “Selina — does he wish to pursue a romantic relationship with me?”

Selina laughed again. “No. His wife is the bookkeeper for this place, and I doubt she’d tolerate anyone hornin’ in on her territory.”

“Jerry is married?” Selina nodded. “And his wife does not care that he sometimes dances with the female patrons?”

“As long as the women don’t get the wrong idea, no, she doesn’t care. Besides, it boosts his business if the women who come here without a guy know they’ll be left alone if that’s what they want.”

“I see.” She looked toward the bar to see Jerry returning with three drinks on a small tray.

He put the tray down and passed out the drinks. “Selina, Matt asked me to apologize for him. He just remembered that he had a very important appointment in Grand Prairie tonight.”

Selina smiled. “Poor guy. I didn’t mean to scare him that badly.”

“If he did something he shouldn’t have, you were right to scare him.” Jerry turned to Diana. “You know, Diana, this here ‘Hurricane Warning’ is a right powerful drink. Most people don’t do so well with just one of them under their belt.”

“I presume that was why you were surprised to hear me request it.”

“Yup. I wouldn’t want you to get the wrong impression of us Dallas cowboys.”

“Oh, I would imagine that the people of Dallas are much like people anywhere. Some are very good, some are very bad, some are bad if they believe they will not be found out, and most are what a friend of mine called ‘passively good.’ They mind their own business and in general behave themselves.”

“Yeah, but that ain’t enough. I used to be one of those passive people till a couple of years ago. This place was a lot rougher that it is now, and I let it happen. Then I heard about a lady who was a crusader for good, and hearin’ all she did made me want to be a better man in every way. I been trying, and I think I’ve done some good.”

From the bandstand came the soft sound of an organ, then a piano, then the drummer added soft cymbals to the sound. Diana listened for a moment, then asked, “Who is this lady to whom you refer? I think I would like to meet her.”

Jerry looked at her sadly. “I wish you could. Matter of fact, I wish I could. Her name was Lois Lane. I’m a little surprised y’ all ain’t heard o’ her, but maybe bein’ from someplace else you ain’t had the chance.”

Diana froze. Lois’ influence had reached all the way to the middle of the nation? She had known that many were greatly impressed by Lois’ life and that many lives had been changed through her example, but the extent and reach of Lois’ influence startled her.

Selina must have seen Diana’s shock. “Jerry, we don’t want to hold you here. I’m sure you have other things you could be doing. You don’t have to baby-sit us.”

Her smile took the sting from her words. Jerry nodded and

touched the brim of his hat. “That’s true, ma’am, I do, but I also didn’t want to leave you two ladies alone.”

“We’ll be fine, I promise.”

He rose gracefully. “In that case, I’ll go on my way. You ladies have fun, okay? And please stay as long as you want.”

As Jerry strode away, Diana listened as Mary Chapin Carpenter began singing a plaintive melody concerning the steadfastness of a lover departing on a journey. She promised to return to her love, no matter how long she was away or how long she was gone.

The song reminded her of the powerful love between Clark and Lois.

Diana leaned closer to her friend. “Selina, I believe I would like to leave now. Would you prefer to remain?”

Selina’s hand found Diana’s and gently squeezed it. “This night is for you. You can do anything you want. If you’re ready to go, we’ll go.”

Just then the lyric “You’ve been a friend to me” came from the band stand, then a melancholy saxophone wept over the piano and synthesizer. Diana returned Selina’s grasp and nodded. “I believe it is time. I have had a great deal of fun and I have learned something very important.”

“Then let’s go. I’ll meet you by the front door. I have to visit the ladies’ room first.”

Diana smiled and nodded. “I will savor this beverage for a few more moments, then I will make my way to the alcove where the band’s recordings are for sale. And you need not worry that I cannot pay. I brought American money with me tonight.”

Selina chuckled. “Yeah, this isn’t the Iceberg. I don’t have a tab here.”

Diana sipped her drink as Selina wound her way to the restroom. It was still delicious, yet it now tasted of distance. She didn’t understand that. Distance from what? Or from whom?

She rose and made her way around the dance floor to the band’s product table where she picked out eight discs, including the “Greatest Hits” disc which Selina had derided mildly when they had arrived. She paid for her purchase, pocketed the change, and waited for her friend near the entrance.

Her friend. The phrase had a very nice ring to it.

Diana was making her third annual pilgrimage to Lois’ grave, and she smiled to herself. Her mother had proposed a mass gathering at the gravesite to join those who chose to celebrate Lois’ life, but Diana had protested that people in the United States did not normally participate in such rituals. Yet here she was, walking slowly through the cemetery toward a celebration of her own.

She had met Clark two years before quite by accident as she sketched Lois’ grave. The next year she had approached as he stood beside the headstone, and he had waited with her as she sat and pondered what she had learned about Lois. She would not have believed that any woman living in man’s world would affect her so deeply.

This year she actually hoped to see Clark. The two of them had worked together as super-powered heroes on several occasions, and they were both involved with Bruce Wayne’s plans to formalize the Justice League, rather than leaving it as a loose confederation of heroes. Diana was not as eager to see that come to fruition as Clark was, but she didn’t oppose it.

She found that she truly wanted to see him. To the Amazons, a man was not supposed to be a close friend or confidant. But Diana had learned that not only was Clark reliable and discreet, he was a source of wisdom and advice. And he understood people in a way Diana almost envied.

She made the final turn on the sidewalk and looked at the headstone. It was as it had been, save for a slight amount of weathering. But that was to be expected.

What was not expected was the sight of Clark sitting on a nearby bench with his face in his hands, his shoulders almost trembling with tension.

She approached him cautiously. “Clark? What is wrong? Are you and your children well?”

He raised his head but didn’t look at her. “I — I don’t know if I can do this.”

She gently sat on the far end of the bench. “You have helped me a great deal, my friend, and I would like to help you. Can you tell me of the ‘this’ which you feel you may not be able to accomplish?”

He turned bleary, damp eyes to her. “I’m a father. I’m general editor of the Daily Planet. I’m Superman. I’m Clark Kent. I don’t know—” he sat up and wrapped his arms around himself. “I don’t think I can be all of those people any more. I don’t know what to do. Everything takes longer than I want it to. The kids need a mother figure in their lives but I can’t even think about dating because I don’t have the time and I really don’t want to look at another woman. The kids need me, the paper needs me, the world needs me, Sam died a couple of months ago and Ellen needs me, I don’t have time for myself and I can’t remember the last time I saw a movie or went to a ball game or even watched one on TV. I’m stretched too thin, Diana. I don’t have any more to give.”

He bent over again and his body jerked as if he were crying. She didn’t know what to do. She’d never seen the strongest man in the world so weak and helpless, not even under the influence of kryptonite. Were that the problem, she could take the green crystal away and ease his pain — but there was no way for her to remove this pain from him. She didn’t know what to do.

But her friend was hurting badly. She had to try.

“Clark — I am not trained to — no, let me begin again.” She scooted closer. “You are my friend, and I am pained to see you in agony for any reason. And I am ashamed that you did not feel free to contact me earlier. That is my fault, and I apologize for this now.”

“Not your fault. You didn’t know.”

“True. But I should have made it clear that you could speak openly and freely with me about such things, and I have failed you in that regard.”

She gently laid her hand on his shoulder. “Clark, I wish that I could cast my lasso upon you and force you to see the truth, that you are a good man who is doing the best he can under possibly the most trying circumstances he might face. You have many people who care deeply about you and who would assist you in your time of need. Your children, by all accounts that I have heard, are excellent young people who love and respect you and who are surely hurting because they cannot but see your agony. This time in your life is a hard one, my friend, but you can face it and defeat it.”

She took a deep breath and let it out. Then a thought came to her and she stood. “In fact, I will help you now.”

“What? How — what are you going to do?”

Instead of answering him, she reached into her pocket and pulled out an earpiece which looked like a Bluetooth phone extension. It was really a direct satellite line to Bruce Wayne’s private cell phone, one of eight units in the world equipped with the necessary security protocols to connect to the other units like it.

“Direct connect to Bruce Wayne,” she said. “Personal emergency.”

Clark rose beside her. “What? No! Don’t call Bruce! This isn’t that kind of emergency!”

She reached up and pressed the mute button. “It is true that lives on this planet are not being threatened, but this situation is important enough for him to be aware of it. He will not permit this state of affairs to continue any more than I will.”

The speaker crackled to life in her ear. “Bruce Wayne. Diana,

what's going on?"

"Bruce, Clark needs us. He is having a personal crisis and requires the assistance of his friends."

She heard him sigh in her ear. "Princess, this is an emergency channel. None of us are supposed to use it for personal favors."

Steel crept into her voice. "This is not a personal favor. The man whom you have called your best friend is in need and you are in a position to assist him. You will now do so."

"Even if that's true, I've got business to take care of here in —"

"I would not have called you had it not been true."

"I believe you, but I still can't just drop everything with no notice. Wayne Enterprises is a multinational—"

"You will do this for Clark, Bruce, and you will do it now, or you will feel my pique."

There was a pause, then Bruce said lightly, "Your pique, not your anger?"

"Anger would be the next level. You do not wish to experience that."

"What would my experiencing your pique entail?"

"I would begin with a call to Selina."

There was another pause. When Bruce spoke again, there was no humor in his voice. "You wouldn't do that."

"Not only would I do so, her private number is on my speed dial."

Another pause, this one shorter. "Deal. I'll be at Clark's house in three hours. And if Selina wants to come, I'll bring her to entertain the kids."

"Good. Please make certain he attends whatever athletic contest is in season while you are here. Diana out."

She removed the earpiece and returned it to her pocket. She looked at Clark, who had an odd expression on his face.

"Bruce will arrive at your home within three hours, Clark. It might be best if you were there to greet him."

Clark nodded slowly. "I'm glad you directed that energy at him and not at me. I don't know if I could take it right now."

She almost melted at his tone, then stiffened her spine and almost smiled. "You could indeed have taken all that and much more. You are the strongest man I have ever known."

"Thank you." He glanced at his watch and sighed. "The kids are due back from their school field trip in about an hour. I have to pick up Ellie from daycare, and I should have a snack ready for them so they don't start eating the furniture."

She reached out and took his hand in hers to shake it. "I wish you well, Clark. I hope you and Bruce have a very enjoyable visit together."

She shook his hand with both of hers, feeling the strength and power flow back into his fingers, and she knew he would be well.

She turned to go, then hesitated. "One more thing. Bruce may be accompanied by Selina, so what she calls 'zany hijinks' may very well ensue."

His eyes changed shape behind his glasses. "Oh, boy. Last time she visited, Marta ended up climbing every tree in the neighborhood. Scared some of the adults pretty badly when their kids tried to follow her."

Diana almost laughed. "Then consider yourself warned. We will meet again, I am certain. Goodbye for now."

She turned and walked away, pleased that she had helped him. Already his voice was lighter, his eyes were clearer, and he appeared to carry less of the world on his shoulders. Bruce's visit would give him the freedom to laugh, and contact with Selina would make him smile. Her unconventional approach to life would demonstrate to Clark that there was still reason to look forward to the future with anticipation.

If all of this did not take place, Bruce would surely feel her pique.

Late that evening, as Diana sifted through the late night after-office paperwork with which every diplomat must deal, her phone rang. "Hello?"

"Hey, Shorty! Missed you today. I think you would have enjoyed yourself."

She smiled. "Hello, Selina. Did Clark and Bruce have a good time together?"

"Yeah, they did. Didn't go to a ballgame, though. They ended up in some ship museum on the Virginia coast and looked at old sailing ships all afternoon. Bruce and Spitecurl both came back smiling."

"I am pleased that they had a pleasant day together. What did you do?"

"Oh, I took the kids to the mall for a while and then we found a little museum of locks."

Diana frowned in confusion. "What kind of locks?"

"The kind that don't keep people like me out."

"Oh." She pondered that statement for a moment, then had a bad thought. "Selina, please do not tell me that you taught Marta how to pick a lock."

"Of course not."

"Good. I was concerned that you—"

"I just lectured them on the weaknesses of various key locking systems and told them about the lock-picking championships in Holland and Germany and how easy it really is to get into places people don't want you to be in without using their special abilities."

Diana closed her eyes. "Selina, please do not think that I am angry with you — or even displeased — but perhaps it would be best if Clark did not know of this particular escapade."

"Clark made me promise not to climb any trees or take them prowling in Gotham, so I had to do something with them! And it's not like I took them through a hotel and left all the doors standing open."

"I only hope that Jon and Marta do not decide to employ their new-found knowledge in a way that might embarrass their father."

Diana heard the teasing tone come into Selina's voice.

"Interesting that you make not embarrassing Clark your most urgent objection to my educational choices. And what harm could it do? They can look through the doors if they want to see what's there. Do you know, I think little Ellie understood almost as much of what I was saying as the other two? She listened as hard as the others combined."

"Yes, and if there is a toddler-driven crime wave in Metropolis, Clark will blame me for you being with the children and teaching them about such things!"

Selina's answering laugh was almost a cackle. "I doubt that Ellie's siblings would let her put any stunts like that. Anyway, I got to go. Just wanted to touch base with you and fill you in so Bruce wouldn't have to."

"What? He does not wish to — Selina, is Bruce vexed with me?"

"No. He just didn't want to feel your pique, whatever that means."

This time Diana laughed. "I am certain he will tell you what it means when the two of you are safe in Gotham."

"Safe, huh? This I gotta hear. G'night, Shorty. We'll talk again soon."

Chapter Thirteen

Four years and three months after Lois' funeral

Standing alone at the Kent front door early on a Friday evening in early summer, Diana Prince was all but terrified.

She told herself it was ridiculous. She'd faced evil in many forms, fought against invaders coming against her homeland and from space to attack the Earth, not to mention the homegrown

evil that man's world — and even Paradise Island — faced altogether too often. She'd captured thieves and burglars and murderers and blackmailers, helped bring down tyrannical governments, helped save countless lives from both natural and unnatural disasters, and had even traveled through space to other worlds to defend her home. She had worked with and fought alongside Superman and Batman for truth and justice on several occasions, had shared meals with the two men, and had appeared at several 'news conferences' with them, events whose true purpose still puzzled her.

Yet two teenagers and one preschooler kept her trembling hand by her side.

She'd agreed to come to dinner. She'd welcomed the invitation at the time, knowing that Clark might not have any more intention of a more-than-friend relationship now than at any other time in the past. Besides the time they'd met accidentally as she sketched Lois' headstone, she'd met him at Lois' grave twice, once with Clark alone when he'd been particularly despondent. There had also been one slightly uncomfortable evening when she, Superman, Batman, and Selina in her Catwoman persona had joined forces to relieve what Batman had informed them was a hostage situation in a Gotham criminal's hideout, but which turned out to be a birthday dinner for Selina. Because she had not known Selina's friends well, she had stayed close to Superman the entire night, prompting Selina to tease her about double-dating with her and Batman. She was still at a loss to understand how Batman could interact with those lawbreakers on any kind of personal level, unless it was for Selina's sake.

She'd also learned that Superman had been aware of the ruse before entering the hideout and had hid his knowledge from Diana and Selina. It was the first time she'd learned that Superman could blush. The reasons for his reaction were still something of a mystery to her, though she still thought it charming.

Diana had known Lois only slightly, but had liked her from their first meeting at Queen Hippolyta's diplomatic reception in Jamaica. Lois had asked some leading questions about Diana's personal life, about her romantic entanglements, about her royal responsibilities, and especially about her preference in men. Diana had smiled softly and replied that she wished Clark had an unmarried twin brother who was much like him, and had smiled wider as she'd teasingly accused Lois of cheating every other woman on Earth by taking the best man on the planet permanently off the market, because there was no way Clark would look at another woman as long as he and Lois were married.

After a long moment, Lois had smiled back and apologized, both for being suspicious and for claiming Clark from all the 'other women on Earth.' After that they'd gotten along fairly well. Now Diana's main regret was that she hadn't invested enough time in a relationship with Lois to be called a good friend.

She hoped that Lois would have approved of her. Diana wasn't sure she could live up to the example the late great Lois Lane had set before her.

Enough prevarication! Either activate the door announcer or walk away, she told herself. The children would not eat her.

After a moment, she convinced her hand to rise. She pressed the button and stepped back, then smoothed the imaginary lines from her skirt and crossed her hands in front of her body.

She was royalty in her home nation. She wasn't nervous at all. She wouldn't allow herself to be nervous.

The door opened to reveal the two terrifying teenagers and she got nervous all over again.

"Hi," said the younger one. "I'm Marta and this is my brother Jon. You must be Diana Prince."

Diana put on her princess parade smile and nodded. "I am.

And I am pleased to see both of you again, Marta and Jon."

"You've met us?" asked Jon.

"Yes, but it has been several years, and each of us was somewhat younger then. It would surprise me if you remembered me."

Marta leaned over and looked past her visitor. "Ooh, you have a big limousine," she deadpanned. "Can we get a ride in it sometime? Pretty pretty please?" Marta hesitated for a moment, then mimed jumping up and down with obviously false excitement.

Oh, good, thought Diana, hostile forces encountered upon initial reconnaissance. Recommended response: engage hostiles on their terms.

In a similar flat voice, Diana replied, "Only if you are a very good little girl. And at this point I have a few reservations about that."

Marta cocked her head to one side and frowned slightly. "No, no, you're supposed to make campaign promises and flatter us with shallow compliments. Didn't you read the memo?"

Diana's eyes narrowed and she straightened regally. "I do not 'campaign' for anything, young lady, especially for your affections, and any compliments I might offer to you must be earned. At this point in time, while I have no words of censure for you, I also have no words of praise."

Marta's eyebrows both rose and her lips parted. For a moment the two women glared at each other, then Marta smiled sincerely and opened the door wider. "Good evening, Ms. Prince. Won't you please come in?"

Diana stood where she was and looked at Jon. "Shall we fence also, young man? Or have I received your permission to enter your domain?"

Jon crossed his arms and sighed. "That's a fair question, if a bit direct."

"I am only following the example of your sister."

"True." He nodded and stepped back. "Please come in, Ms. Prince. I promise not to ambush you while you're here."

"Thank you."

Diana knew what she'd see. It was a modest two-story house in one of the nicer suburbs of Metropolis, and it was not only neat and spotless both inside and out but warm and inviting. She'd visited once with Bruce during Lois' "wake," a custom she still did not fully understand, but since then it had been redecorated in softer tones and with sturdier furniture. As soon as Marta shut the door behind her, she stopped in the front room and inhaled deeply.

"Mmm! Whatever is being prepared for dinner has a marvelous aroma. Who is cooking?"

Jon gestured for her to follow him and headed toward the kitchen. "My dad, of course. If he weren't the Daily Planet's general editor and a multiple Kerth, Meriwether, and Pulitzer Prize winner, he could be on the staff of any restaurant in the world. You should taste what he can do with leftovers. Sometimes they're better than the original meal."

Diana smiled again. "I have sampled his culinary skills a few times, Jon. I am not surprised that this meal is already stimulating my taste buds."

Marta tapped her on the arm and Diana stopped. "Yes, Marta? You have a question for me?"

"Yeah. How come you talk so funny?"

Diana's eyebrows rose this time. "I might ask the same question of you. Although I would probably utilize proper English grammar in my query."

Jon snorted a laugh. "I'd quit while I was close to even if I were you, Mart. This lady isn't going to take any guff from you."

Marta swept past them and tossed a silent glance at her visitor, one which seemed to promise more verbal sparring later. Diana returned it as firmly as she felt comfortable doing,

hopefully without any implied challenge.

As she watched the fourteen-year-old girl disappear into the kitchen she felt a tug on her skirt. She looked down to see a four-year-old girl in a one-piece coverall sporting a purple cartoon dinosaur on her chest.

Diana bent down and smiled. “Hello, young lady. My name is Diana. What is yours?”

“It’s Ellen, but ev’body calls me Ellie ‘cause they think I’m still a baby.”

“You do not appear to be a baby to me. What do you want me to call you?”

“You can call me Ellie too. You’re almos’ tall as my daddy.”

Diana gave her a mock sigh. “Yes, I know. It means I must have most of my clothes made especially for me instead of shopping at retail stores for them like other women.”

“Are you going to be my new mommy?”

The question jarred Diana. She spent a long moment gathering her thoughts as she went down on one knee beside her new interrogator. “I do not know the answer to your question, Ellie. I have not been asked.”

“Okay. What would you say if Daddy asked you?”

Diana tilted her head to one side. “You are most inquisitive. Perhaps you and I should get to know each other better before we discuss such an eventuality. After all, the arrangement which you suggest would involve you and your older siblings.”

Rather than look puzzled at Diana’s vocabulary, Ellie nodded. “Good idea. You wanna eat dinner with us?”

“Well, I was invited to share your dinner. By your father, that is.”

“Okay. Will you sit next to me? I’ll tell you what’s good and what’s icky.”

“Icky? Your father is an excellent chef, Ellie. What might he prepare that would be icky?”

Ellie leaned in and whispered, “Daddy’s cooking veggies tonight!”

By the end of the meal, Diana had relaxed. Jon had kept his word and not tried to ambush her, although he had asked a number of questions about the role of men in the lives of the Amazons. She’d answered most of his questions honestly and openly, save for the few she had allowed Clark to prohibit. So Jon did not learn about Amazonian weddings, honeymoon traditions, or the location of Paradise Island that evening.

After a few gentle jabs and parries between them, Marta had backed off and done a lot of listening. And Ellie had laughed with them and asked a few surprisingly mature questions of her own. For his part, Clark had mostly listened and smiled, speaking only when addressed or when the questions became more personal than he deemed appropriate.

In turn, Diana learned first-hand about Jon’s desire to be a doctor so he could save lives and his current standing as an advanced junior in his pre-med course of study. She also learned that Marta had a similar life-saving goal, but had not yet decided on the best career path to achieve it. Diana assured her that she had sufficient time to make that choice, and that making a hasty decision on such an important matter was not the best thing she might do.

As Diana set down her fork for the last time, Marta asked, “Would you like some dessert? We have strawberry shortcake with whipped cream. It’s really good.”

Diana smiled at her. “And did your father prepare that dish also?”

“No.” The girl hesitated, then blurted out, “I did and you may not like it but I think it’s great and so does Dad so I just kind of thought that you’d—”

“Then I shall sample this delicacy, Marta. May I assist you in serving the rest of the gathering?”

Marta gave her a relieved smile. “No! I mean, no thank you. You’re our guest tonight. I’ll get it for you.”

The girl almost scrambled to the kitchen. Diana leaned back and said, “Thank you for inviting me here tonight, Clark. It has been a very long time since I enjoyed an evening this much.”

Ellie piped up, “Can I have some strawb’ry shortcake too?”

Her father smiled. “Sweetie, you’ve had a big dinner and it’s close to your bedtime. I’m not sure you should put so much in your tummy right before you go to sleep.”

“Aww, Daddy! Please?”

Diana lifted her hand. “Excuse me? Clark? Perhaps Ellie and I might share my dessert. I feel certain that Marta’s creation will be more delicious than one person could consume alone.”

Jon snickered. “I’m not sharing mine. I know how good that stuff is gonna be.”

Clark pursed his lips, then nodded. “Okay, Ellie, you can share with Diana. But you have to stop when I say so. Okay?”

“Yaaay!” The four-year-old clapped her hands and bounced in her chair.

Marta chose that moment to return to the dining room. She carefully balanced the tray of dessert bowls on the edge of the table, then took one off and placed it before Diana before repeating the process with the rest of her family.

Diana lifted her eyebrows in surprise. She didn’t recall seeing sliced strawberries piled atop small round cakes with tiny battlements baked along the edges before, nor did she remember seeing the whipped whiteness piled atop them. And crowning each dessert was a whole strawberry, sitting majestically atop the concoction.

Marta’s forlorn voice broke into her reverie. “You don’t like it, do you?”

“I do not know. I have never before tasted such a treat.”

“Really? You’ve never had this? I was afraid you — I thought you went to all those state dinners and formal parties and stuff.”

Diana lifted her gaze to the apprehensive girl. “I do attend such functions, but not as often as some might think. And while I have sampled dessert treats such as cherries jubilee, baked Alaska, and chocolate mousse, I have never been served this.” She lifted her spoon and hesitated. “I am unsure of the proper technique here.”

Ellie heaved a sigh of great exasperation. “You just push your spoon down on the cake and take a bite, silly. It’s not rocket surgery.”

Diana glanced at the young girl, who wore the face of an imp. “Very well, I shall do as you instruct.”

Down went the spoon. Up came a torn-off piece of shortcake, along with some of the whipped cream and a slice of strawberry. It entered her mouth and she tasted it cautiously.

It was incredibly wonderful!

She dropped her spoon to the table in surprise and Marta nearly burst into tears. “I knew you wouldn’t like it! I knew it!”

Diana managed to swallow what she’d tasted, then turned her enormous eyes on the girl. “No! You misunderstand! This is the best thing I have eaten in man’s world!” She grabbed her spoon, then took another bite and swallowed it quickly. “Ever!”

Two more rapid bites followed, then Ellie tapped her on the arm. “Hey! Where’s mine? You said you were gonna share!”

Diana leaned away from the child and grabbed her bowl from the table. “I shall not divide this ambrosia with you, young lady! You deceived me with your youthful wiles and attempted to hide this bounty from me! This is mine!”

Ellie’s face fell. “But you promised!”

Diana hesitated as if battling herself, then relented. “Oh, very well. You may have a small bite.”

The girl beamed again. “Can I use your spoon?”

“I believe your sister brought an Ellie-sized spoon for you. You may take a small bite. Assuming you are properly deferential

to your sister who has labored long and hard to prepare this divine treat.”

“Hear that, Squirt?” Marta crowed. “You have to be properly deferential to me!”

“You better make sure I get some shortcake or I’ll put ‘nother garter snake in your bed!”

Before any of the females at the table could say anything else, Clark burst out laughing. Jon joined him almost immediately. Ellie stared at her father and brother, but Diana whispered to her, “Let them laugh. It will mean more shortcake for us. Come, let us enjoy this wonder.”

The two of them shared the treat as Clark, Jon, and Marta watched and smiled.

Diana all but forced them to allow her to help clear the table simply by standing and carrying dishes to the kitchen sink. “I didn’t think princesses did housework,” Jon offered.

“I cannot answer for princesses in other lands,” Diana responded, “but when I was eleven, I was given the task of washing dishes for my mother’s personal guard. Since there were twelve of them and they ate in shifts of four at a time, it made for a long day of washing.”

Marta turned on the water to rinse the dishes. “And you just did it? Didn’t you hate it?”

“Oh, of course I despised the task. I believed that I, who might one day become queen of Themyscira, was far too important to waste my time cleaning plates and pots and goblets for women who would one day be my servants. Then my mother took me aside and explained to me that a true leader is one who serves her people instead of commanding them to serve her.” She took a stack of dishes and handed them to Jon, who placed them in the dishwasher just so. “I did not listen at the time, of course, because I was young and proud and too full of my own self-importance, but since then I have learned the truth of that statement.”

Marta passed over the stack of bowls to Diana, who looked at them longingly and sighed before handing them to Jon. “Marta, you must teach me how to prepare strawberry shortcake. It is by far the most wonderful dessert I have ever tasted.”

Marta blushed and ducked her head. “I bet you’re just saying that to be polite.”

“I am not. One does not serve others through deception, even well-intended deception. Will you teach me?”

Marta turned her glowing face upward. “You really mean it?”

Diana smiled back. “I do. This is a compliment which you have more than earned. And should I be invited to share dinner with you again, I would request politely but most emphatically that you prepare it then.” She leaned down and stage-whispered, “Consider it a personal favor to me.”

Marta winked back. “No sweat. It’ll be even better next time.”

“I do not see how it could be better. Have we any further preparations to make before activating the dishwashing machine?”

Jon checked the detergent reservoir and shook his head. “Nope. We’re ready to push the magic button.”

“Good. What shall we do now?”

“I think Dad’s got a movie or two set up. And before you ask, I don’t know the titles.”

Diana grinned at both of them. “Then let us repair to the movie-viewing room and learn of your father’s choices.”

They walked into the living room to find Ellie clad in her pajamas and frowning in Clark’s arms. “I’m sorry, Diana, but she wants to talk to you before she goes to bed.”

Diana smiled and reached for the little girl. “Then she shall speak with me. But not for long, young lady. You must maintain a consistent sleep schedule.”

“But I want you to read to me!” the girl whined.

“Ah, but your father wishes for you to go to sleep. You do not wish to disobey your father, do you?”

“No. But I want you to read to me!”

Diana glanced at Clark, who nodded. “Very well. Since your father has given his permission, I will read to you. Where shall I sit?”

Ellie leaned back and pointed to a bentwood rocking chair in the corner of the room. Diana didn’t miss the suppressed gasp of surprise from the other three, so she turned her head and asked, “Is this permitted?”

Jon and Marta looked at their father.

Clark looked at his son and older daughter.

As one, the three of them smiled slightly and nodded.

Diana turned back to Ellie. “Very well, I shall sit in that chair and read to you. But you must choose what I am to read.”

The girl wiggled until Diana set her down. She bounced toward the bookcase and grabbed a medium-sized tome, then brought it back to Diana and pulled her to the rocking chair.

The two of them nestled into the chair until both were comfortable, then Diana lifted the book. “What? Ellie, you want me to read ‘Introduction to Quantum Theory of Subatomic Particles’ to you?”

“Yes.”

“Whatever for?”

“Cause I wanna learn about it. I’m gonna be a nuclear physicist—” she pronounced the words slowly and carefully but correctly “—when I grow up.”

“I see. Very well, I shall read it to you. Where shall we begin?”

“At the beginning, of course. Chapter one. I already read the other stuff like the four words and the dead vacation and the before face.”

“What does — oh, you mean the dedication and the preface, do you not?”

“Yeah, that’s them. Now I wanna learn about the physics part.”

Diana smiled again. “Very well. But you must tell me when you begin to tire. This is a challenging subject for adults, so I do not expect you to finish the book tonight.”

Ellie laid her head on Diana’s shoulder. “I’ll tell you when I get tired.”

“Good. Then let us begin. Hmm. Here we are. Chapter one. ‘The study of quantum physics is the study of very tiny particles, all of them too small to be seen without the aid of very powerful microscopes, and the manner in which they interact with each other and with the macro world. These particles are smaller than molecules, smaller than atoms, and in some cases, smaller than the electrons which orbit the nucleus of the atom.’ Does that make sense to you, Ellie?”

The girl nodded. “Pretty much. I already learned some stuff about atoms.”

“Then we shall continue. ‘These particles are so small that even shining a light on them changes the qualities of the particles, because the individual photons which make up a beam of light are often the same size as the particles, if not larger.’ My, that is very small.”

Ellie pointed at the book. “Keep reading, please.”

Diana smiled and continued.

“—and so we can determine either the speed in which these particles are moving or their current location, but not both.” Diana stopped and shook her head. “I never knew how interesting quantum theory was before tonight.”

The girl on her shoulder didn’t respond. “Ellie?” whispered Diana. “Are you still awake?”

The only response Ellie gave was to take a deeper breath and

reach up to gently hold Diana's neck. "Clark?" she whispered. "I believe our little physicist is ready for bed."

Her father padded over softly and tried to take the girl from Diana's lap, but Ellie moaned, "No! Mommy D put me to bed."

Both Diana and Clark froze for a moment and looked at each other. Clark spoke first. "You don't have to," he whispered.

Diana knew her eyes were damp as she smiled. "But I wish to. May I?"

Clark's smile lit up the room. "Of course. Up the stairs, down the hall, second door to the left. Her nightlight's already on."

"Thank you. I shall return in a few moments."

She slowly carried the sleeping child to her bedroom, surprised at her own reluctance to release her. As she settled the girl in her bed and pulled the covers up, Ellie grunted and turned onto her side to face Diana.

"Do you like me?"

"What sort of silly question is this? Of course I like you, Ellie. You are a wonderful little girl. And very intelligent, also. Not many Amazons of your age would comprehend such a complex subject as quantum theory so well as you."

"I like you too."

Diana arranged the bedclothes so the girl's chest was covered but her arms were free. "Thank you. You are a wonderful young lady. You make it very easy for me to like you."

"G'night, Mommy D."

The endearment shook Diana to the core. She leaned over and kissed the girl softly on the cheek and whispered, "Good night, beautiful one. Sleep well."

She stood and stepped to the foot of the bed and watched Ellie drift off again.

The girl had called her "Mommy D." Twice. The endearment went straight to her heart and penetrated all her carefully constructed defenses.

Diana had, years ago, given up any vague plans she might have had for a family of her own. There were too many responsibilities, too many demands on her time, and too few available men whom she respected enough to even consider marriage. She'd decided that she would live and rule, if called upon, as a single woman, and pass the throne along to her most qualified niece.

But somewhere — maybe during dessert or maybe as Diana had read to her — little four-year-old Ellie had wrecked those plans with a few simple words and a request for Diana to put the child to bed. Now Diana could not only contemplate being a mother, she suddenly wanted to be this little one's mother. And if that meant dealing with an occasionally bratty teenaged girl and an older brother who was all but grown himself, then she'd take on that responsibility most willingly.

Assuming, of course, that Clark would also think it was a good idea.

And that Ellie didn't change her mind.

And that both Jon and Marta agreed. The last thing Diana wanted to do was to disrupt this wonderful family. Clark and Lois had gotten these young ones off to an excellent start, Clark had done so much to aid in their continued growth and maturity, and it would be an utter travesty for another woman to barge in and wreck what they had built together.

So she wiped her eyes dry, sniffed back a small sob, and gently closed the bedroom door as she left the room. She'd wait and see what might happen in the future.

She already knew what she hoped might happen.

Chapter Fourteen

Clark watched Diana carry his little girl to her bedroom. As they passed from sight around the corner, he let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding. "That was — unexpected."

Marta reached out and took her father's arm. "I don't think

Ms. Prince saw it coming either. I know I didn't."

Jon leaned in from the other side. "Did you hear what she called Ellie? She called her 'our little physicist.' Not 'your daughter' or 'your little one,' Dad, but 'our.' That lady's a keeper."

Clark turned to his son in mock affront. "And what would you know about it, young man who doesn't have a steady girlfriend?"

Jon chuckled. "If you don't ask her to marry you, I might. She's as much a one in a million lady as Mom ever was."

All of Clark's false mockery fell away. "You really think so?"

"Yep. I've never seen Ellie take to anyone like she has to Ms. Prince. And in just one night, too."

"Yeah, Dad," Marta put in. "And did you see how sensitive she was about Mom's rocker? She asked our permission before she sat down. No one else has ever done that before. All those other broads—"

"Marta!"

"I'm sorry, Dad, but they were! They either turned their noses up at it or just plopped themselves down as if you'd already married them. Ms. Prince gently asked our permission, and if we hadn't given it I bet she would've smiled and sat somewhere else without batting an eye."

Clark sighed. "There weren't that many other women."

"I think five was five too many. You should have brought her over first."

"Oh, right," Jon muttered, "that would have gone so well. Sis, you would've thrown her out on her ear if she'd come over just a few months ago, or at least tried to."

Marta smiled back. "Maybe, maybe not. Did you see how she treated us, like young adults instead of little kids, like those other broads? And don't say it, Dad!" She reached up and pulled her father's face down to hers and kissed him on the cheek. "You don't have to go any farther with her if you don't think it's the right thing to do, but if you both want to, you have my blessing."

"Mine too," Jon said.

"Thank you kindly for your permission, both of you," Clark mock-growled. "Now, before she comes back, which movie do you think we should watch?"

Together, the two young people said, "Princess Bride."

Clark's eyebrows lifted at his son. "Really? You're not trying to send out a subliminal message, are you?"

Jon's eyebrows rose in imitation of his father. "Who, me? I'm as innocent as a new-born lamb."

"Me too, Dad," Marta added.

Diana rounded the corner of the stairs at that moment with a feathery glow lighting her face. When she got to the ground floor, she smiled at him. "Ellie is in bed and is already asleep. She is a wonderful little girl, Clark. You have all done a marvelous job with her."

"Thank you, Diana," Clark replied. "That means a lot to me. To us, I mean."

"Ms. Prince, have you ever seen 'The Princess Bride'? It's a great movie."

Diana tilted her head to one side in apparent thought. "I do not believe so, Marta. What is it about?"

"Oh, it's a terrific story about a grandfather who comes to see his grandson who's sick and reads him this book about sword-fighting and giants and a kidnapped princess and a pirate and a six-fingered man and revenge and courage and cowardice and—"

"And if you tell her the whole plot," Jon broke in, "she won't have to watch it. Does that sound familiar to you, Ms. Prince?"

"No, it does not. I believe I would enjoy it. And I would also be pleased if the two of you would address me as Diana."

Jon squinted at her. "I don't know. Dad's pretty old-fashioned about us not calling adults by their first names. How about Miss Diana as a compromise?"

Marta rolled her eyes at her brother. “Really, Jon? ‘Miss Diana?’ You make her sound like some old Southern matriarch.” She turned to Diana. “We’re sticking with Ms. Prince, at least for now. Okay?”

Diana’s soft silver laugh echoed against Clark’s memories and made him think of Lois. “Very well, you two, I shall bear up under the twin burdens of your continued deference and respect. I shall be ‘Ms. Prince’ to you until your father feels comfortable with another form of address, hopefully one a bit more familiar.”

The smile wasn’t Lois’, nor the laugh, nor the posture, and certainly not the face. Lois would always live in his mind as the most beautiful woman he’d ever known, and he would never forget a single one of the moments they’d shared.

But for the first time, Clark didn’t perceive that having another woman in the house would be an invasion or an attempt to replace Lois in his heart. Diana seemed to understand not only where he was coming from but where he was going, even if he himself wasn’t all that sure of his destination. His children had taken to her. He knew and respected her, both personally and professionally, and he sensed no hint that she would prefer to be Superman’s bride instead of Clark Kent’s wife. None of the other women he’d brought home to meet the family had known of his dual identity, and it hadn’t stopped any of them from gushing about Superman. One had even had the poor manners to giggle that it wouldn’t bother her to “ease Superman’s troubled mind.” He flinched as he recalled how quickly that evening had ended.

This evening, however, was still going very well. Maybe this would work out after all. And if he and Diana didn’t develop a romantic relationship, they could still be good friends.

He stepped back and gestured to the couch. “Shall we view this oft-told tale with one to whom it is fresh and new?”

Marta looked at him, her face expressionless. “You’re trying too hard, Dad. I’ll bring in a couple of bowls of popcorn so we can watch the movie. Do you like popcorn, Ms. Prince? Or is that something else of which you’ve been deprived?”

“Popcorn would be wonderful, Marta, thank you. Not too much salt, however, and please do not drown it with butter.” She patted her stomach and sighed. “I have reached the age when I must observe my caloric intake closely, lest I be forced to purchase larger garments.”

Jon grinned at her. “Ms. Prince, I think you should sit between Dad and Marta. I’ll sit on the other side of my cootie-infested sister. Assuming that’s okay with Dad, of course.”

Clark took Diana’s elbow and guided her to the couch. “I think that would be just fine.”

Mark Knopfler’s acoustic guitar softly floated over the end credits as the four of them sat on the couch, each unwilling to be the first to break the mood. Clark glanced at Diana and saw moisture in her eyes, then looked at his daughter and saw the same thing.

Then he saw something he’d missed before. Marta and Diana were holding hands.

He didn’t know when they’d first clasped hands, but as he watched they looked at each other and nodded at the same time. Diana almost whispered, “Thank you, Marta.”

Then Clark’s haughty, ultra-cool, completely together, and totally mature teenaged daughter shocked him by throwing her arms around the older woman’s neck and holding tight while her eyes leaked. Jon chose that moment to lean around the two women and give his father two thumbs up.

Clark lifted one eyebrow and pointed at the TV. Jon shook his head, pointed at Diana and Marta, then gave him a monstrous grin and repeated his thumbs-up gesture.

Then he stood and stretched out his arms to each side, yawned, and said, “Boy, I’m wiped out. That movie is great but I always feel so tired after I watch it, especially with all that

kissing and hugging and sword-fighting and other stuff. Well, I’m off to bed. I have a lot of library research to do tomorrow. Got to keep up that med school GPA.”

He was up the stairs and around the corner before anyone could stop him. Marta released Diana and said, “That’s my brother. He hates it when I cry over a movie.”

“That’s true, Diana. You should see how those two reacted to ‘The Notebook.’ Polar opposites.”

Diana slipped the girl’s embrace and chuckled. “I am familiar with that one. I suppose he laughed at his sister as she wept for the poor couple who were separated by the woman’s unfortunate mental deficiency.”

Marta nodded. “You nailed it. I cried until I could barely see. He laughed at me until he fell on the floor.” She lifted her finger to make a point. “But he didn’t laugh at their situation. I think it hit a little close to home for him.”

Diana softly answered, “And for you also, I would think.”

“Yeah, I guess that was part of it too.”

Diana took both of Marta’s hands in hers. “I am glad that I first watched this particular photoplay with you and your brother. You both made it most enjoyable.”

“Hey!” Clark said. “I was here too!”

Marta pulled one hand loose, then reached out and patted his knee. “Of course you were, Father. I’m just glad you were able to stay awake this late.”

“Oh, really? How about I take you over my knee and show you how awake and alert I am?”

Marta jumped up and leaped toward the stairs. “Never mind! You two say goodnight, but don’t take too long! Older people need their sleep, you know.”

Diana didn’t say anything, but Clark saw Marta’s gaze rest on their guest for a long moment before she spun away and started bunny-hopping up the stairs. Just before Clark spoke up and told her to be quiet, Diana stage-whispered, “Do not awaken your sister!”

Marta all but froze in mid-hop, then softly and gently continued upstairs and down the hall to her room. Diana turned to Clark and waved her hands. “Please forgive me, Clark. It is not my place to correct your children. I shall not do so again.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Hey, she quieted down. That’s the important thing. And if Ellie had gotten up, I’m pretty sure you would’ve had to put her back to bed.” He hesitated, then asked, “Would you — Are you thirsty? Do you want something to drink? Coffee? Iced tea?”

She smiled and put her hand on his arm. “No, thank you. I should be going. As Jon said, it is late, and I require rest even if you do not.”

He stood and put out his hand for her. She took it and rose effortlessly. And she ended up standing closer to him than he thought was safe.

They looked into each other’s eyes for a long moment, then Diana moved back a half-step. “Thank you for inviting me, Clark. I do not recall when I have enjoyed any evening this much.”

He lifted the hand he was still holding and kissed it with his lips. “I enjoyed it too. And all three of the kids approve of you.”

He was surprised by her sudden blush. “Oh, please do not flatter me. Marta, I think, was happy to share the movie with me. I am not so certain about Jon, however.”

“I am. He told me that if I don’t make a move pretty soon, he would.”

Her other hand flew to her mouth to cover her most un-royal snort of laughter. “He did not!”

“He did. In fact, both of them gave me encouragement to — um — to see where this relationship might lead.”

“I see.” She smiled again and ducked her head. “In that case, would it be both proper and appropriate for me to initiate a good-

night kiss?”

Clark tilted his head quizzically. “With me or with Jon?”

She snorted again, then punched him in the chest with her free hand. He rubbed the spot as if truly hurt. “You know, I actually felt that. You hit pretty hard, Ms. Prince.”

“And you have put me off-balance, Mr. Kent. I have not snorted in that fashion since before I took up the tiara and lasso.”

“I’ll put it in my journal of significant accomplishments.”

Her grin lifted one side of her mouth. “I expected that you would. Now, if you have fully drained your reservoir of witty repartee, I would like my kiss before I depart.”

He took her hands and pulled her closer. “Oh, so now it’s ‘your’ kiss, eh?”

She stopped with her face inches from his. “Clark?”

“Yes?”

“In the words of one of your most talented and celebrated musical philosophers, shut up and kiss me.”

So he touched his hands to her elbows and obeyed her command.

It was soft, gentle, warm, and tender. It felt like ‘good-bye for now and I hope to see you soon’ to Clark. It was not a forever kiss, but it was a promise to explore the future together. And it lasted just as long as it was supposed to.

She drifted back, her eyes still closed. “I — ah — that was — a very good kiss.”

He took a deep breath and let it out slow. “It was that.”

She opened her eyes and looked into his face. “I should leave now.”

“Probably.”

She slowly drifted back from him and slid her hands down his forearms to grasp his fingers. “Definitely. But reluctantly, I assure you.”

“I’ll walk you to the door.”

“Only if you do not kiss me again. You breach my emotional ramparts, Clark, and I do not wish to damage what may grow between us by moving too quickly.”

He let her step back to arm’s length. “You’re right. But I plan to call you tomorrow.”

“Good. When we next meet, I shall have my servants prepare a picnic for five and we shall all dine in a private garden where the press will not disturb us.”

Hand in hand, they slipped across the carpet to the front door. “Servants, huh? I thought Amazon princesses did things for themselves.”

“We usually do perform such functions for ourselves, but if I do not allow the servants to do something for me occasionally, they become surly and frustrated.” She put her hand on the doorknob and stopped. “Besides, I am reliably informed that they believe that I would be a fool’s fool if I did not allow this relationship to move forward. Assuming that it does, of course.”

“I would like for us to move forward together. I’d like that very much.”

“So would I, my friend. But I do not wish to interfere with your family relationships as they stand now. You have a wonderful and powerful bond amongst you, and I would be hate myself were I to interfere with the years you and Lois have invested in your children. I believe there is time for us, Clark, and I am willing to wait and see what the future brings us.”

Clark took her hands in his and got serious. “I’m going to tell you something about Lois, and I don’t want you to think that I’m comparing the two of you. I’m not. I wouldn’t do that in a million years. But Lois and I knew that she might not live a normal lifespan when we married, and that I might outlive her even if she did. We both knew we probably wouldn’t have all those years together, and we talked about it at great length. Do you know what she told me?”

Diana inched closer to him and breathed, “No. What did she

say to you?”

“That it wasn’t the years, it was the moments.”

She frowned slightly and tilted her head. “I am not certain that I understand your meaning.”

“Sorry. What we meant is that the number of years wasn’t as important as the number of moments we had together, moments we’d always remember because they were significant. That our love wouldn’t be measured by the number of those years, but by those moments we made together. That we didn’t know how many years we might have, so we’d need to put as many good moments as we could in those years.” He sighed. “We had a lot of good moments.”

“I — I believe I understand now.” She took a breath and held it for a long moment, then said, “I am not confident that I am able to live up to your memories of Lois.”

He shook his head in the negative. “I don’t want you to. I don’t want anyone to do that. If I marry again — and I promise you that I’m open to it — I want a wife who is her own woman. I don’t want to marry someone who’s going to try to impersonate Lois Lane. It would be as frustrating as me marrying a widow and trying to become her late husband. Nobody could make that mess work out well.”

She nodded back and seemed to relax a bit. “I think I understand this also. I promise to be myself and not anyone else.” She smiled and moved closer again. “And in the spirit of that promise, I would like to tell you something.”

He nodded. “You can tell me whatever you want to tell me, Diana.”

Her eyes glimmered in the muted lighting. “Then I will make a moment, for myself if not for both of us.” She put her arms around his neck and kissed him again, then pulled back and smiled. “I love you, Clark Kent.”

Her simple statement stunned him. In years past, Diana had occasionally wondered aloud why anyone as powerful as himself would bother with a civilian identity. She’d once suggested that he drop his Clark Kent persona and become Superman full time. She had always seemed puzzled by his aversion to the spotlight, insisting that Superman could do so much more for mankind if he didn’t have a second life to take up so much of his time.

Did this mean that she’d changed her opinion of him?

She pulled him back to the present as her arms slipped away. “And now I must take my leave. Please do not pursue me and declare your own undying devotion to me. You must consider what has taken place tonight and whether or not your feelings truly reflect your heart, and that you are not simply reacting to the moment.”

“Uh — okay. As long as you promise to do the same.”

“I shall indeed. Whether or not you believe this, my intentions for tonight included only dinner and pleasant conversation. I did not come here tonight intending to declare my undying affection for you. This — this entire experience is quite new and fresh to me. I find myself both frightened and exhilarated by the possibilities in my future. And I am unsure of the course I should chart.”

He smiled. “I think I understand how you feel. I’m more than a little frightened and exhilarated myself.”

Diana’s head tilted to one side. “And — perhaps you are a bit unsure?”

He nodded slowly. “More than a bit, but yes, I’m unsure.”

“Then I hope that we shall resolve our differences as friends.” She dropped her eyes to the floor for a moment, then looked up at him again as her smile faded. “Clark, do you recall my statement some years ago that Superman could be a far more effective hero and could do more to help humanity were he to be only Superman?”

“Yes. I was just thinking about that.”

She reached out and touched his wrist. “I now deeply regret

that statement and the pride which spawned it. I could not have been more wrong. You are a good man, a very good man, and as much good comes from you being Superman, I cannot envision this city — or this family — being as healthy and safe as it is without Clark Kent as its hero and protector.” She reached back without looking and opened the front door. “Good night.”

The door slipped shut and Clark peeked through it to watch her. With her head held high, her eyes forward and her step sure, she walked briskly to the back of the limo where she opened the door herself. A moment later the car purred away.

He turned to see Jon leaning against the foyer wall, his arms crossed and a bright smile dancing on his lips. “When did she say that picnic was scheduled, Dad?”

“The exact date is to be announced later. Why, do you have a conflicting appointment?”

“I just don’t want you to forget it, that’s all.”

“Watch it, son, I’m not over the hill yet.”

“That’s true.” Jon straightened, stepped forward, and put his hand on his father’s shoulder. “I think Ellie will be a totally cute flower girl.”

Clark frowned. “That’s enough for tonight. I thought you had to be at the library early in the morning.”

“I do, but I don’t need sleep any more than you do. Besides, Marta’s waiting at the head of the stairs so I can fill her in.”

“What, she couldn’t eavesdrop herself?”

“She’s highly ethical, like you, whereas my ethics are a little more flexible, like Mom’s were.” He lifted his hand and shook his index finger at his father. “Speaking of ethics, I distinctly remember hearing from Mom that you were the one who first said that it wasn’t the years but the moments. That’s inverse plagiarism or something.”

“I don’t think ‘plagiarization’ is a real word.”

Jon shrugged. “My question stands, irregardless. And I already know that ‘irregardless’ isn’t a real word so don’t correct me.”

Clark smiled at his son. “I think I did say it first, but your mother and I said it to each other a lot. Neither of us wanted the years to slip away without filling them with good moments.” He looked away and sighed, still smiling. “And I think we did.”

Jon’s face grew serious. “Dad, I mean this. If you and Ms. Prince should get married, I’d be proud to call her Momma D, or Diana, or ‘Hey you!’ or whatever she wants me to call her. I haven’t seen you with this twinkle in your eyes for a long time, and if she can keep it there I’m all for bringing her into the family.”

“Thank you, Son. Really.” He shrugged. “I can’t make any promises at this point, but you obviously heard most of what we said, so you know as much as I do. If it should happen, it will happen.”

“Oh, really? What about all those times before you were married when you and Mom almost broke up or slipped apart or nearly got permanently separated somehow? You need to push the situation if you love her.”

“You do know who Diana Prince is in her other job, right?”

“Of course I do. And I didn’t mean for you to put any pressure on Wonder Woman. I don’t think that would work out very well at all. What I meant was that you shouldn’t just wait for things to happen. Try helping Destiny along a little.”

“Again, how many steady girlfriends have you had?”

“Don’t be dense, Dad. You know why I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Uh, well, no, not really. You’re going to have to spell that one out for me.”

Jon shook his head as if disgusted with his father. “It’s you, old man! I’m hanging around here single and unattached because of you! Marta and I both want to find a suitable wife for you so we can move ahead with our own lives!”

Clark’s jaw dropped. He took off his glasses and rubbed his face with his free hand.

Jon shook his head again. “I’m sorry, Dad, I thought you knew. Marta and I made that deal on the first anniversary of Mom’s funeral. That’s why she’s so caustic toward the women you bring home. She’s testing them to see if they wilt under pressure.”

“I see.” He put his glasses back on. “And what is your role in this interview process?”

“Peacemaker, in case Marta pushes our guest too far. She tried it with Ms. Prince tonight, but Marta couldn’t rattle her at all. She took everything Mart threw at her and stood her ground without getting defensive or angry.”

“Was it part of the plan to hug our guest after the movie?”

“What? No! I was as surprised as you were. But we both think Diana’s the real deal. If you don’t keep up this relationship, Marta might move in with Diana and leave the two of us here to deal with Ellie the super-genius toddler.”

Clark laughed. “Come on, let’s get some sleep. You fill Marta in and I’ll check on your little sister, and then I want the two of you to leave me alone tomorrow. I’ve got some serious thinking to do.”

“Got it. And if you want any advice from either of us—”

“I’ll find you and beat it out of you, just like I always do.”

They two men shared a chuckle, then Clark headed for the back bedroom on the lower level. “Good night, Son.”

“Night, Dad. Sleep well.”

Clark changed into his pajamas and sat on the edge of his bed. The possibilities for the future roiled through his mind. Diana had hinted very strongly that she’d marry him if he asked her in the right way, at the right time, and for the right reasons. He liked her very much and the kids seemed quite taken with her. He’d been surprised but not uncomfortable when Marta had obeyed Diana’s admonition to be quiet and not wake up Ellie. It had felt natural somehow.

Jon had told him how he and Marta felt. Ellie would surely be pleased, assuming her four-year-old mind would remain constant. Although, as he thought about it, he realized that Ellie hadn’t exchanged ten words with the other broads who had—

Women, he told himself, they were women! Doggone it, Marta had him doing it now.

He knew how Jimmy and Darla would react. They’d be over the moon, as the English say, and would insist on helping to plan the wedding. Lucy would be just as enthusiastic. She’d insist on checking out any prospective stepmom for Clark’s kids, of course, but he doubted she’d find fault with Diana.

He wondered for a long moment what his parents would have told him. Probably to make sure she was willing to help raise another woman’s kids, then go forward with his decision.

They’d passed away within a month of each other two years before and he still missed them terribly.

Then he thought about Lois’ parents. Sam probably would have advised him to stay unmarried, given the risks. Ellen, the children’s only living grandparent, would probably object to any woman taking her daughter’s place. She had even pitched seven kinds of fits when Lucy had moved in with them for several months after Lois’ funeral. But Ellen’s rock-solid help in their time of trouble had saved Clark’s sanity and kept Jon from breaking down completely.

Perry would have smiled and related an Elvis anecdote, then put his hand on Clark’s shoulder and told him to check for spelling and grammar errors on the license before he signed it.

The thought of signing something with Diana brought the thought of a pre-nuptial agreement to his mind. Which, of course, was ridiculous, since Diana was many times richer than he was. She was an Amazon princess, after all.

And that made him think of Hippolyta, Diana's mother.

The one time they'd met, six years before at a U.N. summit in Jamaica, the queen of the Amazons had come across to Superman as more than just a little haughty and arrogant. She had all but dismissed him from her sight and had focused in on Lois, who'd been there to cover the event for the Planet and to get material for her column, which by that time had gone international. The woman had been insulting enough to him that Wonder Woman had apologized to him for her mother after the event concluded.

He'd let Diana break the news to her mother. Assuming there was any news to break, that is.

Funny. On Tuesday, he'd asked Diana to dinner, thinking that maybe there might be some possibility for a closer relationship between them. And now, on Friday night, he was thinking about asking her to marry him. Even for him, that was fast.

He smiled to himself and began his nightly ritual.

The picture of Lois and the two older kids beside his bed was one of his favorites. She was sitting on the grass in the back yard, rocking mom jeans and a fresh haircut, and laughing as she held eight-year-old Jon in one arm and five-year-old Marta in the other. Both children were also laughing, and Marta's feet were off the ground as if she were floating.

He remembered taking that picture. The day had been clear and brilliant, with just enough cool north breeze to keep the mosquitos grounded. He'd almost called out to the kids to be gentle with their mother, but Lois was having such a good time that he didn't have the heart.

His fingers touched the glass and he sighed. "Hey, Lois. It's me again. I still miss you."

Memories of the woman he loved, the mother of the children he once thought he'd never have, cascaded through his mind in a parade of the moments they'd made together. Some of them made him sad, but the immediate pain of losing her had dulled to a mild ache in his heart. And so many more of those moments made him smile that they far outweighed the sad ones.

He looked at the picture again and said, "I think I've met someone who can love me almost as much as you did. And I think I can love her almost as much as I loved you. The kids like her a lot, especially little Ellie. That little girl is almost too smart for me to handle and she's just four! If Diana and I really do decide to get married, I'm going to need her help to keep our littlest one from driving everyone around her crazy. She had Diana reading to her from a quantum physics book tonight, and I think Ellie understood more of it than I did."

He took off his glasses and lay back on the bed, then set the picture on his chest. "Diana's a special lady. She's not like you, but she is like you. She cares about right and wrong and about doing the right thing. She told me tonight that she loved me and wouldn't let me say anything back to her. No demands, no expectations, no requirements, no conditions, she just said that she loved me."

He looked directly into Lois's picture eyes. "And I mean she said she loved Clark me, not Superman me. In fact, now that I think about it, Superman wasn't a major topic of the conversation at all." He tilted his head as if waiting for a response, then said, "Yeah, I think that's promising too."

"Anyway, it's time for me to get some sleep. I love you and I miss you, Lois. But I remember that you told me not to be alone. There's a country song from the point of view of a young woman whose husband or boyfriend or whoever has died and she's trying to move forward with her life. She sings in the chorus that she probably wouldn't hurt so bad if they hadn't loved each other so much. That's pretty much how I feel about you. I wouldn't miss you so much if you hadn't been such a wonderful wife and mother and companion and everything else you were that completed me."

He set the picture back on the end table and adjusted it just

so. "You'll always be a part of my life, Lois. Nearly everything I have now is because of you. My career, our kids, the house, my place in Metropolis, even my being Superman, is all because of you. Oh, I know I would have ended up somewhere doing something productive with my life even if I hadn't met you, but it wouldn't have been as wonderful or anywhere near so fulfilling.

"Maybe life with Diana will be close to what we had. If it is, then I'll be satisfied with it. And if it doesn't happen, I'll be satisfied with that, too."

He turned off the bedside lamp and settled down under the covers. "Goodnight, Lois. Sweet dreams."

Epilogue

Five months later

Diana sat on the cemetery bench, her hands kneading her purse over and over. She knew what she wanted to do. She even believed she knew what she was supposed to do.

She simply didn't know if she could do it.

Clark's proposal — along with a modest but quite beautiful engagement ring — had not surprised her. She had no doubt that he loved her and that his proposal was both sincere and heartfelt. She even believed he had thought through as many of the possible future permutations as he could before broaching the subject. As his knee had touched the ground and his hands had grasped hers, she'd heard him say the words she'd been hoping and praying he would one day say to her.

And instead of a tearful "Yes!" she'd asked for time.

He'd blinked several times, cryptically growled "Again?" at something off to one side, then stood, turned to her face her again, and nodded. "Okay," he'd said, "I think I've learned some patience in the last two decades. Please take all the time you need. I only ask that you give me something to hang on to, some indication of where you're going with this."

She had promised that he would be the first one with whom she would share her decision.

He had nodded again, then closed the ring box and handed it to her. "Please. Keep this, and think about it. If you decide to accept, just put the ring on and come show me. If you decide to decline, just give me back the box with the ring in it. I won't put any pressure on you, and I'll accept your decision no matter what it is."

That had been four days before and she had heard nothing from him.

Should she marry him? She wanted to. She loved Clark Kent and wanted to spend the rest of her life with him.

Was he ready to marry her? He said he was, and she believed him.

Were the kids in favor of the marriage? Jon and Marta had campaigned for her and to her ever since that first family dinner. And little Ellie had behaved as if Diana were already her mother since that night.

So why was Diana so hesitant to accept?

Simple. It was because of Lois Lane.

Clark and the two older children had filled her with so many stories of how great Lois had been and how driven she'd been to be the best she could be that it had become intimidating. Then she'd made the mistake of relating some of her trepidation to her mother. Yes, Mother, it was foolish for a princess of Themyscira to be intimidated by the memory of a simple human woman. Of course, Mother, the Amazons were superior to mere human women in every way. No, Mother, a normal run-of-the-mill human woman — or even a very special mere human woman — could never be perceived as being superior to the lowest Amazon. Not even the Lois Lane whose life the Amazons still celebrated every year.

Hippolyta had not known Lois Lane-Kent very well at all.

And Diana feared that she'd never live up to such a lofty

standard.

A scrape of a shoe on the gravel path alerted her that she was no longer alone. She quickly dried her eyes and inhaled deeply to present the proper royal appearance to whoever was coming.

She stood, straightened herself regally, and turned, only to be tackled around the leg by a preschool tornado. “Mommy D! I’m so glad to see you! When are you coming to live with us? You need to come home and kiss Daddy again ‘cause he’s so sad! He’s not sad when you’re around so you need to come home with us!”

Marta strolled up and grinned. “Hey, Ms. Prince. I see you found Ellie.”

Diana picked up the little girl and kissed her on each cheek. “Hello, little one. Have you been a good girl lately?”

“Yes! I knew you were here so I brought Mart to talk to you. Put me down so I can go sit by Mommy, okay?”

“Of course. Here you go.”

“Thank you. Have a good talk!” And just like that, she turned and sprinted to Lois’ grave and sat beside it.

Diana turned to see Marta already sitting on the bench. “How did your sister know I was here? This — visit was a spur-of-the-moment decision.”

Marta patted the bench beside her. “She reads you like I used to read Mom.”

Diana sat down and frowned at the teen. “She — reads me? I do not understand.”

Marta shrugged. “I don’t either, not really, except that it seems to be from Dad’s side of the family. I just knew when Mom was in trouble or when she needed help or just needed any of us for anything. In fact, I’m the one who made Uncle Jimmy and Aunt Darla take us to the hospital the night Mom died. I think Jon has the same kind of contact with Dad even if he won’t talk about it.”

“I see. And Ellie appears to have this same sympathetic communication with me?”

“Seems to, yeah. She knew you’d be here, so she got dressed and put on her coat and informed me that we were going to see Mommy D and I’d better come quick or Daddy would be mad at me for not watching her good enough.”

Diana chuckled. “That does sound like Ellie.”

“Yeah, it does. But this doesn’t sound like you. What’s going on? Why haven’t you been to the house in the past few days?”

“I — there is — I have a — a decision — oh, bother! Your father has asked me to marry him!”

Marta lifted her eyebrows. “You say that as if it were a bad thing.”

“It is not! I — I do not feel ready.”

“Ready? To do what, deal with Dad? You’ve been doing that as Wonder Woman for years.”

“No! I am quite comfortable dealing with your father in a professional context. That is not the issue.”

“You’re comfortable with him, huh? I’d think he’d rather you be passionate — or at least pleased — about dealing with him at any time in any way. Maybe it’s Jon, or me?”

Diana’s voice softened. “No, Marta, please do not believe that. You and your brother have done nothing but welcome me into your home and into your family since that first dinner. I assure you, the issue does not involve you, your brother, or your sister.”

“Hmm. Not Dad, not the kids, not the idea of marriage, so is it your family? Maybe they don’t want you throwing your life away raising another woman’s kids. Or being a second wife to some guy, even Superman.”

“I — admit that my mother can be — difficult. And she is less than completely enthusiastic about this proposed union. But that is not the reason I am — oh, what is an appropriate word?”

“Conflicted, hesitant, unsure, cautious, tentative, diffident,

undecided—”

Diana laughed ruefully. “Have you chosen a career as a walking thesaurus?”

“Attorney, I think. Gotta know all those big words that take up space and don’t clarify anything.”

They shared a chuckle, then Marta said, “I think we’ve narrowed it down. You’re afraid you won’t measure up to Mom’s standards. Am I right?”

Diana ducked her head and stared at the ground. “Yes. I — must admit the truth of what you are saying.” She lifted her head and looked in Marta’s direction without making eye contact. “Does that not make me a coward?”

“No.” Marta scooted closer and took Diana’s hand in hers. “It makes you thoughtful and humble. And a little uninformed.”

“What? Uninformed?”

“Look, I loved my mother and I’ll defend her against anyone who attacks her, but you have to know she wasn’t perfect. I can’t tell you all the times she missed lunch or dinner or some school function or her publisher’s deadlines because she couldn’t — or wouldn’t — quit sticking her neck out and daring some moron to chop her head off. Dad always swooped in at the last minute to save her, but she made both him and her doctors so mad sometimes you could see steam coming off them. She risked her life and her health to get stories she wasn’t supposed to be chasing so many times I quit counting. And I can’t help but think that — that she stressed her liver with all of that idiocy and maybe even shortened her own life because of it.” She growled deep in her throat and looked beyond Diana. “Sometimes I got so mad that I — I wanted to tell her—”

“Marta, dear, please contain yourself. There is no threat here.”

Marta turned away and wiped her nose on her coat sleeve. “I’m — I’m sorry. I thought I was past all that.”

Diana moved closer and put her arm around the girl. “Your feelings are natural. Do not apologize. I was not here, so I cannot speak to the accuracy of your impressions. But judging by what I have learned about her and what your family has told me, what you say about your mother’s possible failings is not inconsistent with her character.”

“Boy, you go the long way around Laura’s house to say something, don’t you?”

“I am trying to be diplomatic. After all, I did not know your mother well on a personal level.”

“I know.” Marta turned and looked into Diana’s eyes. “So why did you put her on a pedestal? I’m her daughter and I don’t. Sometimes I even get mad at her for leaving.”

“Please do not do that. Your mother was who she was, and had she been a different person your father would not have loved her as he did. And despite her flaws — which I know of only through you — I think she did some very wonderful things.”

“Yeah, I know, she had Jon and Ellie and me. And she wrote all of those tell-all books with real truth in them. But I’ve never understood why she even talked to Lex Luthor. He was such a snot.”

Diana smiled. “That is what I am given to understand. She also wrote those wonderful Wanda Detroit mysteries.”

Marta turned stunned eyes to Diana. “Wanda Detroit? That’s what you remember about Mom?”

Diana lifted her head and looked around them, then leaned close. “I shall share a secret with you if you will promise not to tell your father.”

“A secret about Mom that Dad doesn’t know but you do? What kind of secret?”

The older woman’s mouth twitched. “It is a mischievous secret.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s the best kind! Tell me, tell me!”

“You must promise first.”

“Oh, I promise. Gimme gimme!”

“My mother—” Diana turned and looked around them again, then quietly said, “My mother owns a hardbound copy of every title in the series, each one personally signed by your mother on the inside cover.”

Marta’s mouth fell open. “No! How’d your mom manage that?”

Diana grinned. “She had one of her trusted advisers visit your mother’s personal appearances, and she always had your mother inscribe it ‘To Lita, Your Most Ardent Supporter.’ I doubt your mother ever knew that my mother was one of her greatest fans.”

Marta whooped and clapped her hands. “Oh, that’s great! I can’t wait to tell Jon!”

“As long as you do not tell your father!”

“No way, not on your tiara!”

They shared another laugh, then Marta tapped Diana’s purse. “I’m guessing you brought the ring with you. I’m also guessing that you planned to ask Mom what to do.”

“You are most perceptive, young lady. Perhaps too much so.” Diana sighed. “Yes, I had planned to imagine a dialogue between myself and your mother. But I could not. Nothing came to my mind, neither her words nor her image, so I am as much in the dark now as I was yesterday.”

“No, you’re not. You know what to do.”

Diana’s eyes narrowed. “And I suppose you know that it is that I am to do?”

“I’m pretty sure you’re supposed to do the right thing, no matter how difficult it might be. One of the things Mom told us was that the right thing was often the path of most resistance, and that’s why so few people did the right thing when they had a clear choice.”

Diana inhaled deeply. “You are correct. I do know what I am intended to do.” She reached into her purse and brought out the ring box, then looked at Marta again. “You do realize that this entire enterprise will not be easy, do you not?”

“If being my dad’s wife, being the woman who supports Superman at home, who helps raise his children, and who chooses to blend her life with his was easy, any bimbo could do it.” Marta nudged Diana’s shoulder with her open hand. “And you’re no bimbo.”

“Thank you.” Diana took the ring out and looked at it, then smiled and sighed. “I told your father that when I made my decision he would be the first to hear it.”

Through her grin, Marta said, “So don’t say anything to me. Just put it on and come home with us. Dad will be there in a couple of hours and you can tell him then.” The girl nudged the hand holding the ring. “Or you could just lift your hand and show him your newly decorated finger.”

“Yes,” Diana smiled. “And then, may I kiss him?”

“Oh, I guess so. As long as you don’t get all sloppy and weepy and stuff. I don’t want to cry along with you.”

“Then that is what I shall do. And you must risk the sloppy and weepy stuff, as you call it. And especially the part about crying along with me.”

Diana smiled widely, then slipped the ring onto the third finger of her left hand. As she snapped the box shut, she realized Ellie was standing beside the bench, staring at her.

“It’s ‘bout time, Mommy D.” Then she reached up with both hands and made a pick-me-up motion. “I’m ready to go home now. You need to help me plan my birthday party. I’m gonna be five soon.”

Diana swept the girl into her arms and laughed. “We are all ready to go home, Ellie. And we shall certainly discuss your party. Do you want to walk or shall I carry you?”

“You can carry me part of the way. I’m a little tired. But I’m glad you put on Daddy’s ring. He’ll be happy now.”

Diana stood, holding Ellie against her shoulder, and reached

out for Marta’s hand. “I hope we shall always be happy, little one.”

“We will if I have anything to say about it,” muttered Marta.

“I am sorry, Marta, I did not quite hear that.”

“That’s okay. I was talking to myself.”

Diana nodded sagely. “Of course. I must inform my driver and security team where I am going, but that will take only a moment. Do you wish to come? I know that they would be glad to see you.”

Marta grinned. “Yeah, but they’ll be even more glad to tickle Ellie and spoil her a little more. You two go on. I just need a minute or so.”

Diana gazed down at the girl. “Please take all the time you wish, so long as you do not keep your sister out too late.”

“Not a problem.”

Diana hefted Ellie and smiled at her. “Come, little one, we shall discuss quantum physics and Schrödinger’s kitty cat with Dorinda and Frances. They will be more than happy to debate you on the subject.”

“We don’t hafta stick with the Copenhagen interpretation, do we?”

“I am not participating in that discussion. You, however, may argue whichever side of that proposition you support.”

“Yay! Do they got chocolate sticks too?”

Diana laughed. “I believe we can convince them to part with at least one chocolate stick.”

Marta watched the woman she’d hoped would marry her father carry her little sister to the Princess’ limo, then turned and took the few steps which brought her to her mother’s grave. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then began speaking.

“Hey, Mom. Dad’s finally getting married again. Yeah, I know, he waited long enough, didn’t he? But I think he’s getting the right woman. I like to think you’d like her a lot.

“Speaking of women, I’m starting to understand what you meant about my teaching Ellie to be one. I hope Diana approves, because I don’t plan to stop.” Marta paused, then continued, “I may slow it down a little, though. Ellie learns so fast, and I don’t want her to grow up too quickly. She’s almost scary now with what she knows and what she understands. Now that I think about it, it’s a little like you were with me. So, yeah, I’m keeping Ellie in the dark about a lot of things as long as I can.

“Jon’s set to graduate this coming May with his pre-med B.A. and a grade-point average of 3.92 out of 4.00. We’ve had three different doctors come to visit us, trying to get him to commit to their schools for his doctoral training. It’s almost like he was a football player and college coaches were showing up trying to recruit him. His grades are so good and his resume is so sharp that I don’t think we’ll have any trouble paying for the rest of his education. They’re gonna throw scholarship money at him like baseballs at a carney bottle knockdown game. He’s going to be a great doctor and save a lot of lives. Just don’t tell him I said that. You’ll ruin my reputation with him.

“I think I’m going to be a lawyer. I’ve set up both my junior and senior years in high school to point in that direction, anyway. And I’ve got the grades to get into a pre-law program. Dad’s been moaning about having to pay for two kids in high-cost college programs, but he’s so proud he’s fit to bust his buttons. And I can’t wait to see how he acts if Ellie follows through on her plans to be a physicist. He’d be able to fly without his powers.”

She stopped and knelt on the soft grass. “I still miss you, Mom. I’ll always miss you. But I know you didn’t really want to go. Oh, I still get a little mad when I think about you going off to investigate stuff when we were little when Dad and Dr. Richards and Dr. Klein all told you it was worse than a really bad idea, but I know why you did it. You wanted to make the world a better place for us to live in, just like Uncle Perry said at your funeral.

“Diana wants that too. And that’s the main reason I think you’d approve of her marrying Dad. Besides, she really loves him. And her servants want her to marry him, and yes, she’s that rich! Hey, I just now realized that maybe Dad won’t have to worry about paying for anyone’s tuition.”

She laughed softly. “I have to go now. Diana just put Dad’s ring on her hand. He asked her to marry him several days ago. I guess he’s attracted to women who don’t know their own minds or what a good deal they’re getting.”

Her hands found the ground and she leaned forward slightly. “I will always love and miss you, Mom, but it’s okay. Diana’s going to pick up where you left off and do great. And one of the big reasons will be because you were so great. Jon and Ellie and I are your legacy, and we’re all going to do our best to live up to your example. You and Dad changed the world for the better, and we’re going to change it even more. You won’t be forgotten.”

Marta closed her eyes and ducked her head. She stayed that way for a long moment, until she felt the feather touch of her little sister’s hug around her neck. “Mart? We gotta go home now, okay? Mommy D has to kiss Daddy and tell him she’s staying with us from now on so he’ll be happy. Don’t you wanna come see?”

Marta brushed the moisture from her eyes and smiled. “Sure I do, Squirt. I wouldn’t miss that for the world.”

Ellie grinned. “I’ll race you back to Mommy D, okay? And this time I’m gonna beat you!”

“In your dreams, Short Stuff. You count the start.”

“Okay. One — two—” Ellie burst out of her sister’s loose hug and began running. “—three!”

“Hey!” Marta lurched to her feet and began running after Ellie. “That’s cheating!”

“Not if I win!”

Diana stood beside the limo’s open back door, and as the two sisters raced toward her she put her arms out to either side. She grabbed Ellie and picked her up with one arm, then snatched Marta off the pavement with the other and let her inertia spin them around. Marta knew that was what was happening because Ellie busy shouting things like “Inertia! Angular momentum! Orbital gravitational attraction!”

All three of them laughed like kindergarteners at recess, and their laughter was echoed by Diana’s servants. At the wheel, Dorinda called out her congratulations, and Frances clasped her hands together and wept with obvious joy. Marta could feel how much Diana — no, she’d get to call her Momma D from now on — thrilled at the contact with the girls and the experience of being close to them. It was as if they were three distinct parts of an indivisible whole. The only thing better would be to pull Dad and Jon into the embrace and complete the family again.

To Marta, it felt like coming home.

the end

and a new beginning