

State's Evidence

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Rated: PG-13 (for emotional stress and some violence)

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Summary: Clark and Lois do not meet until Lex Luthor – Lois' husband of five years – has been indicted for his various and sundry crimes, and his wife Lois has agreed to testify against him in open court. But it will require Detective Clark Kent's determination and grit, along with his special abilities, to get her to the witness stand alive. An alternative beginning to our favorite couple's relationship.

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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.

A/N – This story is inspired by the 1952 movie “The Narrow Margin,” which was shot almost entirely on a passenger train (real and stage set) and it is famous for having no music other than some overheard radio broadcasts and a smattering of records played on a portable phonograph. Even the opening credits had no music under them, just a series of locomotive noises. If you'd like to read about it, you can learn more at IMDB or Rotten Tomatoes (which gave the film a rare 100% rating). I tried to capture the tension and subtext in the movie, though the story line of my tale takes a somewhat different tone and direction. And it isn't necessary to have watched this movie to understand or enjoy my latest tale. (Hope not, anyway.)

The toys start out somewhat bent, but they're straighter and shinier by the end. And many deserved thanks go to the long-suffering betas on this tale, DarthMichael and Folc4evernaday. They made many excellent suggestions along the way, some of which I actually used. If you find something you like, it's a good chance that at least one of them had something to do with it.

Prologue

Mayson met Clark at the front door to Metropolis City Hall at exactly eight-twenty-five that Monday morning in mid-April. “You ready for this?” she asked.

He smiled at her. “When have you found me not ready for anything?”

A touch of acid crept into her voice. “Let me see – yes, I've got it. I'm thinking of a long weekend ski trip with me back in late January where you stood me up because you weren't ready.”

The smile melted away and she missed it immediately. “That was almost three months ago, Mayson. Besides, that's not what I meant and you know it.”

She waved her hand between them. “I know, I know! I'm sorry, I'm just tense.”

“I don't blame you. Cases like this don't come along every day.”

She spun on her toes and began walking, knowing that he'd fall in step beside her in seconds. “I assume you're all packed for the week?”

“I am, but I thought it was just a two-day trip.”

“You should know that when you deal with the Boss, you plan for exigent circumstances.”

“Exigent circumstances, huh? Is that a three-dollar attorney word?”

She was glad to hear the light teasing note in his words. It almost made up for her chasing his smile away. “Just a two-dollar one. Three-dollar words require more serious circumstances.”

“Really? In that case, I hope I never hear you using four-dollar words, especially against me.”

Her snorting chuckle felt good. It was fun to banter with him, fun to walk beside him, fun to work with him. Maybe on their return trip from Denver they could have some fun making serious plans for their future together. It would be fun to pin him down and induce him to commit to her.

A grin nudged her lips and she pushed it away, chiding herself that the time for sex fantasies with Clark was some time other than now.

“Make sure your phone is off, Clark. We don't want any calls from anyone for a while.”

He pulled his electronic tether out of his jacket pocket and pressed a button until it beeped and went dark. “Got it.”

They turned and walked down the stairs to the lowest level, then strode to an unlabeled office suite and entered the front room. Two large men and a tall, broad-shouldered woman reached for their weapons, then relaxed as they recognized the approaching pair.

“Hey, Kent,” the Amerind woman growled. “About time you got here.”

“It's not even nine AM yet, Klaatu. Don't you like hanging around our guest?”

The dark-skinned man crossed his arms. “No. We don't. We're crime-solvers, not babysitters.”

Mayson lifted her hand, then gestured to the two men. “Which of you is Barada and which is Nikto?”

The Asian man sighed. “I'm Nikto and he's Barada for no particular reason that I can determine. She's Klaatu because of her death stare.”

Clark grinned. “If they had a fourth member, he or she would have to be named Gort.”

Barada, the big black man, shook his head. “Naw. We'd be John, Paul, George, and Ringo.” He pointed to the female member of the trio. “She'd be Ringo.”

Mayson bit her lower lip to keep from smiling. “Whatever. I assume your charge is through that door?”

Nikto nodded his massive bullet head. “There's an interrogation viewing room behind the door. The package is in interrogation with Captain Henderson.”

Mayson nodded. “Good. You three hang around, okay?”

“Can we get some breakfast?” asked Klaatu.

“Not until we take formal possession of the package,” Mayson replied. “Besides, I doubt that any of you would faint from malnutrition if you missed a meal.”

Barada groaned. “Speak for yourself, Ms. Drake. I have a low blood sugar condition I need to watch.”

“Sorry,” Mayson said, “I can't change the schedule just for that.”

Clark reached into his jacket pocket and brought out a pair of Tootsie Pops. “Will one of these help? I have a sweet tooth I have to feed.”

Barada smiled and took the orange-flavored one. “Hey, thanks, Kent. You're not as bad as your buddies in the department make you seem.”

“Aw, thanks, pal. All you need now is to shave your head like your partner, drop a fedora on it, and we'll start calling you Kojak.”

“Naw, man, we can't break up the band.”

They shared a laugh as they unwrapped the suckers, and each man put his in his mouth. Mayson sighed. “Come on, Clark, we have to get moving.”

“Sure. Later, B.”

Barada turned and opened the door, then closed it behind them.

Clark frowned through the one-way glass at the man and woman sitting at the table. “Is that her?”

Mayson reminded herself not to grind her teeth. “Yes, that’s her.”

“She’s thinner than I remember. And she’s changed her hair style. Color’s different, too.”

“Oh, really? How often did you pal around with the Luthors?”

She was almost disappointed when her sarcasm bounced away without effect. “Never in person, but I watched her on TV. She used to do occasional on-air pieces for LNN when I first came to Metropolis.” He stepped closer. “She had a great voice.”

Mayson fought down the reflexive jealousy she always felt when Clark complimented another woman. “She still does. And she’s going to use it against Lex Luthor if she lives long enough.”

Clark nodded. “And we’re going to make sure that happens.”

“Yep. All the way to the Federal courthouse in West Virginia.”

He gave her an odd look that suggested that he knew more than he was supposed to know, that Colorado was their real destination. Of course he knew. No one could keep a secret from Detective Clark Kent if he really wanted to learn it. He’d fed her enough inside information about the criminals she prosecuted to know that.

But he fooled her. “So you picked me to go with you because of my – special skills?”

“Yes,” she all but whispered. “That’s the reason.”

He returned his gaze to the woman behind the window. “I thought you disapproved of my special skills.”

“I disapprove of your use of them on the job. I don’t want you to become some Batman-wannabe vigilante.”

“Batman does good things in Gotham.”

“He’s their problem, not ours!” Mayson hissed. “We don’t need any Spandex vigilantes in Metropolis!”

He paused to sigh without looking at her. “Maybe we wouldn’t have this problem if there were one more costumed do-gooder in the city.”

“No!” She glanced around and lowered her voice. “We absolutely do not need some – some self-proclaimed superhero flying around trying to fix everything. Power corrupts, Clark, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

The Tootsie Pop fell from his hand into the trash can. “But you want me on this trip. With my absolute power.”

“Yes! This case is too big to let our star canary get killed before she sings!”

“Easy, Mayson, I didn’t mean anything by that.”

She forced herself to calm down – again. Her quick anger at him was getting to be a habit, and she hated it. “I know, I know! It’s just that – if we get a conviction in this case, it’ll knock out most of the high-level corruption in this state and the four surrounding ones. We have to do this.” She stepped forward and put one hand on the glass. “We just have to. Besides, you can control yourself and work within the law. I trust you on that score.”

He paused again before replying, “You trust me absolutely?”

She knew it was a joke, his way of diffusing the tension between them, so she forced herself to react as she knew he wanted her to. “Yes. Especially if I’m there to hold your hand.”

She felt his comforting presence beside her and his reassuring hand on the small of her back. “Okay,” he almost whispered, “then let’s fire up the stove and bake this cake.”

She nodded and tapped on the door. The man and woman inside both looked up. The man stood and moved toward the door, then opened it. “Kent, Drake, you’re here early. Good. Come on in and meet your new best friend.”

As they entered, the woman at the table stood. Mayson gave

her a quick once-over and nodded to her. Before her stood an olive-skinned woman of medium height, thin, maybe a hundred five pounds after a big meal, straight shoulder-length ash-blond hair, full lips, and dark eyes suggesting a hint of something exotic in her ancestry. She was wearing a conservative, almost-formal knee-length dress that probably cost more than Mayson earned in a month, and it was accented by a tasteful bracelet and matching emerald necklace. Mayson risked a glance at the woman’s shoes and knew immediately that they’d been priced at more than three months of her car payments. Even accounting for the stress of the circumstances and her worn appearance, she was stunningly beautiful.

Mayson was glad that Clark wouldn’t be on the road alone with this subject. He might be the oldest living Boy Scout still roaming around in the wild, but no man was immune to every woman on the planet. And something told Mayson that Clark might be extra sympathetic to Mrs. Luthor.

“Detective Clark Kent, Assistant District Attorney Mayson Drake, meet Lois Lane-Luthor, your new best buddy. You two have the privilege of escorting Mrs. Luthor to a safer location so she can testify against her husband.”

The woman frowned and picked up a clutch which matched her dress, then said, “You guys are Federal cops, right?”

“No,” answered Mayson. “I’m an ADA for the city of Metropolis and Clark is a homicide detective. We’re taking you to the Federal protection detail, a squad of U.S. Marshals. Once we hand you off to them, the city of Metropolis will have discharged its legal obligation in this case.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed even more. She turned to her original companion and growled, “That sounds like legal gobbledey-gook to me, Henderson. The deal was that you people give me safe conduct to a Federal facility, not just toss me at the FBI and walk away.”

“We’re giving you safe conduct, Mrs. Luthor,” Bill replied. “You have my word on it.”

The woman flicked her gaze to each of them in turn, then nodded sharply. “Fine. Just one thing. Don’t call me Mrs. Luthor again. Call me Lois, or Ms. Lane, or Hey Stupid, but not Mrs. Luthor.”

Clark lifted a hand as if he were in grade school. “Excuse me, but can Ms. Lane testify against her husband in this matter? I thought there was still a spousal confidentiality clause in the law.”

“There is in New Troy state law,” Mayson assured him, “but the Federal statute says that while a wife can’t be compelled to testify against her husband, if she volunteers to do so there are no limits to what she can say. Providing, of course, that she holds nothing back, and that everything she swears to is the truth and can be verified independently.”

The witness in question snorted in faux amusement. “Oh, it’s all true, honey. I promise to hold back nothing, and you birdbrains don’t suspect half of what I can prove. Dear Lex made the mistake of letting me know what he was doing almost from the beginning, and now it’s coming back to bite him on the butt. If I get to testify, he’ll spend the rest of his life trying to dodge the death penalty.”

“You say you can prove it?” Clark asked.

“I have more than four years’ worth of names, dates, incidents, transaction amounts, the whole ball of wax, all tucked away in a hidden spreadsheet. I’m going to give it to the Federal prosecutor’s office when I’m safe, and if Lex doesn’t know that for sure I know he suspects it. That’s why I need protection.”

Mayson nodded. “Good to hear. I assume you’re all packed and ready?”

The woman snorted again. “Oh, yeah, the butler is shipping my trunks on ahead of me and the maid is waiting with my personal luggage at the front door of the mansion. I’m just waiting for my limo to arrive.”

Mayson resisted the urge to slug her in that sarcastic mouth.

"Well, we're it. All our luggage is already in the car. Clark will take the wheel until we get out of the city, then I'll spell him once we hit the open road. You get the second seat."

"As befitting my refined social station, I presume."

The urge grew and Mayson forced her fists not to clench.

"Sure, if it makes you feel better about this. Well, come on, Ms. Stupid."

The woman returned an Arctic glare. "That's Ms. Galactically Stupid to you, and don't forget it."

Mayson sighed to herself. This was not going to be a fun trip. At least Clark wouldn't be attracted to this harridan in a tailored outfit.

And if she didn't let up, Mayson might strangle her, dump her body in Hob's Bay, and tell the Feds the woman slipped away from them during the night. It would serve her right for marrying a horrible lowlife like Lex Luthor and staying married to him for almost five years.

Chapter One

Clark walked beside Lois Lane with Mayson leading the way. On the other side of Lane was the Amerind woman Clark had called Klaatu, and her friends Nikto and Barada filled the hallway behind the group. The only one of them who wasn't armed with at least one pistol was the witness they were protecting, and none of them besides Mayson knew that Clark could protect them all from anything short of a simultaneous attack from multiple directions with heavy artillery. Lois Luthor – no, she wanted to be called Ms. Galactically Stupid, a term which might have made Clark laugh in a different situation – was as safe as the group could make her.

Clark was determined that this witness arrive at her destination healthy and ready to talk her head off. He'd brushed up against Lex Luthor's criminal organization a number of times for two years as a Metropolis beat cop, then for almost three years as a detective, along with his own behind-the-scenes extra-curricular activities, and he understood Mayson's deep, intense desire to put the man in prison. He shared it. He'd seen too many people hurt or killed, too many families shattered, too many dreams crushed by Luthor's machinations not to feel that way.

Each person in the group kept his or her head moving, checking out anyone and everyone who entered their fields of vision. If the escort had consisted only of Clark and Mayson, most people would still have moved away from Mayson's laser focus and Clark's imposing presence. As it was, even the highest-paid defense attorneys wearing their three-thousand-dollar designer suits and hand-made Italian leather shoes hugged the marble walls on either side of the passageway to avoid contact with this intimidating convoy. Nikto and Barada appeared capable of brushing aside a Bradley armored combat vehicle without drawing their weapons, and Klaatu walked with the deserved confidence of a lioness among a herd of antelope.

Under almost any other circumstances, watching the people's reactions would have been funny.

Mayson turned and led the group down the stairs to the lobby, where she walked to the garage stairs and jerked her head toward the powerful woman behind her. Klaatu drew her weapon and slipped through the door, the pistol held against her trouser leg for concealment. Her two squad mates turned and faced outward, effectively blocking any clear view of the witness or her other escorts.

Lois Lane sighed audibly. "Is all this really necessary?"

Mayson, who was also scanning the hallway, said, "Well, if you prefer, we could just let some wannabe Jack Ruby gun you down before we get you in the vehicle. I'd just as soon that didn't happen, though."

"Huh. I didn't know you cared that much."

"I don't." Mayson turned her glare to the witness for a quick moment. "I just don't want to have to fill out all those extra

forms."

Lane nodded. "Got it. I'm basically a walking deposition to you, nothing more."

Mayson paused and glared some more, then resumed her scan of the hallway. "That's right, a walking, talking deposition with tons of vital information on the most important case of my career. You really don't matter to me, lady. You're just a legal document I have to deliver."

Even though Clark knew Mayson was technically correct, he felt compelled to say something. "Can't we give Ms. Lane a break? She's testifying in a trial to put her husband in prison for a long time. That's got to count for something."

"Don't bother, Kent," grumbled Lane. "She's determined not to like me. As far as she's concerned, I'm almost as guilty as Lex is."

"I've had prosecutions like this fall apart before," fumed Mayson, "because the spousal witness gets cold feet or decides that love is stronger than the law. Until you actually spill your guts on the witness stand, Lane, I won't trust you as far as I can throw you."

The stairway door opened before anyone could lower the temperature further. Klaatu leaned into the hallway and said, "Stairs are clear to the bottom, Ms. Drake, and there are no stairs going up from this level. There are two uniformed officers at each landing going down. Their names and shields all match the names and numbers we were told to expect."

"Good. Let's go."

Mayson gestured for the bigger woman to lead the group down the stairs. Clark made sure the witness was between him and the outside wall, as far from the open area as possible. He didn't think anyone would be foolish enough to shoot at them even in this enclosed space because of the firepower they could direct at any attacker, but that didn't stop him from checking for bad guys with his vision powers. And ever since he'd switched from leaded glass to clear lenses, he could use all of his vision powers except the heat beams without pulling the frames down on his nose.

Klaatu was right, though. The way to the parking basement was clear.

The group halted just inside the metal doorway to the parking area. Two more uniformed officers holding assault rifles stood at either end of a dark blue late model full-sized Ford sedan. Mayson walked out from behind Klaatu and said, "The road trip is on. Daddy even gave us his credit card."

The taller officer near the trunk replied, "Just don't melt it down or Mommy will cry."

Everyone relaxed just a notch. Lane looked up at Clark and shook her head. "That's got to be the dumbest recognition sequence I've ever heard."

He grinned back at her and was glad to see her glare soften ever so slightly. "Maybe, but it worked, didn't it?"

The officer near the car's hood put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a key ring. "Which of you is the lucky stiff?"

Mayson pointed a thumb over her shoulder. "Tall guy with glasses. Clark, you go get the seat and mirrors adjusted. I'm going to make sure the Princess knows the rules of the road."

"I've ridden in the back seat before, Ms. Drake."

Mayson's voice seemed to compete with Lois' for frugidity. "Not with us you haven't. Buckle yourself into the middle belt and keep your eyes open, especially while we're still in the city. Once we're on the open road, you can ask for a bathroom break whenever you need one, subject to our security okay. That also means that if you visit the ladies' room I go with you, and before you ask, yes, I'm packing heat too."

Lois lowered her head slightly. "What about you?"

Mayson frowned. "What about me what?"

"Can you call for a potty break too or do you just reabsorb it?"

Clark looked across the top of the car and saw Mayson's eyes

tighten and her lips pull back in a leopard-like snarl. “Hey!” he called out. “You two need to call a truce right now or I’m going to make sure somebody rides in the trunk with the suitcases.”

Both women turned fiery scowls in his direction, but neither one said anything. Behind them, Clark saw Barada and Nikto exchange wide-eyed glances and with their lips pressed tightly together as if they were trying not to laugh. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the officer at the back of the car step away and fondle his rifle nervously.

At least Mayson and Lois weren’t snapping at each other now.

“Get in,” Clark ordered. “I’m going to West Virginia with or without either of you and at this point I don’t care who stays and who goes. You two want to have a stinky skunk contest, or even a knock-down drag-out fight, fine. I’ll drop you off at a health club with a boxing ring if that’s really what you want. This may not be a friendly trip, but it’s going to be peaceful or I’ll do something about it. Capice?”

No one moved for a long moment, then Lois almost smiled. “Ooh, Italian slang from the handsome boy detective. How about if I promise not to start anything with Ms. Drake?”

“Yeah, how about it, Mayson?” asked Clark. “You two going to play nice together from now on?”

Mayson pulled in a sharp breath through her nose and let it out slowly. “How about we just agree not to poke each other with sharp sticks?”

“Works for me,” he said. “How about you, Ms. Lane?”

Lois nodded slowly and opened the sedan’s back door. “Sounds just peachy to me. Why don’t we get this little road trip started?”

Something in Clark’s mind tickled his memory. Some association with the witness – a name, a place, her appearance, her attitude – tried to push itself forward into his conscious mind, but failed to migrate from his archive storage memory to his current awareness. He’d keep thinking about it, though – maybe if he left it alone it would suddenly appear in his brain like a neon sign at a bar.

He hoped it wasn’t something that might get someone hurt before he recalled it.

Lois buckled herself in the back seat as Kent and Drake slid into opposite sides of the front bench seat. Drake turned her head toward Kent and started to open her mouth, then apparently changed her mind and yanked her shoulder harness across her body with great vigor. Kent sighed quietly and buckled his belt, made one final adjustment of the steering wheel, then gently started the car. Lois watched as neither of them spoke or even looked at each other.

There was trouble in their corner of paradise, that much was certain.

Kent pulled away from the curb with a smoothness Lois had seldom felt except with professional limo drivers. She wondered if the icy blonde beside him in the front seat understood how good her boyfriend was behind the wheel. Lois had to admit that they made a cute couple, or would if she weren’t with them as a third wheel antagonizing both of them.

Except that the relationship felt unbalanced to Lois. Drake’s harsh words and sharp actions had seemed directed at Kent as much as they had been aimed at Lois, and the only thing that would cause that was a significant degree of insecurity on Drake’s part concerning his steadfastness. She wondered if Kent made a habit of ogling women prisoners or just playing with Drake’s heart.

Only he didn’t come across to Lois as a guy who would do those kinds of things. His frustration with both women had felt sincere and even-handed, as if his goal really was to have a smooth and safe trip. Not once had he treated Drake with anything other than professional respect until Lois had provoked her in the

parking garage. He hadn’t touched Lois inappropriately or stared at her like a piece of meat or undressed her with his eyes – at least, not that Lois had noticed – and he appeared to be focused on his job and not its perks. Maybe he really was the Boy Scout Drake obviously thought he was.

Mayson Drake, on the other hand, was transparent as glass. Lois knew, from her intelligence-gathering on Lex’ organization, that Drake’s father had been involved in a couple of shady deals where money had changed hands back during the underground war with Intergang. Lex had shown his true colors then, running the defense of his empire against the invaders as if it had been the Normandy invasion in World War II. She smiled to herself as she considered that if Lex had been in overall command of the German armed forces on that day, that war would probably have had a completely different outcome. Of course, she mused, that probably wouldn’t have been a good thing.

Drake’s father, an honest cop who couldn’t withstand Lex’ threats against his wife and daughter, had let Lex’ pet MI6 assassin skate on two different occasions by suppressing evidence which would have entangled him in the murders of five Intergang crime bosses. The daughter had never learned about it, of course, but the mother had, and the marriage hadn’t withstood the strain. Mayson had tried unsuccessfully to hold them together, and she naturally blamed herself for contributing to the breakup. Maybe Lois could use that against her if—

No. That was Lex-type planning and tactics. She’s never done it before and she refused to succumb to the temptation now. Lois didn’t like Mayson Drake, but she understood the other woman’s motivations and knew that she was less involved in the corruption swirling around and through the DA’s office than anyone else there. Drake would be terse and unfriendly, but she would play it straight with Lois and do her job. And while Lois’ last name might be Luthor for now, she deliberately refused to live down to her estranged husband’s reputation.

Drake was plain and clear to Lois. Kent, though, was something of a mystery. Lois couldn’t recall more than a couple of mentions of his name, and both times she thought she remembered notations that he wasn’t for sale at any price. Until he was promoted from detective, though, he wouldn’t be a target for a bribe or even a quid-pro-quo arrangement. So she thought she could trust him, but she couldn’t be sure. There was no history on him, no handle she could grip to manipulate him. He might die to keep her alive, he might hand her over to Nigel or Asabi, or he might put several bullets in her brain while she slept. Her gut said he was honest, but her gut had misled her before.

Of course, there was also no real option for Lois. She was stuck with these two sort-of almost-but-not-quite lovers for the duration of the trip. And Lois hated not being in control.

Clark decided that enough silent time had passed. “Mayson, is there a specific route you want me to take or should I just get on I-78 as soon as possible?”

Without looking at him, she answered, “Neither. Make your way to the Downtown South Bank Plaza and drive into the garage. As soon as we’re stopped, pop the trunk and we all bail out.”

“What? Why?”

“We’re switching vehicles. There’s an outside chance that whoever might be hunting us has spotted this car, so we’re moving to a white Ford E150 van with red trim. It’s got dual fuel tanks, more range, and more room inside, so if we have to, either you or I can drive through the night while the other sleeps.”

From the back seat, Lois said, “That’s a lot of prep work for a one-day trip to West Virginia.”

“It would be if that’s where we were going.”

Mayson’s announcement silenced the other two occupants for a long moment, then Lois groaned. “I don’t suppose you can tell me where I’m really going, can you?”

"I can now. We're heading west to Denver."

Lois snorted. Clark stopped at a red light and said, "You mean Denver like in Colorado?"

Mayson finally made eye contact with him. "Yes. That's why we're taking so many changes of clothing, why I have a money belt under my blazer with four thousand dollars in fifties and twenties, and why we're switching to the van and changing clothes when we get started again. Oh, Ms. Lane, we're going to dye your hair dark as soon as we stop for the night."

"Uh-huh. And where will that be?"

"Our itinerary is in one of the money belt pockets. Clark, I'll give it to you when we get going again."

"I assume you're going to dye your lovely blonde locks also, Ms. Drake?"

Mayson glanced at Lois, then turned to face forward again. "Yes. It'll be one big mixed-gender slumber party."

Lois didn't say anything else. Clark gritted his teeth for a moment, then growled, "Why did you keep me in the dark?"

Mayson didn't look at him. "I'm sorry. My boss gave me strict orders not to tell you until we were under way. He wanted to make sure this wasn't leaked."

"What if there's a leak in the DA's office?"

"Jim Dixon is as honest as the day is long. If there was a leak in his office he'd plug it himself."

Clark glanced into the rear-view mirror and turned on his blinker. "We're coming up on the transfer point. I assume you want me to use the Powell street entrance."

"That's fine."

"How many cops know about this change of plans?"

"None. There's only one investigator from my office with the van, and he was told it was for a minimum security prisoner transport to the courthouse. He's probably wondering why no one has shown up to take the van."

"Won't it look odd if this car drives in and doesn't leave? Especially if someone really is watching for us?"

"There are three officers in plain clothes sitting in the van. They'll take the car out before we leave the garage. And that's all they know about this little escapade today."

"Ahem." Lois cleared her throat. "I know you people think this will throw off anyone following us, but this is starting to sound a little too complicated. You've got a whole bunch of moving parts here, and either Nigel St. John or Asabi could figure out what you're trying to do with just one or two tidbits of information. There's a whole lot that could go wrong with this plan."

"You're saying this won't work?"

"No, Ms. Drake, I'm not saying that. I am saying that you shouldn't break your arm patting yourself on the back until we get to the Federal courthouse in Denver. Lex is still in competition with Intergang, so they're not likely to take a run at us, but there are others between here and Colorado who'd love to have Lex owe them a huge solid."

Mayson looked back over the seat again. "You'd better hope we're smarter than they are or you might end up dead."

"It's possible," Lois agreed. "It's also possible that these hopefully hypothetical button men will kill you and Mr. Handsome here and try to take me alive. I'm more valuable to Lex' rivals if I'm breathing than if I'm not."

"I'm sure Mayson has thought about that, Ms. Lane," Clark said.

"Don't listen to this back-seat Cassandra, Clark." Mayson gently put her hand on his upper arm and softened her voice. "This will work. You'll see."

"Well, we'll know in a few minutes. There's the bank."

Lois didn't like this plan one bit, partly because she hadn't been consulted on it, but mostly because it sounded like the plot of

a Keystone Kops silent short film. There was too little security and too few people in the command structure knew what was going on, not to mention the three cops in the van who probably had no idea why there were where they were or what they were about to do. But all it took was a word or two in the proper ear, and they'd be driving into a crapstorm of epic proportions.

The car slipped into the open garage door and glided to a stop behind the only van facing the same direction they were. At least it matched Drake's description.

Kent hit the trunk release lever, then put the car in park without turning off the key and opened his door. Lois was already sliding toward his side of the car and didn't stop as he opened the door and lifted her out.

She knew he was a big guy with a light touch at the wheel, but he also never stopped scanning the area for anyone or anything unexpected. And she was impressed with his controlled strength as he effortlessly pulled her to her feet.

As Drake stepped out of her side of the car, the rear door of the van swung open and three people jumped out. Two were women, one wearing a Lois-colored wig and the other a Mayson-colored wig, and a man sporting glasses that he obviously didn't normally have on, all wearing civilian clothes, glanced at them. Then one woman and the man stepped toward the sedan as Clark looked toward the entrance they'd used. The blonde-wigged woman stopped behind them and reached toward her waist—

Lois knew what would happen before it happened.

And then, before she could take a breath or call a warning, it happened.

The woman wearing the blonde wig snatched her weapon from its holster and skipped one step to the passenger side of the vehicles. Drake was already moving toward the trunk and didn't see the action, so she took the first bullet high in the back and fell face-down on the concrete.

The second woman spun and reached for her weapon but didn't make it. She took the next bullet in the chest.

Lois didn't see what happened next because Kent knocked her down and dragged her behind the car faster than most people could run. Two more shots rang out almost as one as Kent pulled his own weapon from under his jacket. He pushed Lois down flat on the ground, jerked his head from one side to the other, then leaped to his feet and ran to Drake's side of the car.

By the time Lois got to him, he had already pulled off her blazer and was applying a pressure bandage to Drake's wound. His weapon was back in his holster, but his hand shot to his armpit when a door behind him slapped open.

Kent spun to see another man in a suit who was pointing a weapon at him. "Put down the gun!" the man screamed. "Put it down and get away from her!"

"My name is Clark Kent," he said clearly. "I'm a detective with MPD. You put your weapon down."

Lois felt a fluttering grip on her wrist and looked down. Drake, lying on her stomach under Kent's ministrations, was still conscious and trying to speak, so Lois leaned down to listen.

"Detective Kent! Drake says this guy is Dennis Franklin. He's the investigator she told us about."

The man seemed to relax slightly. "You know who I am?"

"She does. This is ADA Mayson Drake. This guy is a cop, like he says he is."

Franklin hesitated, then holstered his weapon and raised his hands. "What happened? Can anyone tell me what's going on here? This is like the freaking OK Corral!"

Kent released his grip on his weapon and pivoted on one heel, keeping his hand against Mayson's wound. "Mayson and I were supposed to escort this woman to a safe house in that van. The woman in the blonde wig shot Mayson and the other woman from the van, then she and the man shot each other. I think the man might still be alive, but I know Mayson is. Either way, we need an

ambulance here right now.”

Franklin nodded and pulled out a cell phone. As he called for emergency help, Drake grabbed Lois' hand again and croaked, “Clark? Talk to – Clark?”

Lois slapped Kent on the leg. “Hey, she wants to tell you something.”

Kent knelt down beside her and grasped her hand. “It's okay, Mayson, the ambulance will be here soon. You're going to be fine.” He brushed her hair back from her face and took a shuddering breath. “You – you'll be fine. I promise.”

Drake lifted her head closer to Kent and said, “Get her – to Denver. Got to. Get her there. Important.”

“I'm not leaving you, Mayson.”

The wounded woman's eyes flashed. “Go! More – important than – just me. Take – the money – and luggage. Go.”

“I – I can't leave you like this! Don't ask me to go!”

Drake's head fell forward into Kent's cushioning hand and her eyes drifted shut. He looked at Lois with the most helpless expression she'd ever seen on a man.

Lois took a deep breath and made a decision. “Look, Kent, I know you care for her, but if I don't get where I'm supposed to go, I might die. And if that happens, lots of other people will die, too, and Lex Luthor will walk on most of the things he's guilty of. I know that sounds selfish and heartless but it's the truth. I'm your best bet to put away the man who's responsible for her getting shot.” She lifted her head as she heard a siren in the distance. “We need to go now.”

“No! I'm not leaving her!”

Before Lois could speak again, Drake growled, “Clark. Go. Keep her – safe. Do what – you do – best.” She paused and took two labored breaths. “It's okay. I'll – I'll be fine. Go now – while you can.”

He looked at the woman bleeding on the ground and blinked. Lois was startled to see a tear in each eye. Maybe he cared for Drake more than Lois had thought.

He looked up at Lois and his face hardened. “Get all the luggage and put it in the back of the van. I'm keeping you safe.”

Lois let out a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. “Thanks. I know this is hard but it's the right thing to do.”

He glared at her. “Don't make me regret this decision.”

He turned and waved to Franklin to join him before she could answer, so she stepped to the trunk and gathered three suitcases. As she stepped past the body of the man who'd been shot, she saw that he was still breathing. The woman with the blonde wig wasn't, not with that hole in her forehead and her brains blown out of the back of her head.

Lois also saw a semi-automatic pistol on the ground.

She glanced up to hear Kent lecturing Franklin about keeping pressure on the wound, so she tossed the luggage into the van, then stooped and scooped up the pistol and slid it under one of the suitcases. She threw the doors shut and walked to the passenger side of the van, past the second woman's body.

The bullet had taken her in the middle of the chest. There was a puddle of blood spreading under the sedan's front bumper and she wasn't breathing.

The ambush had almost worked. Lois wondered who had set it up – Asabi or Nigel or some independent contractor – then decided it didn't matter. They had to leave now.

Kent took a ring of keys from Franklin and turned back to Drake. He bent down and gently removed the money belt from Drake's waist, then brushed her face with his fingers. She reached up and grasped his hand for a moment, then pushed his hand away and said something Lois didn't catch.

Kent turned and stalked to the side door of the van and opened it. “Get in here,” he ordered.

They were leaving, so Lois didn't argue. She climbed in and sat on the bench seat, but Kent followed her in and pointed at the

floor. “Get down out of sight. It's safer for both of us.”

She slid to the floor as he slammed the door shut. He stepped around the front of the van and slid into the driver's seat, started the van and yanked it into gear.

As they exited the far side of the garage, Lois asked, “Hey, where was the other guy while all that shooting was happening?”

“You mean Dennis Franklin, the guy who walked in after the shooting stopped?”

“Yeah, him.”

Kent snorted. “He had to pee.”

It sounded so much like a joke that Lois almost laughed. “Wait – he what?”

“He said he just started taking antibiotics for a urinary tract infection and his bladder fills up about every forty minutes. He thought he had enough time to run to the men's room and get back before we pulled in, but we were a couple of minutes early.”

“Huh. I guess his full bladder saved his life.”

“Yeah, that's a first.”

Lois didn't say anything else for a moment, then quietly said, “Thanks for saving me back there.”

“It's my job.”

“I know. But – thanks anyway.”

She thought he wasn't going to answer, but after a moment he surprised her. “You're welcome. I just—”

When he didn't finish the sentence, Lois gently asked, “You just what?”

“I – I just hope you can do what Mayson hopes you can do.”

That wasn't what he'd almost said, but Lois let it go. “If you mean can I put Lex Luthor away for as many lives as he has left, the answer is yes, I can, assuming I get where I'm supposed to be.”

He made a turn and accelerated again, then said, “I promise that I'll get you there. You – you'd better deliver on your promise.”

Lois didn't say anything else. She hoped she'd live long enough to testify. After that, she had no plans, no dreams, no illusions about her future.

She didn't think she had any future worth a single illusion.

Chapter Two

Clark had to force his hands to relax so he could drive without crushing the steering wheel. It was his fault Mayson had been shot. It was his fault that Lois Lane had almost died.

It was his fault the mission was coming apart before it got started.

He'd blithely accepted Mayson's assertion that the three people in the van were all cops, and he'd allowed himself to relax. It had been a mistake. One of the three waiting for them hadn't been a cop at all, or else she'd been compromised or coerced somehow. Or maybe she'd been a dirty cop all along. There were a lot fewer today than when Clark had first started with the department, but there were still enough to give the MPD a bad name among many of the honest citizens of the city. Internal Affairs hadn't closed their doors, and, in fact, were still investigating only the worst offenders. There were still too many bad apples in the department.

He flicked on his turn signal and waited for oncoming traffic to clear so he could turn left and put more distance between himself and the memory of Mayson's bleeding body. In a few minutes, once they'd gotten away from downtown, he'd have Lane find the itinerary in the money belt.

He also needed to get his emotions under control.

Lane probably thought he was weeping for Mayson primarily because he cared about her personally. While that was partly true, he was more upset that he'd allowed someone he cared for to be injured while he was right there.

Again.

It was something he'd had to deal with since he'd learned about his "special abilities," as Mayson often put it.

Just before his junior year in high school, his father had been caught under his tractor when it had overturned in the field where Clark had been repairing the fence. He hadn't been paying close attention and his father had paid the price for his inattention with damage to his heart that had killed him some sixteen months later, just after Clark's last football game. His date to his senior prom, Rachel Harris, had been manhandled by two drunken basketball players when she'd asked him to bring her a soda. He'd come back in time to keep her from any real injury, but she'd been shaken up enough to ask him to take her home early, where her father insisted on blaming Clark for the trouble. The basketball players had been dumb enough to jump him next to his car before class the next Monday morning, and it had taken a superhuman effort for Clark not to do any permanent damage to either of them. The incident had damaged the budding relationship with Rachel beyond repair. By the time Rachel had convinced her father, the county sheriff, that Clark had actually kept her from being really hurt and that he hadn't sought a confrontation with the guilty parties, it was too late for them as a couple.

His mother had known and understood. She'd tried to comfort him on all those occasions where he thought he'd failed, yet his insufficiency continued to eat at him. She assured him that he was expecting too much of himself, and he tried to believe her. It simply never penetrated his mind that he wasn't perfect, could never be perfect.

And now, because he'd failed yet again, Mayson might die.

He wiped one hand over his face to clear his vision as he turned onto the access road for I-80. If they hadn't been spotted yet, they probably had some time between now and the state boundary to make a plan.

He turned to say something to Lane and realized that she was holding a folded piece of paper out to him. "I think this is our itinerary," she said.

He gestured with his head. "Come on up here and we'll take a look."

"Umm. Can I change first? This dress isn't the most comfortable outfit for travel. And we were going to switch clothes anyway."

He sighed. "Sure. Just stay out of sight as much as you can."

He heard her drag a suitcase around the bench seat in the middle of the van and flip it open. There was a tiny moment when he was almost tempted to watch her change in the mirror, just to punish himself for being stupid, but he ruthlessly suppressed it. All he needed to do to put a perfect cap on this disastrous day would be to run into the back of another vehicle, get them stuck in traffic, and allow Lois to be killed, all because he couldn't control his all-too-human lust.

So he was startled when he pulled up to a red light and felt a nudge on his elbow. "Hey, Kent, I can't unbutton the top of this dress or start the zipper by myself. It's in exactly the wrong place between my shoulders. Gimme a hand here, will you?"

As he complied with her request, he asked, "How did you put it on this morning?"

"Thanks. I had a maid until I got to City Hall with my lawyer this morning. By now she's probably on an airliner heading back to Guatemala." He heard rather than saw her shimmy out of the dress, but it was still oddly stimulating. "Lex loved to hire illegals. They were easier to get rid of in case of problems."

"You mean, he'd put them on a plane and send them back to their country of origin?"

"Usually. Although I know of two who got buried in unmarked graves."

He hesitated, then offered, "Your husband is a real prince among men."

The sound of her jeans being zipped up sounded angrier than

her voice. "That's why I'm going to testify against him. I know where those two graves are and who's in them, along with a few more. Machiavelli was an angel compared to Lex Luthor."

"All political power flows from the barrel of a gun," quoted Clark.

"That's actually from Chairman Mao. Lex should have put it on a sampler and hung it on the wall of his study. Machiavelli said that a prince must rule by the consent of the governed."

"Huh. Serves me right for not taking that philosophy class in high school."

She rose to a kneeling position between the driver's seat and front passenger's seat. "Actually, Mao got the idea from Machiavelli, who did say that, generally speaking, the ends justify the means. Lex lived that credo to the hilt."

"Interesting that you use the phrase 'to the hilt.' It refers to an assassin thrusting a dagger or a sword as deeply as possible into the target until the hilt hits the body of the victim. Sounds to me as if you're going after your — after Luthor with the same degree of determination."

Her sigh sounded more determined than resigned. "You've got it." Then she chuckled slightly. "Sounds like we both learned something just now."

"Yeah. Hey, are you cold?"

"Not really. Why do you ask?"

"You're wearing a pullover sweater. The temperature is in the lower 80s already and it's not noon yet."

She met his gaze too directly, as if she were trying to convince him of her sincerity. "It's a good disguise. I haven't worn one of these for years. Any recent pictures of me will show me in something tastefully expensive, not a pullover and jeans from Cost Mart. Hey, can you turn the air conditioner fan up another notch? I don't want to melt in this thing."

"Sure. Will that do it?"

She nodded. "Perfect."

He knew she was right, but there was more to it than that. For now, though, he focused on getting them out of the city. Whatever she wasn't telling him couldn't be that important.

Lois watched the traffic and the pedestrians they passed, looking for anyone she might recognize or even suspect might wish her harm. Apprehension and shame fought for dominance in her gut as she automatically controlled her expression and the timbre of her voice. After her years with Lex, hiding her true feelings came easy.

Everything but the anger.

Another person who was trying to do right had been hurt, maybe killed. Lois hadn't liked Mayson Drake, but she had respected the attorney. It took real courage to do the right thing when you knew that so many people were so very willing to kill you for trying to do the right thing.

Lois knew she didn't have that kind of courage. She'd ignored the subtle signals Lex had sent out during their courtship that his focus was on himself, not on them as a couple, and certainly not on her as a person. She had known, deep down, that he'd wanted her more as arm candy and camouflage for his public image than for who she really was. How could he be a bad person, people would think, if he were dating the upright and fiercely honest investigator Lois Lane? He can't be all that bad!

By the time they'd returned from their honeymoon in Europe, where Lex had closed several business deals Lois hadn't known were being negotiated, she'd learned that there were questions she wasn't supposed to ask, things she wasn't supposed to know, and places she wasn't supposed to visit. Of course, she asked questions and went places. Repercussions followed and innocent people got hurt.

The first time she'd tried to investigate him from the inside, he'd taken her aside and "explained" to her how vulnerable her

parents and sister were. He'd shown her photos of each of them at work, commuting, shopping for groceries, eating meals – both outside their homes and inside them – and each photo had crosshairs superimposed over the main subject, as if they'd been taken through a rifle's telescopic sight. There was even one picture of a private moment from their honeymoon where Lois was walking down a street beside Lex, holding his hand and smiling as if he'd just said something amusing.

The crosshairs were focused just above her left eyebrow.

The message was clear. Behave and enjoy the advantages Lex' money and power gave her. Misbehave and someone she loved would die. Keep pushing and she would die.

Then he'd beaten her. Not out of anger or revenge, but clinically, as if he'd been teaching a remedial math lesson to a class of lazy high school juniors.

She shook the images from her mind. It didn't matter now anyway, not since the funeral five months ago where she'd made the decision to take Lex down or die trying. She didn't want her parents to die too, but it was past time to allow this evil man to push her around and continue his criminal reign. Lucy, with her unending questions and sincere but clumsy search for the details of Lex' criminal empire, had started this ball rolling downhill. Now Lois was determined to remove any impediment to its inexorable path to crush Lex Luthor forever.

She sat back, thinking about her own mental state. If she was building metaphors that complex to keep her going, she was barely holding off panic. Even though she'd told the police and the FBI and everyone who would listen that Lex would stop at nothing to prevent her from testifying, she could tell that no one had realized just how far he cast his webs and how much power he controlled. Even if Lex was being held in solitary in Federal custody, neither Nigel St. John nor Asabi would rest until they found her and either took her back to Lex' palatial penthouse or killed her, even at the cost of their own lives.

She would never be completely safe. She'd look over her shoulder for her killer for the rest of her life.

Nigel picked up his cell phone during the second ring. "Yes?"
"The ambush at the car swap failed. Our agent shot ADA Drake and the other two cops but was killed before she could pick off Lane."

Nigel gritted his teeth in frustration. "And what of the police detective with them?"

"Unhurt. They made the car switch and took off."

"What vehicle are they operating?"

"I don't know. My informant only knows that there are two dead cops, including our mole, one cop on the critical list in ICU, one seriously wounded assistant District Attorney, and one intact Ford sedan."

Nigel made a fist with his free hand and almost slammed it down on the desk before he controlled himself. "Do we know where they are going?"

"The Federal courthouse in Wheeling, West Virginia. There's a team of U.S. Marshals waiting for Mrs. Luthor there."

"Do we have someone in or close to that team?"

"Negative. We know the team is in Wheeling but we don't know where they're holed up. And because that team has been together for several years, we can't slip a mole in with them."

After a pause, Nigel asked, "Do we have a location on the detective's police-issued phone?"

"Not yet, but we know it's one of the latest LexTel models. As soon as he makes or receives a call, we'll know where he is within fifty yards."

"His phone does not have the auto-on feature? Or the GPS tracker?"

"No. According to LexTel's records, his phone is scheduled to be included in the next upgrade cycle."

"Very well. Place a team at each of the two most likely approaches to the courthouse in Wheeling and a third overlooking the least likely route. Until we receive more definite information, that is all we can do."

"Will do. Anything else?"

"Not at this time. Call me as soon as you learn anything which might be important."

"Yes, sir."

Nigel thumbed the phone off and leaned back to think.

Mr. Luthor would not look kindly on him if he failed to either capture or eliminate Lois Lane-Luthor. Nigel had never liked the woman, had in fact actively disliked her, and had hoped for orders to permanently remove her from his employer's life for years. Now that very opportunity had come to him and he had not yet succeeded.

He knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that if Mrs. Luthor were able to testify, it would be a close race between the authorities and his employer's other operatives to locate and neutralize him. He could probably avoid the legal authorities, or he could endeavor to escape Mr. Luthor's reach, but he was certain that he could not evade both sets of pursuers for long. One or both would find him. And should that eventuality come to pass, his only options would be to either go out in a blaze of glory and take as many of his opponents with him as he could – or he could try to make some kind of deal with the government.

Neither course would afford him the opportunity to live in the luxury to which he had become accustomed. Therefore, neither of those options appealed to him.

His only chance was to take personal charge of the woman's demise.

The thought galvanized him. First, he would send an operative to visit ADA Drake in the hospital and discover the detective's route to West Virginia. Second, as soon as the pair were located, he would take one of the LuthorCorp private jets to intercept Mrs. Luthor. Third, he would eliminate her single remaining escort and then personally kill Lois Lane in as violent and painful a manner as he could imagine, and as slowly as he could afford.

But he had to act quickly. Wheeling but was one day's drive from Metropolis, so he didn't have a great deal of time. Step one had to happen now.

Lois leaned back against the bench seat and exhaled. "We don't happen to have anything to eat or drink in the van, do we?"

"Unless there's a cooler in the back where you dropped the luggage, no. And we're not out of the city yet, so I'm not stopping unless one of us starts floating our back teeth."

A dry chuckle escaped her lips. "Good point. In that case, how long before we can grab some grub?"

"I'd guess about two hours, give or take fifteen minutes. Depends on the mid-day traffic around the I-80 exit."

"Okay." Lois waited for him to say something else, and when he didn't, she said, "We could turn on the radio. Maybe we can find out how Drake is doing."

Kent acted as if he hadn't heard.

Lois walked on her knees to the floor beside the driver's seat. "Please? I want to – I want to make sure she's going to be okay."

Clark glanced at her with a frown on his face, then turned on the van's AM radio and turned the channel dial. A commercial for shampoo was playing, and when it finished a blurb for a new action movie came on.

"Just what we need," Clark muttered. "The latest martial arts epic from Arnold Stallone. When will that guy quit making bad chop-sockey movies?"

"Shh! Local news is on."

The serious music faded out as the news announcer began speaking. "This is Richard Coleman with WMET news. There was a shootout this morning at the South Metro Bank Complex

between police and an unknown number of assailants. Two plainclothes police officers were shot to death, one was seriously wounded, and a member of the District Attorney's staff was also wounded. No names of the victims have been released, and both the wounded officer and the DA staff member were taken to an undisclosed hospital with one or more gunshot wounds. That person's condition is not known at this time. Metropolis PD Internal Affairs spokesperson Deborah Young said in a prepared statement, 'The City of Metropolis and the Metropolis Police Department are stunned by this act of violence, but we are also determined to locate and apprehend the person or persons responsible for this outrage. The officers who were shot were all heroes, as is the DA staff member who was wounded. We vow to discover the cause of this shooting and bring the perpetrators to justice.'

"In other news, the trial of billionaire Lex Luthor is still on schedule. Mr. Luthor's team of attorneys submitted a motion for a continuance in a hearing this morning. Judge Peter D. Wenzel denied the motion and ordered both the prosecution and the defense to be ready to begin the trial on May twelfth, just four weeks from now. Federal prosecutors present at the hearing submitted a motion to have Mr. Luthor transferred to their jurisdiction so Mr. Luthor could be tried first on a number of federal charges. Judge Wenzel took the motion under advisement and promised a ruling before the state trial would begin. He also agreed to review the brief submitted by Mr. Luthor's attorneys objecting to the transfer of jurisdiction.

"Legal analyst Myra Stonebreaker, of the law firm of Pounder, Smith, Hart, and Stonebreaker, said that Mr. Luthor would not benefit from being tried first in federal court, due to the slightly more lax rules concerning evidence gathering, the presentation of forensic evidence, and harsher sentencing guidelines. If he were found guilty in New Troy state court, according to Ms. Stonebreaker, Mr. Luthor might face a sentence of anything upwards of twenty years imprisonment to life without parole.

"In NBA news, the Knicks worked out a trade with the Los Angeles—"

Clark clicked the radio off and sighed. "Well. Mayson is still alive."

Lois nodded. "Yeah. That's a really good thing. For her, I mean."

"Who else?"

"Well – for you, actually."

He tensed up again. "She's a friend of mine. A good friend and a person on the side of the angels, but that's it."

"That's not what she thinks."

His head jerked around for a moment. "What does that mean?"

She shrugged. "It means that she really likes you. I mean, she really, really likes you. And not just as a friend."

He flexed his fingers against the steering wheel and ground his teeth before responding. "I know that. We've had discussions on the subject."

"And?"

"And we'll probably continue to have discussions on the subject when she recovers."

"And where are you going with her?"

He turned and glared for a moment. "You're awfully inquisitive for someone in your precarious position."

She shrugged again. "Hey, it's not like I have anything better to focus on right now."

"How about staying alive?"

"That's your job, remember? Although I don't know how you're going to watch over me all the way to Denver all by yourself."

"Don't worry about it, Ms. Lane. I'll be fine."

"Okay, let's be fine on I-80. The exit's coming up fast and you're in the wrong lane."

It amused her to see him even slightly flustered, but he slid over to the exit lane with a minimum of fuss and no horns honking at them. She tapped him on the elbow. "Very adroitly done, Kent."

He pulled the van to the left lane of the exit ramp and pointed them west. "Hey, about that. I really don't like being addressed by my last name. Would you call me Clark?"

"Only if you call me Lois."

He nodded. "Done."

She smiled at him and got a genuine grin in return. Then she said, "Oh, hey, I just thought of something. How about we call each other by our last names if there's a problem?"

"Hmm. So, if you spot a problem, like one of Luthor's killers, you'll yell for Kent?"

"Yes. And if you call me 'Lane' instead of 'Lois' I'll know you're warning me and not just making a suggestion."

"Deal."

She settled back on her heels and smiled to herself. Maybe – just maybe – her protector could also be her friend. She hadn't made any new friends since she'd married Lex, and he'd cut her out of her former social circle. She rarely saw any of her old friends or her family.

Many men would have been angered at her for reminding them about a turn, but Clark hadn't. He'd seemed chagrined at himself for losing track of his location, but he hadn't been mad at her. It was a pleasant change.

They rode along for almost fifteen minutes when Clark reached inside his jacket and said, "I'd really like to find out how Mayson is. I think the traffic—"

"Kent!" she shouted.

He stopped moving immediately. "What is it?"

"Is that a LexTel phone?"

"Yes, it's department-issue—"

"Is it turned on?"

"What? No. Mayson had me—"

"Give it to me now!"

Without hesitating, he handed it to her. She popped the back off and looked closely, then sighed. "Good. This doesn't have the latest upgrade."

"I'm supposed to get that upgrade next week, I think. Why, what's wrong?"

She reassembled the case but didn't give the phone back to him. "This is something I learned after I turned my research over to the DA's office. Lex' phone geeks have developed a drop-in replacement memory chip which expands the phone's storage capabilities. The press release said that they're planning to add a camera on the next model, and they wanted to field-test the chip before customers started using the camera and losing pictures."

"But that's not what it's really for, is it?"

"Oh, it'll perform as advertised, but it also allows the service provider – in this case, LexCom – to remotely turn the phone on and to use the civilian Global Positioning System to locate the phone."

"Huh," Clark grunted. "That's news to me."

"It's news to everyone. But even with this model, they can track your incoming and outgoing calls as you're making them. They'd know exactly where we are. So let's not turn the phone on, okay?"

"Agreed." Then a smile slowly spread across Clark's face. "On second thought, maybe we can use that to our advantage."

"How? You turn it on, someone calls you, bang, Nigel St. John knows where you are, what direction you going, how fast, and maybe what you had for lunch. How are we going to use that?"

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Just leave that to me, okay? I'll tell you about it if I think I can pull it off."

She frowned. "I'm not used to trusting other people. Hasn't worked out so well for me the last few years."

"I know. But if the right circumstances pop up, this is a good

idea.”

She didn't answer. No ideas on using the phone to their advantage came to her.

She hoped Clark was smarter than she was.

They cruised down the interstate at the speed limit, piling up the miles as they passed from New Troy to Pennsylvania. Clark heard Lois' stomach growl daintily, and he said, “We're coming up on the intersection of I-80 and 81. You want to try to find a drive-through and get some lunch?”

“Why a drive-through?”

“Because you're still wearing Lois Luthor's hair color and style.”

“Nuts. I forgot about that.” He heard her rise to her knees again. “Anything is fine, as long as there's a bathroom there.”

He nodded. “Done and done. What are you in the mood for?”

“I'm not picky, Clark, I just want to relieve the pressure in my lower belly and put some high-calorie nourishment in my mouth. I'm about done with filet mignon and fresh Maine lobster for a long while.”

“Got it. Sign up ahead, says there's a McDonald's, a Burger King, and an Arby's in there somewhere. Anything tickle your fancy?”

“Arby's, I think. Assuming they still have their Jamocha shakes.”

“They did the last time I was there.”

“Oh? When was that?”

“Just last week. Mayson and I had lunch—”

He went silent, remembering Mayson's suggestion of another long weekend together and how he rebuffed her as gently as he could. He heard Lois shift beside him and he thought she was about to put her hand on his arm, but she didn't. “I'm sorry,” she said quietly. “I wasn't thinking.”

He shook his head and let out a deep breath. “Don't worry about it. You had no way of knowing.”

“I'm still sorry.”

“Thank you. But there's nothing I can do for her right now except finish the last job she gave me.”

Lois nodded. “To get me to Denver.”

“Alive and uninjured, if possible.”

“Oh, by all means, let's make that possible.”

He pulled off the interstate and drove along the access road until he found a clean truck stop. “We'll gas up there and you can use the ladies' room. I'd rather not leave the van unattended, so I'm going to trust you not to do anything dumb, okay?”

She gave him a wide-eyed stare of utter innocence. “Who, me? When was the last time I did something really dumb?”

He returned a look of disdain. “Don't make me point to your left hand.”

Her left eyebrow rose to Vulcan level. “Very good. Score is fifteen-love, Kent leading Lane and serving.”

“And I have a great backhand, too, so get going.”

She grinned and bounced out of the side door to the entrance. He reached down and opened one of the pockets in the money belt, took out a fifty-dollar bill, and stuffed the belt under the driver's seat.

He pumped the gas, then walked in and paid the bill, then put the receipt and change in his shirt pocket. No one would even hint that he'd skimmed a dime from this trip.

When he got back to the van, Lois was already in her customary place on the floor. “I didn't think you wanted anyone to see us together,” she explained.

“Good thinking,” he said. “Nigel's out-of-state spies are almost certainly looking for a couple, not a pair of singles.”

“That was what I thought, too. So, Arby's now? I'm almost ravenous.”

“They'd better have Jamocha shakes out here in the

Pennsylvania wilderness or be prepared to face the wrath of Lois Lane.”

Her silver laughter touched a chord in his heart and he joined her. It felt good to share a laugh with a woman who didn't have a personal agenda and wasn't a part of his pain and loss. He could learn to like Lois Lane very easily.

He'd have to remind himself that liking her wasn't his job.

Keeping her alive to testify was his job.

But liking her might be a nice perk.

Chapter Three

Lex sat in his cell in solitary confinement, silently fuming at the idiocy of his hired help.

He had expressly ordered his attorney to tell Asabi to set up a snatch to get Lois back, a snatch which would involve no shooting, no loss of life or injury, and no risk to Lois. He didn't want his wife endangered. And he didn't want another shooting incident added to the mountain of accusations already leveled against him.

Instead, two cops – one of them Asabi's plant – were dead. Another cop was clinging to life. And an assistant district attorney, whose prognosis was not good, was undergoing surgery to save her life. It was a monumental screw-up in a season of insanity.

Asabi had failed him. So he'd used the code with his attorney to hand the task of locating Lois Luthor to Nigel St. John. Nigel had never failed before, and Lex had faith in him.

Of course, the stakes had never been this high before. And the one thing Lex knew for certain about Nigel was that Nigel was a survivor.

At any cost.

Her name tag identified her as Marcie Cunningham and claimed she was a registered nurse. She was neither of those things, but it didn't matter. Cathy Ames – her real name – had been trained as a physician's assistant, and along with the ability to prescribe certain drugs when working under an M. D. she knew how to check a patient's vital signs. If necessary, she could also administer lethal drugs to “special” patients. She was one of Nigel St. John's more valuable assets.

But Cathy's real talent was in getting patients to talk to her. She was pretty in a girl-next-door way, short and slender and looked totally harmless, had a gentle voice, with a soft Southern accent that made her sound like anyone's close friend. She knew, if she could get close enough to the woman in the hospital bed, she could get her to talk.

The trick, of course, would be getting past the huge cop at the door.

Most people, especially men, would take one look at her soft brown hair, bright eyes, and gentle smile, and simply step aside. Not the monster detective here. He held up his oversized hand to stop her and blocked the entire doorway when she tried to enter Drake's room.

“Hold on, miss,” he growled. “You're not who I was told to expect.”

“I know,” she drawled. “I'm just helpin' out a friend. She's not feelin' real good right now.” She leaned closer as if sharing a secret. “It's her time o' the month, y'see, and she's kinda cramped up. You know how it is with girls sometimes, don'tcha? I just gotta check the lady's pulse and stuff.”

That almost always moved men out of her way. The male of the human species is generally uncomfortable discussing the intimate workings of the female members' internal plumbing with said female members.

Not this giant. Her shared intimacy made no impact on the big man. “Sorry. You don't go in unless my boss or your boss comes here and tells me it's okay.”

“Aw, come on, man! I got a job to do here! Don't y'all cover

for each other sometimes?”

“We do occasionally, honey. But I got a job to do, too. No one goes in that room unless that person has the proper authorization.”

She feigned offense, one of her better expressions. “Well, I never! You ain’t gotta be so rude about it, Lieutenant!”

The man swelled up and blocked the light from the sun. “It’s Detective, not Lieutenant, and I don’t care how rude you think I am. Tell your friend to go take some Midol and do her job herself.”

Cathy decided she couldn’t push her luck any further. She should leave before he decided to do more than block her access to Drake. She spun on her heel and barked out, “Fine! We’ll see who still has a job tomorrow!”

Her new nurse’s shoes squeaked slightly as she stalked down the hallway. The more she thought about it, the worse her chances of getting to Drake this afternoon seemed. Nigel wanted answers right away, but it was too soon after multi-hour surgery for a bullet wound for the patient to be alert and talking. Assuming she was in the room and not still in recovery, she’d be in no shape to talk until at least tomorrow.

Cathy wasn’t getting a bonus for this job.

Klaatu walked up behind Barada and asked, “What was that all about?”

Without turning, he answered, “Some cute little white chick wanted to see Drake. Claimed to be a nurse here to check her vitals.”

“But you didn’t like her?”

“No. Did you get a good look at her?”

“Sure did.”

“She remind you of anyone?”

“She fits the description of a woman posing as a nurse or an EMT. I still don’t know why she’d do that unless she was getting paid for it.”

“Maybe she’s just a little nuts. Or she’s a hospital groupie. You know, like some people listen to police band radios so they can show up at crime scenes?”

Klaatu frowned. “You’ve run into some of those, I take it?”

Barada nodded. “I seen ‘em before. This didn’t feel like that. That girl was clear-headed and sane, just up to no good.”

Klaatu sighed. “Okay, swap places with me and call Henderson. Tell him what happened and what you think about her.”

He backed into the room and reached for his cell phone, but the tall Amerind woman detective stopped him. “Uh-uh. Remember what Bill said? No sensitive info over the LexTel phone?”

He grimaced. “Right. I forgot for a second. I’ll use the phone in the room.”

“I’m sure Detective Carter won’t mind the noise.”

They both glanced at the blonde woman lying on the bed. She gave them both a sneer, then stuck her tongue out at them. As Barada picked up the phone, Carter whispered, “How much longer do I have to lie here like a sack of potatoes? My back is getting stiff.”

He punched the number for Bill Henderson’s desk and smiled. “As long as you work as a decoy. You make a very convincing Mayson Drake, by the way. Now go back to sleep. You just had major surgery, remember?”

Glynis Carter huffed and shifted to a less uncomfortable position. Barada grinned at her and waited for his supervisor to answer his desk phone.

“Henderson here. Really? Yeah, I have a pencil. And paper too. Go ahead.” Bill listened and wrote for several moments. “I think you’re right about who she is. No, don’t arrest her unless she tries to force her way into the room. Just let me know if she shows

up again. I don’t think she will either, but it’s best to be prepared. Right. No, Drake is in intensive care now, and Nikto is watching her with a couple of unis. The surgery went well and her prognosis is as good as we could have hoped. Tell your other partner, but do it quietly. As far as Luthor’s people know, she’s hanging on by her fingernails and we don’t think she’ll make it. I’ll get back to you if I get anything firm on Kent and Lane. And have the hospital staff start looking for the nurse who was supposed to be there. If we’re lucky, she’s sleeping off a sedative in a closet somewhere in the building. No, we – I know what it means if we’re not lucky. You guys stay sharp.”

Bill let the handset slide off his fingers onto the rack. He hadn’t liked the tricky plan that Mayson had devised, but he knew it should have worked. The crime scene folks were still working the site of the shooting, but their preliminary results told him what he’d feared most had come to pass.

He’d had a mole in his department and it had cost at least two lives.

Even under pressure to get results, the ME’s office wouldn’t have the autopsy results for both bodies until the middle of the next day at the earliest. He was still waiting for financial records on all three, even though he suspected that Kendra Rogers had been the killer. Given the position of the bodies and the number of rounds fired from her weapon, it was the scenario which made the most sense.

The joker in the deck was the missing weapon. Paul Bridges’ service pistol wasn’t on the scene, and Dennis Franklin, the investigator from the DA’s office, was no help. He had been interviewed more than once, put on paid administrative leave, and allowed to go home. He claimed to know nothing about Bridges’ pistol, and Bill wanted to believe him. The only thing he was certain about was that he’d seen Mrs. Luthor carry the luggage to the back of the van while Clark had given him strict instructions on keeping pressure on Mayson’s wound, which he had done until the ambulance had arrived.

Bill knew that Kent didn’t like firearms very much and only carried one because he had to. The man had phenomenal accuracy on the firing range, and his paper targets nearly always came back with one hole cut out of the exact middle of the target instead of multiple holes from multiple hits close to the bull’s-eye. He chuckled as he remembered Kent’s most recent range check.

The new range master, who’d known Kent’s reputation but hadn’t seen him shoot, had handed Kent a full fifty-round box of ammo and challenged him to write his name on the target. Clark had smiled and nodded, then filled two twenty-round magazines and put the remaining ten rounds in a third. Then, at the range master’s order to fire, he’d written “Kent” across the target’s center mass. Mayson had been there with him, and Bill suspected that Clark had been showing off just a little for her, especially since she’d clapped her hands and bounced on her toes when the target had come back and the range master had growled at Kent to “get off my firing line, you punk showoff.”

Why the young man disliked his weapon so much when he could use it so well still puzzled Bill. But he was confident that if any individual in his command could deliver Lois Lane Luthor to the Feds, Clark Kent could do it. He seemed to have a knack for wiggling out of tight spaces and bad situations using a minimum of force. He could get Mrs. Luthor halfway across the country—

Wait a minute. Mrs. Luthor—

Oh, no. No. No, it couldn’t be!

It struck him with the force of a bowling ball falling off the shelf over his head. The missing weapon was in the van, on its way to Denver.

And Clark didn’t have it. Lois Luthor did.

That meant one of two things. Either the woman was scared enough to want to defend herself if necessary or she was going to use it to get away from Kent. If the latter were true, then she

wasn't the willing witness she'd claimed to be.

She might be just as much a crook as her husband was.
And Bill had no way to warn Kent about her.

Warren, Ohio wasn't the smallest place Clark had ever driven past, but it if you yawned long enough while driving you'd miss seeing the town from the highway. He turned to Lois and said, "I think this is far enough for today. We can order a pizza, fix your hair, get a good night's sleep, and get away early tomorrow."

Lois unfolded the itinerary. "According to this, there's a place about two miles just east of Niles called – oh, no."

"What? What's wrong?"

She giggled. "I'm sorry – the motel is – it's called – the Dew Drop Inn."

Clark's eyebrows rose close to his hairline. "You're kidding."

She giggled again. "No – not kidding. Hahaha! I hope they have – hahaha – I hope they have locks on the doors!"

He forced himself not to laugh out loud. "I just hope they take cash when we check in. What's your middle name again?"

The desk clerk at the Dew Drop Inn looked like she'd retired from at least two other professions and was counting the minutes down on this one. She hauled her oversized bulk out of the chair behind the desk and said, "Got a reservation?"

Clark refrained from looking around at the few people in the lobby and eating area. He also refrained from mentioning the worn, frayed carpet and peeling wallpaper. "No, sorry. We need a room just for the night."

"Need to see your ID."

He dug in his wallet and pulled out his department-issued cover ID. "Here you go."

The woman glared at the card for a moment, then nodded. "Jerome Clark of Gotham City. Just for one night, Mr. Clark?"

"Yes."

"Who else?"

"My wife Joanne. She's outside in the van."

"You two on your honeymoon or something?"

"Oh, no. We're travelling cross-country to Las Vegas."

The woman huffed. "Place'll take your money and leave you flat broke you ain't careful."

"We're not going to gamble, just see the sights along the way and meet up with my sister and her family there."

The woman nodded again. "Whatever. Sign here, here, here, and initial here. You got any animals with you?"

"No, just the two of us."

"Fine. You can order something in the restaurant if you want and we'll charge it to your room. And we got a free continental breakfast in the morning from six to nine."

He turned and looked at the dingy dining area. "Uh – is there a pizza place nearby that delivers here? Joanne has a craving for Canadian bacon and sausage."

She shrugged. "Suit yourself." She pulled out a laminated sheet of paper from under the desk and handed it to him. "There's four places that deliver here, and they ain't all pizza. Just leave the card in the room when you get ready to leave tomorrow. Checkout time is eleven or I gotta charge you for another day."

"No problem. We want to get an early start."

"Uh-huh. Then I'd recommend you don't order anchovies on your pizza. Charley don't always have the freshest ones, you know?"

"Thanks for the tip. How much do I owe you?"

"Just gimme a credit card and we'll settle up in the morning."

"Oh, sorry, I don't carry credit cards. I was planning to pay cash."

She lifted her gaze and glared at him. "You sure? Cash customers have to put down a four-day deposit and wait for me to inspect the room before they leave."

He lifted his hands as if helpless. "What can I say? I'm a slave to my wife's financial constraints. She thinks I can't handle having credit cards in my wallet."

The woman gave out an onion-and-garlic-flavored sigh that made Clark want to gag. "Fine. I'll take three days of basic charges and give you back your change in the morning."

"Thank you. How much do you need now?"

"Let's see, a double for three nights – I assume you want a queen-sized bed?"

"That's fine." If necessary, he knew he could sleep on the floor. Lois would surely prefer that to sharing a bed with a man she'd just met.

"Okay, three nights at sixty-three-fifty a night, plus state and city taxes and fees – give me two-twenty-five even and I'll be here in the morning to check you out and give you back the balance."

He reached into his pocket and counted out a small pile of cash. "Here you go."

"Thanks. Here's your receipt. Oh, I almost forgot, I have to leave about nine-thirty tomorrow to take my sister to the doctor. You get here by nine so I can take care of this, okay? And bring the receipt in case someone else is here, otherwise you might not get your change for a while."

"Don't worry. And thank you again."

"You're welcome. Wait!"

"What is it?"

She handed him two plastic rectangles with holes in one end, like a perforated domino. "Card keys for your room. It's number one-eighteen, down the hall to the right and next-to-last on the left side. It's closer to park behind the building and come in the side door. Your room key will open it."

"Thanks again."

He exited the front door and climbed into the van. "Got the room and paid cash. Guess my Kansas charm worked again."

Lois smiled at him. "You're from Kansas, huh? I didn't think you were a native Metro."

"Nope. Transplant about five years ago. I was a little overwhelmed at first, but now I really like living there. So many people, so many stories, so many opportunities to help."

She shook her head. "You are such a Boy Scout."

"Eagle Scout, ma'am, Eagle Scout. I earned just about every merit badge I could except the ones dealing with boats and such."

"You don't like the water?"

"It wasn't an option. The water in Kansas usually comes out of a well or a faucet. We don't have a lot of lakes, and there are no ocean beaches there."

"Sounds boring."

He backed into a parking space near the door and turned off the engine. "There are some very interesting geographical features in Kansas, I'll have you know."

"Yeah, if you like flat."

He gave her a mock glare and shook his head. "Come on, let's get in the room and get that pizza ordered."

"You're that hungry?"

"No, but I'm betting you can't be too snarky with your mouth full."

"You'd lose that bet." She tossed her hair over her shoulder and strode to the motel's side door. "C'mon, Clark, I gotta make a pit stop."

"Okay, okay." He pressed the card key into the reader and the door unlocked. "Is that better, your highness?"

"It will be when I actually get to the bathroom."

He held in his chuckle and keyed the door to their room open. "Here's the sheet with the pizzeria's phone number. You call for the pizza when you come out. I'll get the luggage. We're checked in as Jerome and Joanne Clark."

"Got it."

"Oh, the desk clerk said not to order anchovies."

"Yuck. I wasn't going to."

He propped the door open with a rock, then walked back to the van and opened the back door. A pang tapped his heart when he saw Mayson's suitcase, but he suppressed it. She had still been alive the last time they'd heard a news report on her, just before they'd crossed the Ohio state line. Clark doubted that they'd hear much more before tomorrow, although he planned to watch the twenty-four hour news network before they went to sleep.

He almost left Mayson's luggage in the van, but he didn't know which bag the hair dye was in. He'd let Lois go through Mayson's suitcase if necessary, and if—

He lifted the suitcase and something under it made a metallic 'clunk.'

He looked closer and saw the pistol. Then he went cold.

There was only one place that weapon could have come from. Lois had picked it up that morning right after the shootout.

But why? Was she that unsure of his ability to keep her safe? Or was there a more subtle reason?

Could she have somehow been in on this? Could that shootout been a rescue attempt and not a hit that went bad? Was Lois planning to shoot him in his sleep?

He didn't know what to think. The easy conversations they'd had this afternoon, the joking, the gentle teasing, the comments on each other's hair and clothing — had they all been a smokescreen? Could she have been working to lower his defenses and get him to trust her so she could betray him?

Was she that good an actress?

He didn't know. And he didn't dare risk it. He glanced around to make sure no one was watching and went to work on turning the weapon into a paperweight.

"Yes, room one-eighteen," Lois said into the phone. "No, we'll have cash for you. Your tip? That depends on how long it takes you to get here and how hot the breadsticks are. Great! Oh, drinks? What two-liter bottles do you have? That's it? Fine, we'll take the Sprite. Bring enough change so you can break a fifty. I don't know what my husband has in his wallet."

She heard the tap on the door as she hung up the phone.

"Jerome?" she called in a high, screechy voice. "That you, babe?"

"It's me, Jo. Can you open the door? My hands are full."

She opened the door and let him in, then set the deadbolt and security lock behind him. "Pizza's on its way. Soon as we're done I'll find the hair dye and—"

She stopped talking when she saw the unloaded pistol on the end of the bed in front of the unopened suitcases. Clark's voice was bone-dry. "Forget something?"

"Um — yeah, actually. I was going to mention it but I forgot." He sighed deeply. "No, really, I forgot it was there! I was going to tell you but—"

"That's enough!" he barked. "I've got the magazine and the firing pin. It won't shoot now. Thanks to you, though, we've got another three plus pounds of weapon and ammunition to carry around with us and smear oil on our clothes and leave a scent trail for a search dog." He stepped closer and leaned down so his face was at her level. "I'm more interested in why you even had it. Do you not trust me to protect you? Were you going to run out on me? Or were you going to put a couple of rounds in my ear one night while I was asleep?"

"I wasn't going to run and I'm not going to shoot you!"

"Oh, and you have such a record of trustworthiness to fall back on."

She took a step backwards. He was really mad, mad clear through, and she felt herself reverting to her default attitude when Lex showed her his temper. She turned her body ninety degrees, bent over at the waist, and covered her head with her hands, trying to make herself smaller. It was a submission posture, and it was one of the few things which would deflect both Lex' anger and the

blows he would rain down upon her. A bruise on the arm was less debilitating than a hard blow to the head or neck.

Except Clark didn't hit her.

His voice finally came to her from across the room. "I'm not going to hit you. I promise."

The promise sounded as if it were being given under some duress, but for some reason it reassured her. She slowly lowered her arms and straightened up. "I — I'm sorry. I really was going to tell you about it."

"I wish you had. This is going to make it that much harder to trust you."

"I know. I'm so—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, you're so very sorry. You're sorry about marrying a skunk like Lex Luthor, you're sorry about Mayson getting shot, you're sorry about stealing a police weapon from a crime scene, you're sorry you didn't tell me you had it, and now you're sorry you got busted for it." He stalked toward her again, his index finger pointing at her forehead. "I'm tired of how sorry you are! And I'm sorry I treated you like a human being today!" He stood in front of her for several seconds, teeth gritted and breathing hard, then spun away and yanked off his coat. "I promise you I won't make that mistake again."

Lois knew it was a reasonable reaction from him given the provocation. She knew that her actions had brought his ire down on her. She knew she was responsible for the suddenly altered dynamic between them.

She also realized that she would miss the easy camaraderie they'd developed in one short day. It left her feeling hollow and empty.

And she didn't know why.

Clark hid the disassembled pistol in the top of the closet before he answered the door and paid for the pizza. He almost told the kid to keep both twenties he gave him, but Lois' quiet throat-clearing reminded him that they didn't need to make themselves any more memorable than they had to. He opened the pizza box and set it on the end of the bed, then popped the plastic wrapping on two cups and poured some of the clear sugar water into each.

He took a big swig and gestured with his cup. "Feed bag's on. Come get it while it's hot. I don't know if that microwave works very well."

She didn't answer. She just put a slice on a napkin and took her cup to the chair farthest from him. Despite her earlier protestations of severe nourishment deprivation, she ate almost mechanically.

"How's the pizza?" he finally asked.

She shot him a dead look and nodded. "Not too bad."

He finished his second piece and reached for a third. "Sorry about all this."

"Not your fault," she muttered. "Don't be sorry."

"No, I mean I'm sorry I accused you of planning to shoot me. If you were going to go back to Luthor, you wouldn't have stopped me from turning on my phone this morning."

She stopped eating for a moment but didn't look at him. After a moment, she finished chewing and swallowed. "Thank you," she all but whispered. "I — I'm not used to anyone apologizing to me. Not sincerely, anyway."

"But you are used to being abused, aren't you?"

Her head snapped up and her eyes narrowed. "How do you — what makes you say that?"

"I'm a cop, remember? Two years as a uniformed officer in a black-and-white. I've responded to domestic violence calls before. I've seen smaller women who were bullied and beaten by their husbands. A lot of times, I couldn't get anywhere near them because of my size and because they were terrified of anything large and male. And I've seen that protective crouch before." He sighed deeply. "I can almost understand why you'd want

something you could defend yourself with.”

“With which I could defend myself.”

“What?”

She shook her head and almost smiled. “Sorry. It’s a holdover from my days writing news copy for LNN, and before that for the Daily Planet. You ended your sentence with a preposition.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess I did. Hey, did you ever hear the story about the major league umpire who was trying a new technique to calm down batters who didn’t like the calls he was making behind the plate?”

“No. What about him?”

“Well, seems he called a strike on a batter who didn’t like the call, and the guy backed out of the batter’s box and said, ‘Hey, Ump! Where was that last pitch at?’

“The umpire called time, pulled out his whisk broom, and leaned over to clean off home plate. While he was bent over, he said to the batter what you just said to me, that you shouldn’t end a sentence with a preposition.”

“And?” prompted Lois.

“And he had to explain to the batter what a preposition was.”

Despite herself, a smile tried to peek out of her face. “Then what happened?”

“The batter said, ‘Okay, smart guy. Where was that last pitch at, jerk?’”

She snorted and almost dropped her pizza. “No more of those, okay? I don’t think I can stand being whipsawed any more today.”

“No problem. Uh, we’ll need to get an early start in the morning. You want the bed or the floor?”

Her smile melted away. “You’re giving me the choice?”

“Yes. You can tell me after you shower and dye your hair if you like.”

The smile crept back on kitten’s soft paws. “I’ll do that. You need in there before I get started?”

“No, I’m good. I’ll clean up and dump the trash outside. No sense putting out more roach bait.”

“Yeah,” said Lois. “There are plenty of roaches chasing us already.”

Chapter Four

Lois looked at the bottle of hair dye and grimaced. Clark didn’t know, of course, but the only reason her hair was ash-blond was because Lex liked it that way. She’d acquiesced to the color change simply because it was easier than arguing about it with him.

Her hairdresser had finally allowed Lois to convince her that a surface touch-up dye was better than a deep dye because it wasn’t as damaging to Lois’ hair. At least, that was the reason Lois gave her. So it was as much a matter of scrubbing out the surface color and letting her natural brunette tones shine through than it was covering one dye with another. Mixing dyes probably wouldn’t have worked very well, and might have made her head shine with a day-glow orange hue or something even worse. Mayson Drake wouldn’t have liked sharing anything feminine with Lois, but she would have understood.

As she stepped out of the shower and began toweling her hair, she heard what sounded like Clark flipping channels on the TV in the main room. Probably looking for any morsel of news about the Drake woman, thought Lois. Too bad he was so hung up on her.

It would be nice to be with a man whose reason for being with her was something other than arm candy. Or being shown off as his latest and greatest conquest.

She flicked the thought aside. There was no way someone as upright and honest and righteous as Clark would even want to be anywhere near her if he didn’t have to be. He’d by far rather be sitting beside Drake’s bed right now, holding her hand and telling her how much he really cared for her and that she had to live for him.

No man had ever loved her like that.

She thrust that image aside also. No one would ever love her like that. She was damaged goods now – not because she’d been married, but because of the man she’d married. How many honest men would ever trust her now?

None. Zip. Zilch. Zero. Nada. No one, no way, not ever.

Her hand lifted the edge of the towel to dry her eyes. When she looked into the mirror, she was pleased to see her normal brunette locks framing her face. Her hair was a little long for her taste, down below her shoulders and wavy from the middle to the ends, but overall it was another small step down the path to reclaim her life. Throw it into a ponytail and she’d look years younger.

She wouldn’t be any younger, though.

Bitterness filled her mouth. She’d flushed half a decade of her life down the drain living with an amoral sociopath, allowing him to use her for his own ends. She’d already given up too much of herself to him over the years. She would surrender no more.

She would testify or die. Maybe both. But she would die content if Luthor were facing justice.

She picked up another towel and rubbed down her body, then wrapped her hair in a third towel. She’d picked the best ones she could find, but all of them had frayed edges and thin spots and two of them were already slightly damp. Boy, would she ever give this place a negative review at her next cocktail party.

Her lips refused to twitch. That didn’t sound at all funny, even to herself.

From the end of the bed in front of the TV, Clark turned his head when Lois opened the bathroom door. She was barefoot and wearing what appeared to be the same jeans but a different shirt. Even with her hair done up in the towel and piled on the back of her head, she looked enticing.

He shook himself and forced his attention back to the TV. He’d never reacted to any woman like this before. It was as if he’d imprinted on her the moment he’d seen her through the interrogation room one-way mirror. But there was no way he could know her well enough to care for her that deeply.

Yet he did – at least, he felt something for her that was very strong. And unless he controlled himself, she’d betray him. Or he’d betray himself. Or, perhaps, he’d allow himself to be distracted at the wrong time and she’d die because of it.

Best for everyone involved that he keep an emotional distance from her. Which was going to be difficult. If Mayson had made the trip, she could have been a buffer between Clark and his independent, rebellious emotions.

As it was, though, she wouldn’t have to knock down his emotional barriers. He’d take care of that himself.

“How’s your hair look?” he asked without facing her.

“Good, I think. It’s close to its original color. Now it just looks like I’m a little prematurely gray up near the roots.”

“Even better. That darkish-blond shade is too easy to spot from a distance.” He flipped the channel again and found a news report. “Got something.”

She slipped into a chair without speaking. It was one of Luthor News Network’s competitors. The title under the man’s upper body placed him in Metropolis.

“—assistant District Attorney Mayson Drake of Metropolis is still listed in critical condition. Doctor Joseph McConnell of Metro Emergency Surgery hospital said that the surgery to remove the bullet and repair the damage it caused went as well as could be expected, but that unspecified complications had quickly set in. Ms. Drake is one of two known survivors of the shooting this morning at the Metropolis South Bank Plaza. Police still have not released any information about the incident which left two plainclothes officers dead and one badly wounded. We still don’t know the identities of the officers, nor do we know why there

were there at the plaza. Police spokesperson Marcia Jones has scheduled a press conference on Wednesday, two days from now, at ten-thirty in the morning, where we hope to learn more.

Reporting live from Metropolis for LNN, this is Denny Lawson.”

Clark muted the TV before the network switched back to the attractive Oriental woman behind the desk. His hand fell to the floor and his eyes slammed shut. “I should have stayed with her,” he muttered.

“Then I’d probably be dead with a bullet or two in my skull, waiting for room inside a concrete piling in Hob’s Bay. And I wouldn’t be able to testify against Lex.”

“The bullets would take care of that,” he said.

“Yeah.” She pursed her lips together, then seemed to gather her strength. “But if Lex kills me but you have my body, you can still get the data files.”

“Why, do you have them tattooed on your stomach?”

“Close.”

Close? Close to what? What was ‘close’ supposed to mean?

He opened his eyes and turned to face her. “I don’t suppose you’d explain that remark to me? Just in the interest of passing the time, of course.”

She didn’t smile back. “I have a tattoo that gives the location of the data files I created. It’s on – on my right cheek.”

His gaze flicked to her face just below her right eye and he was almost sure she blushed a little. “Not that cheek.”

He tried not to laugh but couldn’t help it. “Lady, you are just full of surprises. When were you going to reveal that little tidbit to us?”

“I was going to – to tell ADA Drake. Tonight. After you went to sleep.”

“I see. But because she’s not here—”

“I’m telling you.”

He nodded. “I presume you’re not going to show it to me? Just so I’ll know where to look for the files should something untoward happens to you?”

Her face seemed to harden. “You wouldn’t understand it unless you had a Master’s degree in math. The IP address, directory structure, and password to the file folder are all hidden in the fractal pattern of the tattoo. You’d have to know how to decode the relationships among the angles to know what it really says. Even I don’t completely understand the mechanics of how it works. It took me about eight months of secret studying and trial and error to come up with that design, and then I had to convince Lex that it was the world’s most complex snowflake and that it represented his and my relationship.”

“I suppose he has a matching one on his left – cheek?”

“Similar but not matching. You could analyze that one from now till Doomsday and all you’d get would be a musical booby trap and the GPS coordinates of our honeymoon cottage.”

A snort of laughter burst out before he could stop it. “So when you told us this morning that Luthor letting you know about his criminal activities would come back and bite him in the butt, you were—”

“Yes, I was being literal.”

Despite his earlier decision not to let himself get close to her, he smiled and nodded in approval. “Sounds to me like you’re smarter than all of us put together.”

Her voice hardened to match her expression. “I’ve had to be. Dumb people don’t finish last around Lex Luthor. They finish early and then they get buried.”

That sounded almost personal to Clark. He started to ask her what she meant, but before he could say anything she was rooting around in her suitcase. “And if I was really smart,” she growled, “I wouldn’t be running for my life from the worst criminal since Al Capone.”

After a moment, she pulled out what looked like fuzzy pajamas and stalked back into the bathroom.

He told himself not to bring the subject up again. Best to keep his distance.

“This is not acceptable, Ms. Ames. We require information from the patient and we must have it now.”

“And I’m telling you that I can’t get it! You don’t understand how tight the security is around that woman! They’ve got cops and armed private security poking around everywhere and extra cameras in the halls and maybe DNA scanners next! I don’t think I could even get back in the building now!”

Nigel frowned and sighed. “What of the woman for whom you substituted yourself?”

“If they haven’t found her already, she should be waking up about now, and then they’ll really lock down the place. The only thing I could have done that would have been dumber would have been to kill her. Maybe now I’ll just get lost in the wash of all that’s going on.”

“Did you attempt to speak with the other survivor?”

“You know, you got a stubborn streak a mile wide, mister. Don’t you ever change the subject?”

“Not unless there is an actual need to do so. Have you spoken with him?”

“No. He’s still in intensive care. I couldn’t even get close enough to check his chart.” Cathy paused, then continued. “I don’t know what anthill you kicked over, Mr. St. John, but it’s not worth it to me to poke my nose into it. Not at the hospital, anyway. I’m going to ground until the heat’s off.”

Nigel almost responded with a threat, but he knew that he couldn’t afford to push her away at such a crucial time. He needed every operative he could put in the field to track Mrs. Luthor, and there was no telling which one might give him the clue he needed.

“Very well. I ask only that you contact me should you learn anything you believe I would want to know.”

“Don’t worry, I will. Wups, here comes my ride. Later, gator.”

The connection clicked off at her end, leaving Nigel with a handful of unresponsive telephone and a budding ulcer that could dissolve the steel surrounding any bank vault in minutes. Every moment his employer’s wife remained out of his possession, the more dangerous she became.

Where was that blasted woman?

Lois walked out of the bathroom wearing her cotton fleece pajamas and looked at Clark. He’d built himself a pallet on the floor at the foot of the bed and cleaned up the room so that it was nicer than when they’d first entered. He’d changed into loose exercise shorts and a T-shirt that didn’t hide his musculature at all.

She’d known he had a good build, but she hadn’t realized just how good it was until that moment. No wonder Drake was all breathless and starry-eyed over him.

Then it hit her. He’d cleaned the room, set up his sleeping area, changed clothes, and remade the bed for her while all she’d done was change into pajamas. The guy must have some kind of lightning reflexes to go along with a functional brain and a body by Hercules.

Just to keep from hyperventilating, she glanced out the window and remembered something she’d meant to ask earlier that evening. “Clark?”

“Yes?”

“Why are we on the first floor? Isn’t that more vulnerable than a room on a higher floor?”

He shrugged. “It’s a tradeoff. Higher floors are a bit safer from break-ins, but I wanted to be close to the van, and I didn’t think you’d want to jump three stories down if we did have to get out quick. Besides, this was the room the clerk gave us, and I didn’t want to make us any more memorable than we already are for paying cash. And it’ll be easier to get away in the morning.”

She nodded back. “Makes sense. Well, I guess it’s time to hit

the hay, as they say in Kansas.”

He gave her a half-grin. “Good idea. We’ll be up with the chickens in the morning, so I will bid you good night.”

She reached over and turned off the overhead light, leaving just the bedside lamp on. He looked even better in partial shadow, with intimations of power and strength warring with a hint of danger resting on his cheekbones.

Whoa, girl, that was already too much of that.

Lois moved to the bed and slid under the covers, and she was startled for a moment that they weren’t ultra-high count Egyptian cotton. This felt more like Cost Mart Bargain Days quality, and it reminded her that she wasn’t in Metropolis anymore.

She reached out to the cheap alarm clock beside the bed, then paused. “Clark?”

“Yes, Lois?” came the muffled reply.

“What time do chickens get up?”

“Around four-thirty.”

Her eyes popped open. “In the morning?”

“That’s right. Early start, remember?”

“What I remember is that I’m not a chicken.”

His head rose above the foot of the bed. “No, you’re not. You’re a material witness in the biggest corruption and racketeering investigation Metropolis has ever seen and there are people out to kill you. The quicker we get you to Denver the safer you’ll be.”

She gave him a blank stare for a moment, then nodded. “Four-thirty it is.”

Her hand pressed the ‘set alarm time’ button just as Clark said, “Go ahead and make it five-thirty. Chickens got to sleep too, you know?”

A grin tried to bloom on her lips. “Five-thirty it is. Just make sure the maid has laid out my ensemble for tomorrow.”

She thought that he would have bowed had he been able to do so from that position. “As you wish, my lady.” He lay down again and sighed, then said, “Good night, Lois.”

“Good night, Clark.”

She finished setting the alarm, then turned off the table lamp beside the bed. If only Clark Kent had been around when Lex Luthor was pursuing her. Maybe she wouldn’t have made her life into a disaster.

And Lucy would still be alive.

Lois would have bet real money that she’d lie awake for hours with her mind running in place at top speed, but instead she slipped into a peaceful, dreamless slumber.

Cathy Ames was scared. She knew, without knowing the whole story, that Nigel St. John was desperate to find Lois Luthor. Nothing flustered that unflappable killer Brit, whether he was pointing the weapon at his victim or having it held on him. Cathy had seen him one night after a meet where four gang punks had tried to take his wallet.

Two of them had survived to learn from their error. Nigel hadn’t mussed his hair.

Yet Lois Luthor was pushing him to the edge of his endurance without being anywhere in the city, at least as far as Cathy knew. She and that hunky detective had vanished after the shooting at the bank plaza, and none of Cathy’s informants could – or just refused to – tell her anything about the pair. They could be almost anywhere within a five-hundred mile radius by now. For all that anyone could or would tell her, they could have driven into Canada and were working their way west.

The only thing Cathy knew for sure was that the Luthors had gotten complementary tattoos on their rear ends about eight months earlier, just before that business with the sister-in-law had gone down. Once again she was glad to have had those lunch dates with Mrs. Luthor’s personal maid.

Funny, thought Cathy, Mrs. Luthor had never seemed to be the

tattoo type. And Mr. Luthor definitely wasn’t.

So why did they get them?

The one piece of data Cathy had uncovered was the name of the artist who’d applied the ink to their rear ends. She’d tried to tell St. John when Mr. Luthor had been arrested, but he’d ignored her and told her to learn something important. And Cathy had agreed that it wasn’t all that important, at least to Nigel’s face.

Now, however, that name was the only thread left that she could pull. And she could do it without exposing herself to danger. All she had to do was put on her fat clothes over some body padding, grab her best wig, and go see Ben “The Inkster” Tremont. She even knew that Tremont was the name he’d adopted after a stretch in the Florida state pen for embezzlement, and if she had to she’d use that piece of leverage against him.

Tattoo shops usually opened late in the morning and stayed open until at least ten o’clock, sometimes past midnight, but Cathy didn’t want to brace him at the end of the day when Tremont was tired and not thinking clearly, or had customers in the store. Right before lunch was a better time, before the junkies and tweakers got up, and after the morning rush of power suits and bottled hair color finished pretending that they were tough enough to get a tat without any anesthesia. Cathy had seen such men and women cry at simple marks on their shoulders, while the hardcore body art aficionados, both male and female, would strip naked and let Tremont ink an intricate multi-hued dragon on their private parts without blinking.

It took all kinds, she told herself.

Bzz-bzz-bzz-bzz-bzz—

Ugh, thought Lois, there’s a bee in the room. How could a bee get past Lex’s security?

Bzz-bzz-bzz-bzz-bzz—

It’s a pretty angry bee, too.

Bzz-bzz-bzz-bzz-bzz—

The tap on her shoulder yanked her out from under the pillow. “Where’s th’ bee?”

Bzz-bzz-bzz-bzz-bzz—

A man chuckled. “Not a bee, I’m afraid. Come on, it’s time to get going.”

She tried to open her eyes but that stupid bee kept buzzing beside her head. *Bzz-bzz-bzz-bzz-bzz—*

“Kill it!” she grunted. “Kill the bee! Lemme sleep!” She fell back onto the bed and pulled the covers up to her neck.

Bzz-bzz-bzz—

The click of a switch and the sudden silence got her attention. Then the man she’d heard before said, “Come on, up with the chickens, remember? We need to get on the road.”

She blinked a couple of times and tried to remember. Road? Chickens? What did—

She shot up to a sitting position and gasped. “Clark!” she barked. “What – what time izzit?”

“Five thirty-three.”

Her eyes found him, a tall and wide blur outlined by light spilling from around the bathroom door. “In the morning?”

Either he put his fists on his hips or suddenly sprouted extra arms. He chuckled again. “Yes, in the morning. We can grab some coffee and donuts from a convenience store down the street, or we can go to the takeout window at McDonald’s. Your choice.”

She ran a hand through the rat’s nest on her head. “My choice?” she mumbled.

“Yes.”

“I choose sleep.”

“Okay. We can just wait here for your husband’s goons to find us and shoot us full of holes, if that’s what you—”

She shot upright again. “Shoot us? No! Wait – I remember now. We – have to go to Denver.”

“Not bad for a second try. I’m guessing you’re not a morning

person.”

She pulled her knees up close and rested her elbows on them. “Never had to be while I was married to – while I was married. He even arranged for me to have special work hours at LNN so I could come and go as I pleased.”

“What did you do there? I saw you on camera a few times, but I know you didn’t have your own time slot.”

“Producer, writer, researcher, talking head talent coach, you name it, I did it.” She looked up at him with almost-clear eyes. “I’d like to think that the people there came to respect me for what I did and for what I could do.”

His voice softened. “I’m sure they did.”

She shook her head, then let it hang down close to her chest to stretch out her neck. “Got to be the worst pillows in the state of Ohio. My neck is all twisted.”

“Want me to rub your shoulders? My mother used to make ‘ooh’ and ‘ahh’ sounds when I gave her a neck massage.”

“I’ll keep it in mind. Right now, though, I need to pee.” She stopped and closed her eyes, then looked at him and shook her head. “And I can’t believe I just said that to you.”

He smiled. “Perils of close companionship. Hard to maintain a lot of privacy when you’re traveling with another person.”

Lois wanted to ask how much privacy he and Mayson Drake had given up in their travels together, but instead she threw back the covers and stood. “I’ll be back in a minute. Don’t listen too closely.”

He held up three fingers in a Scout vow. “I’m deaf until you come out. Just don’t fall in because I won’t hear you drowning.”

“Ha ha ha. Funny like a full-body cast.” She reached out and snatched her suitcase from the chair where it sat. “See you in a few minutes.”

He couldn’t help but hear sounds, of course, but he manfully resisted any mental speculation of what was happening behind the paper-thin bathroom door. He was glad she’d slept through his own morning toilet routine.

Then he realized that he’d shaved with his heat vision. The scent was probably still hanging in the air.

With any luck, she’d attribute it to the quality of the motel and not think anything about it. But he’d have to take special precautions from now on. Maybe if he picked up a scented candle and lit it after he shaved?

And he’d have to remember to buy a small box of matches, too. He didn’t think she’d believe that he could light a candle in a glass cylinder by rubbing two sticks together.

He picked up the map from the desk and sighed, then sat on the end of the bed with it. Traveling a straight route was the quickest way to complete their journey, but it held its own perils. If one of Luthor’s henchmen found where they had been, they could be tracked, especially if they kept on the same road.

He looked at the spot indicating Warren and thought. If they stayed on I-80, they’d be just south of Lake Erie when the interstate ended and they’d have to pick another road. By that time, they’d be around Akron, and if they went north to Cleveland – a place which many of the locals called ‘The Mistake by the Lake’ – they could pick up I-76 and keep west until they got to Toledo, where they’d have to choose another road. Not only that, I-80 was a toll road beginning just west of their location, and he didn’t want them to be photographed at a toll booth. He’d found out the year before how easy it was to hack their cameras when one of his co-workers had pulled pictures of a kidnapper from the I-950 bypass in Metropolis.

Clark didn’t like that route for other reasons, too. It went too close to Chicago and Lake Michigan, which would rob them of a northerly escape route if they needed to dodge in a hurry, and the toll road would have limited exits. No, he’d rather go back to I-80 and then on I-76 to Akron and head south on I-71 to Columbus,

then take I-70 going west. That would point them to the middle of Indiana, and he was fairly sure that none of Luthor’s thugs would think of looking for them there. Terra Haute was about nine hours’ drive from their motel, and Clark wanted to give Luthor’s goons plenty of time to panic over not finding them.

As he firmed up the decision in his mind, the bathroom door opened and Lois walked out. Today she was wearing a dark red pullover golf shirt, loose knee-length Navy blue shorts, and low-heeled white tennis shoes. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and secured with a Navy blue band, and she topped the ensemble with a white tennis visor. Only a hint of makeup covered her face.

He stared, bludgeoned into silence by the vision before him.

He couldn’t help it. She was the most artlessly beautiful woman he’d ever seen in person, and there was no way his mouth would form words. A small part of his brain nudged the rest of his brain and insisted that it was time to go, but the larger part of his brain was drooling too hard to listen.

She stopped and frowned at him. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “Is this okay?”

His lungs pulled in some air for him and broke the spell. “Oh – yeah, that’s okay. It’s more than okay. It’s great.”

She gave him a look like she wondered if he’d had a stroke, then said, “I thought if I changed my appearance and dressed like I wasn’t trying to hide, it would actually make me harder to see, especially with my new hair color. Do you like the effect?” She swished her head to either side and let the ponytail flip back and forth. “It’s a little longer than I prefer, but I think it works to my advantage now. Maybe we can get some scissors and cut it short later. You know, change my appearance again?”

He was glad she’d kept talking. It had given his brain time to reassert itself. “No, that’s a very good idea. If you look like you’re headed toward the links or the tennis court, people who don’t know you will be much less likely to recognize you.”

She flashed a quick grin as if she’d passed a test that had worried her. “Good. I mean, it’s good that people won’t notice me so easily. Do you want me to come to the front desk with you?”

The sudden change of subject threw him for a moment. “Huh? Front desk?”

“For the refund, remember? You paid cash for the room and the clerk promised you a deposit refund.”

“Oh. Oh! Right, right.” He stood abruptly. “Just forgot for a second. Let’s load up the luggage and I’ll go to the desk. I think maybe you should deal with the next desk clerk, though.”

She nodded. “No problem. I’ll wait for you in the van.”

He stopped before opening the door. “One more thing.”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to ditch the pieces of that pistol you brought. I don’t think it’s a good idea to have it with us.”

Her face lost some of its brightness. “Oh. Yeah, you’re right. And you’re the boss on this trip, so whatever you say goes.”

Chapter Five

The woman Clark had dealt with the previous night wasn’t on duty, but the girl behind the counter nodded as Clark explained his situation. She tapped a few keys on the computer and handed him the refund without complaint, then pointed him to the nearest McDonald’s. He even remembered to sign the paperwork as Jerome Clark.

At the drive-through window, Lois ordered a large coffee and a breakfast sausage sandwich while Clark settled for a large orange juice and two Danishes. They drove in comfortable silence as Lois sipped her coffee and nibbled on her food. Clark, as usual, inhaled his pastries and slurped his juice in seconds.

He glanced at Lois, who seemed to be enjoying her meal with sensuous pleasure, then said, “We’re changing our route. I-80 becomes a toll road and goes north, and I don’t want to get caught between one of the Great Lakes and a car full of bad guys on a

highway with so few exits.”

She finished chewing and swallowed the morsel in her mouth. “I was wondering if you were going to do that. Lex never drove on toll roads either. He said it was too easy to ambush someone on them.”

“That’s why we’re getting off I-80 and going south to I-70. If everything goes well, we’ll sleep over in Terre Haute.”

“How far is that?”

“Drive time, about nine hours, depending on the traffic around Akron. I think there are some construction zones we’ll have to go through, so that will slow us down a bit. I don’t want to try to go too far in one day. We’ll need to get a full night’s sleep every night to stay alert.”

He saw her nod out of the corner of his eye. “Good to have a plan. I just hope I can be as convincing as you were back in Warren when we check into the motel for the night.”

“I’m sure you’ll do fine. Oh – I just thought of something. Do you have any identification with you?”

“I have my New Troy driver’s license that says I’m Lois Luthor, but since I don’t want to get shot in the head I’d really rather not use that one. I bet there are some ID cards in the money belt.”

He noticed that she hadn’t referred to it as “Mayson’s money belt” and briefly wondered what it signified – that she didn’t want to remind him of Mayson, or that she didn’t want to think of Mayson herself. “Why don’t you look for one with your picture? You’ll need it if you do the check-in at the motel.”

“You’re right. I should’ve thought of that.”

She finished her sandwich, put her coffee in the cup holder, and unsnapped her seat belt. She crawled to the front bench seat and reached under it for the money belt, then laid it out on the floor of the van. After a moment she said, “Found it. Wait, no, I found two.”

“What names?”

“One has a picture of me with my blonde highlights, name of Lois Drake. Eww. Was I supposed to be Mayson’s sister?”

Clark gave her a sardonic frown in the rear-view mirror. “I don’t know what she was planning. What name does the other one have?”

“Huh. Joanne Clark. And it’s an older shot of me with my hair cut shorter and pulled back so you really can’t tell the color. The color field says brunette, though. Did you know about this one?”

“No, I didn’t. I just knew that most people don’t think of looking for fugitives who go by their middle names. Worked out pretty well for us last night.”

“Uh-huh. Unless you think I shouldn’t, I’m going to put Joanne Clark in my purse and hide Lois Luthor and Lois Drake in the money belt.”

“Good idea. If we get stopped, we’ll be pretend to be a married couple who are bored with each other. That ought to throw off anyone trying to spot us.”

She bit her tongue before she replied, I could never be bored with you, Clark.

Neither of them needed that kind of complication, especially not now. Besides, he was just being nice to her, trying to soften her up before she testified. Or he was just trying to make the trip go smoothly. There was no way he could care – he couldn’t feel real affection for her. He didn’t know her that well, hadn’t known her that long, and he didn’t know that she didn’t deserve it. And with that dumb pistol stunt, she hadn’t given him anything to make him trust her.

On top of that, she didn’t need any softening up. She needed to be diamond-hard and obsidian-sharp to stand up under the battering of Lex’ lawyers. She knew they would do anything and everything they could to discredit her testimony and malign her honesty. And while the information she would provide them would

validate every word she would say, a jury might not buy it if she weren’t clear-eyed and confident on the stand.

Joanne Clark’s driver’s license slid into her purse. Lois Luthor’s ID disappeared into the money belt. And Lois silently slipped back into the passenger seat and watched central Ohio slide behind them.

Cathy thought her disguise was good enough, but it was still hard to walk past the cops directing drivers around a broken traffic signal at South 3rd and Main just two blocks from the tattoo shop. But none of them gave her a second look. Either her disguise was even better than she’d thought, or the lunchtime rush was good camouflage. She tried not to appear too relieved.

She looked in the window of the tattoo shop and saw Ben Tremont smiling and nodding to a young preppie couple who seemed to be waffling on getting matching butterfly tats on their shoulders. One of them was probably worried about the cost and the amount of pain involved, while the other was concerned that the ink wouldn’t age well as their bodies did. Cathy guessed that the girl was the one thinking about money, since she was the one Ben spoke to with a more serious look on his face.

As Cathy pushed through the front door, the young man – hardly more than a boy – yelled “Yeah, baby!” and hugged the girl enthusiastically. The girl laughed and patted his head so he could put her down, then said to Ben, “So, seven o’clock tonight?”

Ben smiled and nodded. “Both of you should wear shirts with very loose short sleeves. I’ll have someone here to watch the front, and we’ll just go in the back and ink you up.”

“Great! Hey, man, you take checks, right?”

Ben slowly shook his head. “Sorry, no. Cash or plastic, and no gas cards.”

“Aw, man!”

Ben put his arm around the boy’s shoulder. “I have this deal with the banks in Metropolis, my man. I don’t open savings accounts or sell Certificates of Deposit, and they don’t tattoo their customers. Works out pretty well for both of us.”

The girl’s voice was firm. “We’ll bring cash, Mr. Tremont. If I’m going to wear a shoulder tat at my wedding, I want it to look like I’ve had it for more than two weeks.”

The boy pouted, but finally said, “Okay. I’ll hit my savings account this afternoon. We can still go out to dinner after, right, honey?”

She gave him a smiling stare. “No, dear. We’ll go back to your apartment and you can make dinner for us. We probably won’t be all that hungry after getting needles stuck in our arms anyway. And we’ll have to apply that disinfectant cream.”

He rolled his eyes at her. “Fine. Dinner at my place. Hope you still like my pancakes.”

She patted him on the forearm. “That sounds great, babe. Now let’s both get back to work before we get fired for taking too much time at lunch.”

He kissed her quickly and grabbed her hand, then waved at Ben and pulled her out of the shop behind him. The look on her face made Cathy think that her young man was in for a bit of a surprise once they actually tied the knot and she began to ‘guide’ him more forcefully.

Tremont walked over to her and said, “And how may I help you today? Can I interest you in a nice garden rose on your shoulder? Or maybe just a small vine on one ankle?”

She shook her head. “I’m looking for anything you have on Lois Luthor.”

His smile vanished like dew in a heat wave. “I’m sorry, I don’t have anything to tell you. I’m afraid you’ve wasted your time.”

“You put a pretty complex tat on each of the Luthors a few months ago. I want to know more about it.”

He shook his head. “I can’t talk about my customers or what ink I’ve put on them. I can’t even confirm that the people you’re

talking about are my customers.”

“There’s no tattoo-artist-slash-client confidentiality clause in the law. You’re neither an attorney nor a clergyman.”

“I still can’t talk about people who may or may not be my customers.”

“Oh, come on, Paul, you can tell me anything.”

His eyes flickered and she knew she’d hit her target. “I think maybe you have the wrong artist. My name’s Ben Tremont.”

“No, your name is Paul Randall and you spent three years in the Florida state pen for embezzlement, forgery, and assault with a deadly weapon a decade ago, and you testified against your buddies in exchange for a reduced sentence. You’ve been living the straight and narrow since you got out. Almost no one knows who you really are except a very few of your closest friends.” She took off her sunglasses and smiled at him. “And me, of course.”

His eyes hardened and he took a menacing step toward her. “You need to leave right now.”

“I can’t, Paul. I need whatever you know about these folks.”

He stopped just out of arm’s reach. “You know, you aren’t as smart as you seem to think you are. You have me pegged as a violent ex-con who’s hiding his real name, yet you come here alone and threaten to expose me?” His slow grin held no humor. “Think about it and let me know if you really think that’s a good plan.”

“Hang on, okay? You remember the tall skinny British guy with a white beard and mustache? Came with the Luthors? Didn’t you get the idea that he was kind of dangerous?”

Tremont leaned back and cocked his head. “Keep talking.”

“Well, he’s more than just kind of dangerous. He’s freakin’ scary and more than a little crazy when he gets going. And he wants me to help him find Mrs. Luthor. She’s missing.”

Now he looked puzzled. “Why aren’t the cops helping him look?”

“Because they have her.”

Comprehension dawned in Tremont’s eyes. “I see. She’s turned state’s evidence on him, or they’ve arrested her for something and she’s going to roll on him. Now he has to get her before she gets him.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny those presumptions,” she responded primly.

He grinned and nodded. “Naturally. And, just as naturally, I can’t talk about my customers, assuming that the people you’re talking about are my customers.” He crossed his arms and stared down at her. “Sounds like we’ve reached an impasse.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” As she spoke, she drifted over to a pattern display book and opened it at random. “Like I said, I need to know everything you know about Mrs. Luthor. Naturally, no one would ever suspect where the information came from.” Her eyes smiled at him over a page showing a jousting knight on horseback. “I can be – very discreet.” The smile reached down and enveloped her lips. “And very generous, too.”

“Sure. And if I don’t tell you what I know – providing, of course, that I know anything – you’ll send that dangerous Brit to see me.”

She laughed and shook her head. “I don’t send Mr. St. John anywhere. I don’t control him. He does what he does without any input from me.” She took a slow step closer to Tremont, then another. “Of course, if I don’t learn anything from you, I will have to let him know that I didn’t learn anything, and – well, I don’t have to promise to sign your body cast, do I?”

She held Tremont’s gaze for a long moment, then he sighed and dropped his arms. “Fine. I’ll tell you what I know.”

“Why, thank you, Ben. That’s very kind of you. Oh, and if you could let me know which of those designs made it to Mrs. Luthor’s hip, I’d be most grateful.”

“That part’s easy. She brought it in herself. Said it was a fractal design that expressed their relationship in – what did she

call it? Oh, yeah, she said it – quote – ‘expressed our relationship in the most precise manner possible.’ Made me stop several times so she could check it out and make sure it was right.”

“And you gave Mr. Luthor the same tat?”

Tremont shook his head. “No, his was different. It was about the same size but with different lines and angles. And before you ask, I don’t know what either one of them means. I don’t even know what a ‘fractal’ is.”

Cathy nodded. She knew what it was, and she also knew that digital information could be hidden in a fractal design. But it was static, unchanging, and anything that was almost nine months old was old news in business terms. Maybe not in statute of limitations terms, but it was old in her circle of acquaintances.

Unless—

“Did either of them call those designs by a name?”

Tremont looked startled. “Where did you come up with that question?”

“Never mind. Did they?”

“Well, yeah. Mr. Luthor said something about his being the star of the east and hers being the north star. They didn’t explain the names to me and I didn’t ask.”

“Of course, of course, why would you?” She turned away and put her fingernail between her teeth to help her think.

“Yeah, why would I? You want those designs?”

Cathy spun back to face him. “You have them?”

“Well, yeah. I take photos of every finished design. I never include the customer’s face or name in the shot, just a bar code so I can refer back to it later.”

Cathy suppressed a smile. She’d keep it under wraps until after she gave Nigel the pictures of the Luthors’ inked bottoms. Then she’d laugh her head off. “I’m going to need a copy of each of the finished products, Ben.”

He nodded. “No problem. Why don’t you come by this evening about nine? I can have copies printed up for you by then.”

“You still have the negatives, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then you can replace the prints I’m going to take now.”

“Aw, come on! I said I’d give them to you!”

“And I believe you, Ben, but we’re working against a ticking clock on this thing. Nigel needs those pictures as soon as I can get them to him, and that means I need your photos now.”

Ben scowled at her for another long moment, then shook his head. “Fine. Just don’t tell anyone where you got them, okay?”

She smiled impishly. “My lips are sealed, my friend.”

The motel clerk in Terre Haute was even easier to deal with than the one in Warren, or maybe Lois was a better charmer than Clark was. Clark didn’t care which one was true as long as they got to sleep before too much longer. He was starting to feel unusually tired and he didn’t know why, nor did he want to face trouble with a yawn and a stumble.

Lois stepped out of the lobby and waved for him to follow her. Before he could hiss at her to get back in the van, she’d vanished around the corner of the building, and Clark had to force himself not to rev the engine too loud or follow her too quickly.

As it turned out, they were in the very back of the motel, in a separate wing that ran perpendicular to the main building, making the motel look like a disjointed ‘T’ from the air. Clark saw that theirs was the only vehicle on the back row, so he turned and shifted into reverse to put the rear doors of the van right up against the back door of the motel.

They carried in their baggage, this time leaving Mayson’s suitcase in the van. Clark brought in the money belt and hid it under the foot of the mattress while trying not to breathe too deeply. There was definitely a tang of mildew in the air, and he wondered how sensitive Lois’ nose was and whether or not she could smell it.

She answered his unspoken question with an “ick” expression and an apology. “Sorry about the odor. I was trying to be as inconspicuous as possible.”

He shrugged. “This room’s fine. I probably would have picked it too.”

“At least it’s on the first floor.”

“Yep.”

As she put her few hang-up clothes in the tiny closet, she said, “Why don’t you take the bed tonight? You look a little ragged.”

“Not necessary. I’m fine.”

“I’m sure you are, Clark, but I could tell you were getting frustrated this morning. That construction zone west of Akron would have driven Saint Peter to honk his horn.” She shook her head. “I’ve never seen so many people drive so stupid in so short a time.”

“And you’ve driven in Metropolis, right?”

She returned his almost-grin. “So have you. I was impressed with what you said to that guy in the pickup. I thought he was going to get out and come back to discuss the situation with you.”

“I did not curse at him! He was hearing things.”

“You did some fancy dancing right at the edge of cursing him. Verbally, you’re very creative.”

“What can I say? I’m a frustrated writer.”

She paused, then said, “I know how that feels. Seriously, Clark, you take the bed and I’ll sleep on the floor. If anyone tries to come in I’ll scream like a banshee and probably scare you out of a year’s growth.”

His mother would have frowned at him, but after a moment he nodded. “Okay, you’ve talked me into it. Just promise me that you’ll take the bed tomorrow.”

“Done and done. Get some sleep, won’t you? I think you really need it.”

He sat on the bed and was surprised to feel how comfortable it was. “Yeah, I think you’re right. If you’ll let me have the bathroom first, I’ll be asleep by the time you come out.”

When Lois exited the bathroom, Clark was already in the bed and breathing rhythmically. She looked at his face on the pillow and marveled at his sculpted cheekbones, his solid jaw line, his rumpled hair that needed a hand run through it to—

She closed her eyes and shook herself. Thinking about how good-looking this young detective was would probably be the worst way to spend the next eight hours that she could possibly choose. Sure, he was almost beyond handsome, strong, intelligent, compassionate, and flat-out honest, but all he really did was remind Lois how badly she’d misjudged Lex. Six years ago, she’d barely known her husband. Five years ago, they had just returned from their honeymoon and she was deeply in love with the man she believed him to be – a man he was not, never had been, and could never be.

Four years and nine months ago she was in his private hospital, nursing two broken fingers, a bruised spleen, a dislocated elbow, a wrenched back that had her horizontal for a week and in a brace for nearly two more months, and possessed of the sure and certain knowledge that she’d married one of the worst mass murderers in American history.

She was a relationship booby trap just waiting to explode and she knew it. She was like one of those actresses who was said to be “box office poison,” the ones who were talented and intelligent and skilled and who somehow still destroyed the profits on every movie they made because the public wouldn’t buy tickets to see them. She was like that with men, starting with Lex and working backward to every high school date she’d ever had. None of them who were worth anything had stayed around, and the others were uniform wastes of oxygen, food, and water. If Lois had chosen to be a cloistered nun straight out of high school, she and everyone else around her would have been far better off.

She checked the main door – locked and bolted – and the windows – locked – then wedged the desk chair under the main doorknob. It wouldn’t stop a determined killer, but it would slow one down long enough for Clark to draw his service weapon and protect her.

Funny, she mused, that she trusted a man she’d met the day before far more than she trusted any other man she’d ever met. He’d fail eventually, of course, and disappoint her deeply – just like every other man she’d ever known – but there was something in her mind and heart that told her that Clark Kent would engage in hand-to-bumper combat with a battalion of armored vehicles to protect her from harm before he would quit trying and stop fighting. It made her feel safer than she had ever felt before, even when she was still lying to herself about Lex.

Her bed might be the floor of a cheap and shop-worn motel. Her traveling companion might be a relative stranger. Her sense of identity might have been dumped in a blender and pureed beyond recognition. But she still drifted off to sleep with her heart more at peace than it had been for a long, long time.

Nigel transitioned from sleep to action in milliseconds. He felt the nudge on his shoulder, snapped his hand under his pillow, and had his weapon pointed in the general direction of the intruder before he realized who it was. An instant later he realized that his hand was being held by crossed wooden rods, which was all that was keeping the muzzle of his pistol from zeroing in on his target.

He wished he could shoot the intruder and be done with him, but he still needed the man.

“Mister Asabi,” he grunted, trying to put reproof toward his nominal equal in the emphasis of his words. “I have lost count of the number of times I have requested that you not awaken me from sleep in that manner.”

Asabi put his escrima sticks back in their holster and nodded. “You have indeed made that request a great many times, Mr. St. John, and I must apologize for disregarding your wishes. However, there are exigent circumstances which have prompted me to take this risk and awaken you in this precipitous manner.”

Nigel put his pistol back under his pillow. “What exigent circumstances might those be?”

“I have discovered a description of the vehicle used by Mrs. Luthor to leave the city. I have also discovered the general direction she traveled when she departed from Metropolis.”

Nigel sat up. “That is very good news. Did you manage to discover the license plate number also?”

“I fear not. My source did not know it, and I did not wish to alarm him. He is not one of our usual informants.”

“Perhaps he would be more cooperative were you to ask him once more.”

Asabi shook his head. “The man does not know that he is giving us information. The young woman to whom he is relating this – I believe it is called ‘pillow talk’ – is one of our occasional operatives, and she cannot appear too eager to garner information from this man.”

“Can you at least tell me his name and how he has what little information he has relayed to us?”

“Of course. His name is Dennis Franklin, and he is an investigator with the city District Attorney’s office. His information is always reliable, despite his not knowing the ultimate recipient of his late-night confessions.”

“I see. Please tell me about the vehicle.”

“It is a recent-model Ford Econoline 150 van, white with red trim. It was last seen traveling west on Interstate Highway 80, although none of my people have reported seeing it since then.”

“I see.” Nigel brooded for a moment, then asked, “Do you think she has gone to ground somewhere between here and West Virginia?”

Asabi shook his head. “I do not. We have many assets between

here and that courthouse, and I cannot believe that she and her escort have not been spotted in their travels. I believe that they have chosen a different destination.”

Nigel's eyebrows rose, surprised that Asabi was thinking along the same lines as he had been. “We should assume that their destination is a Federal facility of some kind, since those are the charges Mr. Luthor will most likely face first. To which facility do you believe they will go?”

“Denver, Chicago, and New Orleans are all potential destinations. But both Denver and New Orleans have a significant Intergang presence, and the district attorney's office is surely aware of that. I believe they will head to the nearest destination, Chicago.”

“Mmm. I am not so certain. Al Capone may be dead and buried, along with his associates, but there are still gang families active in Chicago, and indeed, the entire state of Illinois. Given those three choices, I would expect them to head toward Denver. The FBI, the US Marshal's Bureau, and the Secret Service all maintain offices there. And they all have a number of personnel available for any action they might wish to take.”

Asabi frowned for a long moment, thinking, then nodded. “Your logic is sound, as usual. Shall I direct our assets to concentrate on the Denver area?”

“I do not believe we should do that, at least not yet. I do not discount your own thinking either, so I believe we should put a secondary force near Chicago and have them ready to move on a moment's notice.”

Asabi smiled, then put his hands together and bowed. “Your preparation is, of course, superior. I shall see to it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Asabi. And do not forget to set aside some time to rest. You may require it in the days to come.”

As Asabi slipped out the door, Nigel took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It wouldn't be long before he was free of that Oriental impediment to his plans. And as far as Nigel was concerned, it couldn't be soon enough.

Chapter Six

Lois slowly became aware of her surroundings. She was in bed with the shades pulled partly back, so Consuela must be nearby. She sucked in a deep breath and was startled at the smell. Had Lex gotten her drunk again? No, she didn't have a hangover. Besides, it smelled more like a cheap motel room than her—

She catapulted upright and looked around. It was a cheap motel room! And except for not wearing shoes she was fully dressed. What was she doing—

Wait a minute...

Now she remembered.

She was on the run from the Wonder Twins, Nigel and Asabi. One or the other of them was always tracking her, following her, marking her every move. The only chance she'd had to elude them was when Lex had been arrested and they had both been confined to the main house for the morning by the police. Her plans to get free from either the Indian mystic or the defrocked British secret agent had easily fooled the two men who'd taken over for Lex' two favorite minions that day.

She looked for Clark, who'd gone to sleep – in the bed where she was now resting? How had she gotten there? And where was he?

A clicking noise from the door told her that someone with a card key was coming in.

They'd found her.

She grabbed the first solid thing she could reach, an old ceramic ashtray from the night table, and slid it under the covers beside her leg.

She wouldn't go quietly.

“Good morning!” Clark almost whispered as he put the grocery bag he was holding on the sorry excuse for a desk. “Are

you ready for breakfast? Or brunch, actually?”

Lois released the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. “I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but how did I wake up in the bed, seeing as how I went to sleep on the floor?”

He grinned and spoke at a normal volume. “Sometime early this morning, you got up, went into the bathroom, then stumbled back in here and lay down on the bed. When I asked you what you were doing, you replied, ‘Mrghphumbler’ or something similar and began snoring very lightly and in a most dainty and ladylike manner. So, since discretion is often the better part of valor, I claimed your spot on the floor until about forty minutes ago. I walked to the deli down the street and picked up an assortment of bagels, spread, and fruit. I also got some fresh fruit juice and a couple of cream sodas in case that was your preference.” He frowned and looked at her arm, which was still under the covers. “What do you have there?”

She grinned sheepishly and pulled out the ashtray. “Sorry about this. I wasn't sure who you were.”

He shrugged. “No problem. I understand. What flavor of cream cheese do you want, or would you prefer plain butter?”

She put the ashtray back on the night table beside the bed.

“Wow. Uh, do you have strawberry cream cheese?”

“Sorry, no. The closest the deli had was raspberry.”

She smiled and stood beside the bed. “That sounds wonderful. Thank you, Clark.”

“You're more than welcome.”

He forced himself to turn and look at what he was doing before he said something really stupid like, Let's do this again every morning for the rest of our lives.

He took his time spreading the cream cheese on her bagel, trying to understand where that thought had come from. He couldn't let himself fall for her. She was a witness in the biggest case he'd ever been involved with. She was the wife of the man who was responsible for at least a dozen deaths in the last five years, not to mention the corruption and intimidation that had flowed from his office. For all he really knew, she'd been part of it the whole time and had offered to testify just to save her own skin.

It was very nice skin, too, creamy and soft and youthful—

Cut it out, Kent! he ordered himself. Even if she were single she'd be so far out of your league that you might as well be an alien from some other solar system entirely! Keep your focus on the mission!

But there was something he needed to do, something she might misinterpret, but it had to be done. He'd been too tired the previous night, and he suspected that his need for sunlight wasn't being fulfilled by the light that filtered through the tinted glass in the van. He needed a day in the sun, and she needed a day of rest, so he'd planned a little detour without telling her.

“Oh, my!” Lois gasped. “It can't be that late, can it?”

He nodded without turning around. “It's a quarter past ten, and I let you sleep because you obviously needed it. I'd imagine you haven't been sleeping very well for the past few weeks.”

“Well – no, I haven't. But don't we need to get to Denver as soon as we can?”

“We need to get there in one piece. You needed the rest, and I need to get out of the van for a few hours. I know a place we can go where your husband's hunting dogs won't find us.”

“Huh. My husband.”

Her flat tone reminded him of their initial meeting where she'd asked to be addressed as “Ms. Galactically Stupid.” He turned to see her take a big bite of bagel. “Can of fruit juice?” he offered. She shook her head. “Cream soda?” She nodded, so he popped the top on one of them and handed it to her.

After two quick sips and a long guzzle, she lowered the can. “Ahh, that's good and cold. Haven't had one of those for years. I'm glad you found them.”

He waited for a moment, then prepared another bagel for himself and popped open the other cream soda. "So?"

She gave him a puzzled look and swallowed. "So what?"

"You sounded like you were going to make a comment about your husband."

"Ah. Well, yes, I was. First, though, I wish you'd stop calling him my husband."

"Okay. What do you want me to call him?"

Her eyes narrowed and her lips flattened. "How about something like 'crap-eating rat snake' for starters? We can get more graphic if we need to."

He tried to laugh and swallow at the same time and ended up coughing awkwardly into his hand. "Crap-eating rat snake? Come on, Lois, don't beat around the bush. Tell me how you really feel about him."

Her face froze for a moment, then the edges of her mouth crooked upward and her eyes glistened. She didn't quite laugh, but he could feel the tension leak out of her body. "Thanks, I needed that."

"You're most welcome. So why else should I not call old Hissy your husband?"

That got a chortle out of her, and he realized that he was doing it again. He was actually trying to make her laugh so he could watch her face light up and hear her mirth.

It was dangerous, frightening, and not a little bit counter-productive. He really shouldn't be personally involved with her. He really shouldn't let himself enjoy her company so much. Because of their current circumstances, they had no future as friends, much less as anything more. When he let her out of the van in Denver and handed her over to the marshals, he would probably never see her again.

He replayed her last few words in his mind and caught up with her answer. "Funny. Very funny. No, it's because I'm going to divorce him as soon as I can, even if we're both in jail. I probably won't be able to do it before I testify, but it won't be very long after the verdict. When I know he's in prison, I'll get away from him so fast it'll make his lawyers' heads spin."

Clark had a thought. "Does your — I mean, does old Hissy know about this part of the plan?"

"I haven't told him, but I'd be surprised if he hasn't guessed it. But he can look at almost any situation and put his own unique spin on it, make himself believe it, and convince nearly everyone around him that he's right. So it's possible that he still thinks I'll do a Tammy Wynette and stand by him no matter what."

"Really? Doesn't that make him just a little nuts?"

All hint of expression fled her face. "Do you really think he could have done all those things to all those people if he were completely sane?"

Had Cathy Ames known what Lois was thinking at that moment, she might have agreed with the sentiment.

Cathy had reported to Nigel on the phone that morning and informed him about the tattoos. Nigel, of course, didn't think they were significant. But Cathy knew better.

"Look, Mr. St. John, why would Lois Luthor get a tat on her butt that was so intricate? People who get body art like that want to show it off, not hide it. And the fact that the artist called it a fractal design is important."

"I do not agree, Ms. Ames. The best use of that mark would be to identify her body should she expire while lacking identification."

"Then why did Mr. Luthor get a similar one?"

She heard his exasperation across the phone line. "Why does any man desire to please a woman? I am certain that he was merely humoring her whim."

"Mr. St. John, do you know what a fractal design is?"

"I know that it is a mathematical construct and little more."

"Did you know that it's capable of containing complex information?"

The silence told her that she'd finally gotten his attention.

"No, I did not. Perhaps your theory is not so far-fetched as I originally thought. Please fax the design to me and I will have one of our best people look at it."

"That's not good enough."

She heard his voice turn hard. "It will have to be good enough."

"No, no, I don't mean that I'm trying to get more money from you! This design is very intricate and detailed, and a fax doesn't have enough resolution to let anyone see all the fine lines and angles. The photos were taken with high-resolution film and they're printed on the best paper available. You need to see the entire design to make any sense of it."

"You make a valid point. Very well. Please go to a copy center, have them duplicated, and send them to me as an email attachment."

"I'm afraid that's no good either. These pictures don't show just the designs, Mr. St. John, they show Mr. and Mrs. Luthor's bare bottoms. The only identification on them is the bar code the artist uses, but a regular copy shop won't work with these because of the anti-nudity laws in New Troy. I have to bring them to you myself."

A hint of amusement filtered through. "It sounds as if you have personal experience with these particular laws, Ms. Ames."

She ignored his jab. "Where can I meet you? I'm guessing you won't want me to carry these pictures into Luthor Industries' main entrance."

"You are correct. Let me think — yes. Do you know the Ace of Diamonds?"

"If it's the bar on the north edge of Suicide Slum, yeah. That's kind of a dive, though."

"I will meet you there in two hours. There are some items which require my immediate attention. Please bring the photos there and I will have an envelope for you."

"Thanks, Mr. St. John. I'll be there. We can make it a lunch date."

He didn't say it, but Cathy knew he was thinking, In a pig's left eye, madam.

Clark was deliberately vague about their destination for the day. He wasn't sure in his own mind if it was due to his natural caution in trusting people — including witnesses in big cases — or some desire within his heart to see Lois smile and fully relax around him. She didn't say anything when they turned east instead of west on I-70, but she did give him the old side-eye glare.

When they pulled onto the exit ramp leading to Richard Lieber State Park less than half an hour later, she crossed her arms and said, "Either you've gone over to the dark side and you're delivering me to Nigel's goons or you've got some kind of surprise in store for me."

He flashed his best smile. "Do you fish?"

"You mean like push a hook through a minnow or a grasshopper and tie it to a bobber and throw it out on the pond?"

"That or use a lure."

She shook her head. "Not for a lot of years. It wasn't that much fun then anyway."

"Well, if you don't want to fish, we can always rent a boat and see the sights on Cagle's Mill Lake. Or we could hike one of the trails, or pick up a couple of camp chairs and just sit there and watch the sun crawl across the sky. We could even buy some swimsuits and play in the water. Whatever fancies your tickle."

"Fancies my tickle? Isn't that backward?"

"It would be if we were driving in from the south. We're going in the north entrance, so it's just fine."

She giggled. "I see. What do you prefer, Mr. Kent?"

He gave her another smile. “Whatever gets me out in the sun.”

Lois hadn't been completely on board when Clark had first mentioned taking some time for recreation, but the more she thought about it the better she liked it. And when he mentioned swimming, an image of him splashing on the lakeshore in tight spandex trunks popped into her mind and wouldn't leave.

She'd have to check to be certain, but there was a memory of a dark blue one-piece Catalina swimsuit inside one of the pockets of her suitcase tickling her mind. It was reasonable to assume that her maid Consuela would have packed it, especially since Lois hadn't told the woman of her final destination. There were limits to trust, after all.

She glanced at Clark's hands on the steering wheel. Or were there limits? She trusted him with her life, didn't she? Of course, she hadn't had a choice after the shooting in Metropolis, but she wanted to believe that she would have trusted him no matter what had or had not happened to them.

And that made her feel guilty about Mayson, so she reached to the dash and turned on the radio. A slight adjustment pulled in a local news station, and she caught the last few words of the talk show host as he mentioned something about an update to the Luthor case after a commercial break.

She needed to hear this.

Clark rolled to a stop at the park gate, chatted with the ranger for a moment, then paid the entrance and use fee, stating that they did not plan to spend the night on the grounds. As Clark tucked the change and the receipt in his shirt pocket and started the van moving again, the talk radio host came back from his break and picked up his rant in mid-word.

“Now about this Luthor thing – what? No, Mr. Wormsley, I don't think Lex Luthor should get bail! Look at all that he's accused of! I mean, he's got both federal and state charges pending, and the biggest problem I can see is that if he manages to beat the federal rap, the New Troy DA may not be allowed to use some of the evidence the Feds plan to use. I know that doesn't make sense to normal people! That's the way the state criminal statutes are written in New Troy, and usually it works out for the best. Of course, if the Feds convict him on those RICO charges, not to mention the drug distribution charges and murder solicitation charges, not to mention the interstate criminal activities he's charged with, New Troy might have to exhume his body after he dies of old age while serving that sentence to put him on trial for whatever they have against him! And – do what? Yes, I believe that you're right, Mr. Wormsley, I believe the federal trial will come first. Where? That I do not know, and I prefer not to speculate on it. I'm pretty sure the venue hasn't been announced to the public yet.

“Now about this shooting the other day, where Luthor's wife was supposed to have been shot, then it turned out that it was some assistant district attorney who was really shot, and nobody seems to know where Mrs. Luthor is now. Some people say Luthor's boys tied her to an anchor and dropped her in Hob's Bay. I've also heard that she's on the run to Canada with a suitcase full of cash, all in hundreds. I personally don't buy that one. Why? Because I've been to Canada, that's why. They're pretty strict on Americans bringing in large amounts of cash. Besides, the state of New Troy is supposed to have her passport.”

“Well,” sighed Lois, “this guy's not totally off the rails. The Metro DA's office does have my passport.”

“—one I think is true is that Mrs. Luthor has made a deal to testify against her husband in open court. What? No, no, no, that's not right! A wife can't be compelled to testify against her husband, but she can volunteer to do so if she chooses to. At least that's the way it works in Federal court. Yes, apparently she chose to, probably because she didn't want to rot in jail herself.”

Lois grunted but didn't speak as the host redirected his rant.

“No, I don't think any kind of prison would be fun. Tell you what, though, that woman ADA who did get shot – what was her name, anyway? I've got it somewhere – ah, here we go. Mayson Drake. As of the last news release this morning, she's on the critical list and still alive. Her doctors say her condition is – and I quote – ‘guarded, and we do not know when she will regain consciousness, much less be able to return to work.’ This may be a smokescreen, people. Sometimes the police will release what is euphemistically called ‘misinformation’ to make the bad guys think ‘A’ when the truth is ‘Q’ or even ‘Z.’ It's possible that this is one of those times. Although, if she does die, that may be one more murder to lay at Lex Luthor's feet.”

Clark reached out and snapped the radio off. Lois put her hand on his forearm and said, “She's alive now, Clark. Hang on to that, okay?”

He glanced at her and nodded. Lois let her hand slide off.

She was almost angry at him for his faithfulness to Mayson. Yet it also accentuated the differences between him and Lex. Clark cared about Mayson's survival because he apparently cared about everyone's well-being, and maybe a little more about Mayson because of their relationship, whatever that was. The only concern her soon-to-be ex-husband would have about Mayson would be how much the woman's death – or survival – would affect him and his business interests.

There might be some confusion about her feelings for Clark, but there was absolutely no ambiguity in her heart concerning Lex. She hated him.

Mayson slowly drifted into awareness of her surroundings. She seemed to be lashed to a bed with several needles stuck in her arms. A soft, regular beeping came from somewhere near her left shoulder, the one which didn't seem to have a bone-deep ache in it.

Her tongue ran around her lips and failed to dampen them. The bed was as comfortable as a hospital bed could be, so apparently she'd been hurt somehow—

No.

She'd been shot.

But when? Where was her wound? Why had she been shot?

Those answers were still hidden behind the curtain. Her right hand fluttered in a vain attempt to clear away the cobwebs and let the wizard in front of the curtain explain everything, but all she managed to do was attract the attention of a huge, bullet-headed man just outside the door to her room.

“Mayson?” he whispered. Then a broad grin spread over his face. “Yeah, you're back. Here, lemme call the nurse.”

He reached over her and pressed something beside her hip. A long blink later, a tall black woman in nursing scrubs leaned over her and smiled. “Ms. Drake? Can you hear me? Here, take my hand. Now squeeze twice if you understand me.”

Mayson tried to crush the woman's hand twice, but she only smiled again. “Very good! Are you thirsty? I can give you a wet washcloth to suck on until the doctor comes. Okay?”

Mayson's mouth moved but no sound came out, so she nodded. A moment later a damp cloth touched her lips, and she sucked on it like a newborn kitten working for her mother's milk. The moisture felt so good that she let out a long satisfied sigh and tried to sit up.

The nurse touched her forehead and pressed lightly. “No, no, Ms. Drake, don't try to sit up yet. The trauma surgeon needs to examine you first. Do you remember why you're here?”

Mayson nodded and glanced at the big man who was now just a few feet from her bed. “Hey, May. Remember my name?”

She knew him. She knew his name. But nothing came out of her brain. She wondered if she'd been shot in the head.

Just then a short older man appeared in front of the big man. “Hello,” he said. “I'm Doctor Prescott. I'm glad I was here when

you woke up. Now you just relax for a minute while we check you over.”

The doctor shined a penlight into her eyes, then checked her ears and nose. He plugged his stethoscope into his ears and listened to her chest. When he pressed down near her right shoulder, a gasp escaped her lips even though the pain she knew she should be feeling was masked by what had to be some pretty strong drugs.

The surge of discomfort seemed to clear her head a bit and she tried to talk again. “D-doctor?” she croaked. “How – how bad?”

Dr. Prescott smiled down at her. “How badly are you injured?” He waited for her to nod. “Well, you were shot once in the back. You’re fortunate that neither the bullet nor the bone fragments severed a major blood vessel. You do, however, still have a punctured lung, which we have already repaired, and some structural damage to your shoulder. I’m afraid you’re going to live.”

She tilted her head and gave him a puzzled expression. “You’ll live,” he grinned, “but you won’t enjoy the physical therapy you’re going to experience. Most of my patients don’t enjoy it in the slightest.”

“I – I’m alive,” she whispered.

He nodded. “That you are, young lady. And you’re strong, you’re otherwise healthy, and I predict that you’re going to do very well while complaining to your therapists that you’re recovering too slowly. But that’s a conversation for another day.”

“Clark?” she said.

“I’m sorry, what?”

The big man said, “She’s asking about Clark Kent, doctor. He’s a detective who sometimes works with her, and he’s escorting a witness to a federal facility so she can testify in a really big trial.”

Mayson knew she shouldn’t move much – couldn’t move much since she was still strapped down – but she almost rolled to her left, ignoring the shot of real pain that surged through her shoulder. Again, it seemed to clear her head a bit. “Where is Clark?”

“He’s out of the city,” the big man answered. “If he’s contacted anyone in the department, I don’t know about it. On the other hand, the bad guys are still scrambling around like someone kicked their favorite puppy and ran away, so we’re pretty sure they haven’t found him.”

The tall nurse gently pushed her back down on the bed. “I know that hurt, Ms. Drake, and unless you’d like more major surgery you’ll have to lie still. I know it’s not fun, but you’ll recover faster if you don’t hurt yourself before your therapists can do it for you.”

Mayson recognized the truth of what she heard, but the drive to do something, to protect the weak, to defeat the guilty, to make a difference, had all pushed her forward on the days when nothing seemed to work, when the bad guys seemed to be winning, when all her efforts seemed in vain, when she felt she was spending her life accomplishing nothing. It pushed her now, made her grasp the handrail and try to sit up, to say something, to do something, and she was disappointed when the doctor said, “Time for a sedative, Charlene.”

“No – no, I need – need to—”

The nurse smiled and softly said, “Good night, Ms. Drake.”

As the drug flowed through her system and she drifted back down to the depths, she thought she heard someone say, “Hard-headed blonde—” and something else she couldn’t make out. Probably wasn’t a compliment, she mused.

The darkness closed over her and she slept again.

Chapter Seven

Lex Luthor had, for the most part, enjoyed his day.

It had not begun well. Sheldon Bender, his lead attorney, the

only person who was allowed to visit him, brought him the news – or lack thereof – concerning his beloved’s confusing disappearance. He was certain that Lois would never betray him, nor would she admit to even a hint of any wrongdoing against him. He might be incarcerated, but his chief lieutenants were not, and they had standing instructions to eliminate Lex’ in-laws should Lois dare such a thing. And she knew it, too. The Lane family plot’s recent addition had demonstrated Lex’ determination to insure her loyalty.

Even though Lois was still missing, Bender had brought better tidings concerning the conflict between Lex’ organization and Intergang. The advantage Intergang had over Lex’ empire was that their command structure was decentralized, so an assault on any one man or woman would not irreparably damage the entire organization. But it was also their weakness, since Lex could act without having to call a meeting and build a consensus before striking. This weakness had cost them dearly in the past month – seven Intergang board members had been attacked, and four of them had died. Two of the remaining three were injured badly enough to force them to resign from active participation in the organization.

Two of the witnesses against him in New Troy’s legal proceedings had recanted their stories. Another had turned up dead at the bottom of an elevator shaft, and one was missing. Even Bender didn’t know what had happened to the last one.

But the federal case against Lex was still moving forward, with several key witnesses being held in secret locations. It was far harder to pry information out of the FBI or the Treasury Department than the Metropolis District Attorney’s office, but Lex knew his people would keep at it. With Bender filing motion after motion and requesting continuances, someone would spill the beans, as it were, and then Lex’ people would move.

The time after the meeting was more enjoyable.

That same huge guard had brought Lex his midday meal, and this time he’d accepted the cash Lex had slipped him when he’d returned his tray. The man would, indeed, deliver on his promise of an additional channel of communication from this drab gray purgatory. After lunch, during the exercise period for the solitary wing of the prison, one of the other detainees (Lex preferred that term to “prisoner” as it hinted at a political reason for his being locked up) had produced a prison-made knife from somewhere and had tried to impale Lex. The guards hadn’t been able to stop the attacker, but they had arrived quickly enough to keep Lex from slicing the man’s throat open with the shiv. He anticipated that few others would risk attacking him now, and despite the punishment he would endure, Luthor considered the moment a quality investment in his near-term future.

It was only a matter of time before he departed from this hole in his reality. Lex Luthor would soon be free to wreak his vengeance upon his oppressors. And this time, he vowed to himself, he wouldn’t be nice about it.

Clark had thoroughly enjoyed the day.

He’d bought himself some baggy swim trunks and a garish Hawaiian shirt, then had topped it with a straw hat that had made Lois laugh. And she’d laughed again when he’d given her the hat’s twin to wear. Two bottles of sunscreen and four large bottles of water resting under ice in a small Styrofoam cooler had completed their purchases.

They’d rowed out on the lake in a rented boat and met another young couple who were on their honeymoon. Bob and Carol Josephson had invited them to their campsite for lunch, where Clark had helped Bob grill burgers and hot dogs while Carol and Lois had carried ice, filled red Solo cups with it, and poured copious amounts of carbonated soda for them to drink.

The only awkwardness had appeared when Carol had asked how long Clark and Lois had been married. Lois had smoothed

that over by saying that they weren't married yet but were planning to talk about it soon. Bob's nudge and wink had assured Clark that their covers hadn't been blown.

After nearly two hours of fun, Clark had suggested to Lois that they take that swim they'd spoken about that morning. Bob and Carol had both smiled shyly and declined the invitation to join them, so both couples had shaken hands and wished each other well as they separated.

"Well, we know what they're doing now," Lois had said.

Clark had glanced back to the Josephson's tent. "I just hope no one interrupts them."

She'd slid into the van to change into her swimsuit. "Maybe he should have put a sock on one of the tent poles."

"Or a pair of his underwear."

Lois had stopped and slowly looked back at him. "Why, Detective, you have a dirty mind."

He'd shrugged and shaken his head. "No. I just know what I would be thinking of if I were on my honeymoon. Besides, it didn't look like he was coercing her in any way."

She'd grinned and slid the door shut. "More like the other way around," she'd called out.

Their conversation as he'd applied sunscreen to Lois had also gone well, he thought. "How much of this stuff do you want on your back?" he'd asked.

She'd smiled without looking at him. "Just pretend I'm your high school girlfriend and her parents aren't around."

Her reaction to his ministrations had given him cause to wonder just how good an actress she really was. He was sure that any casual observer would conclude that they were more than just comfortable around each other. And he was oddly pleased that the tattoo she'd described wasn't visible outside her swimsuit.

He had put that thought – and several others of a personal and private nature – aside and concentrated on making sure they were alone. Then, at Lois' insistence, he'd removed his shirt and allowed her to slather his back and neck with sunscreen he knew he didn't need. Lois had been businesslike, almost perfunctory, after the startled little gasp she'd released when she'd first seen him without his shirt. He'd almost become used to the reaction he got from women when they noticed his body, but somehow this time it had felt special – almost unique.

Not like Mayson's reaction to their first swim date. He knew that most men would bribe a judge to have an attractive and emotionally stable woman gaze upon their bodies with such focus that she almost forgot to breathe. But Clark hadn't liked the degree of attention he'd gotten from Mayson. She might as well have painted crosshairs over his heart and pulled a spear gun out of her swim bag.

A quick vision of his head mounted on the wall over Mayson's bed had galloped through his mind and erected a wall between them that had been dented and battered by her siege, but not broken. Being with Lois Lane, though, was like a shot of oxygen after a long journey through space. Even a super-powered man like himself had to breathe once in a while, and the day had been the pressure release he hadn't realized he'd needed.

The police professional part of his mind grimly insisted that he focus on his assignment and not look for ways to impress this woman. The part of his mind attached to his heart ignored the old fuddy-duddy part and thoroughly enjoyed spending the day soaking up the sun with a beautiful woman beside him.

They turned west on I-80 again when they left the park late that afternoon. Lois was tired, but it was a good kind of tired, the kind you feel when you know you've had a wonderful time. She sighed and wished yet again that she'd met Kent before she'd married Lex. Then the nightmare of the last five years might not have happened.

But they had happened.

And the cost in lives was almost incalculable.

What was she doing? How could she spend the day with an honest and upright man while she was still married to a ravaging monster? How could she even smile? At least three people had died just to get her this close to federal custody, and she was thinking about a day spent on the water with her police escort? How much of a heartless monster had she herself become?

She shuddered as she remembered Lex' opposition to her having children so soon in their marriage. He'd said that they needed time to establish their lives together. He'd told her that he'd know when the time was right.

It was a good thing, too, she mused. Her children would probably have all turned out like the ravaging beast in the Beowulf poem. She would have ended up with a house full of Grendel-like teenagers, all chomping at the bit to be released into the wild so they could defile whatever corner of the world in which they might land.

Lois would rather be dead than be the mother of such a brood. Lex had ruined her best chance to make up for the dysfunctional disaster her family had been in her own teen years.

And now it was too late for her.

She wasn't fit company for man or for beast. There was nothing she could give to any man, no love inside her to share, no tenderness to offer, no capacity to accept his devotion. She had to stop letting Kent into her heart. Anyone who got close to her heart got hurt. Her relationship with Lex was toxic, not just to her but to anyone around her. She wouldn't be able to stand it if she got Clark hurt – or killed.

This thing with Kent had to stop right now.

It was for his own good.

"I had fun today, Lois. It was a nice change of pace."

Grunt.

"Bob and Carol seemed like nice people. I wonder if they know Ted and Alice?"

Extended grunt.

"That was supposed to be a joke. You know, the old movie from back around 1970? Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice?"

Gruff sigh. "Wasn't funny."

A quick glance across the van's engine cover told him that yes, that was still Lois Lane in the passenger seat. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Fine."

At least he finally got words instead of grunts. "I always enjoy being out in the sunshine, don't you?"

Another grunt.

Well. Whatever the problem was, maybe she'd perk up a bit after something to eat and a good night's sleep. The only question now was where to stop, and when.

It was close to dark, so Clark decided they needed to find a place to sleep. He didn't want to go all the way to Terre Haute – there was too much danger of their being spotted in any quasi-metropolitan area – so while they were still more than twenty miles from the "big city," he turned off at the exit to Brazil. Just down the access road was a Best Western that looked new and clean, so for lack of a better option, he asked Lois if it was okay with her.

She didn't answer. "Lois? Is this Best Western okay or would you rather push on down the road?"

"Huh? Oh, no, this is fine."

"I see a couple of fast food places. You have a preference, or are you even hungry?"

"Hungry? Sure, yeah, I can eat." She pointed at the Burger King on the corner. "This one's okay with me. You?"

"That's fine. Are you okay ordering from the drive-through?"

She waved a hand in the air in apparent exasperation, although why she'd be exasperated he didn't know. "Drive-through is fine!

Let's just get some food and some sleep, okay?"

Lois mumbled her order low enough so that the clerk couldn't understand her, so Clark repeated it and added his own. After paying and stuffing the receipt into the money belt, they pattered over to the motel and parked in front.

The desk clerk didn't bat an eye when Clark told him they needed to pay in cash. In short order, he had their room keys, a breakfast menu, a TV schedule, and a room on the lower floor around back.

Lois didn't make eye contact with him as he hauled their luggage into the room. He supposed he should be grateful that she deigned to hold the door open for him.

He eyeballed the room. Twin beds this time, and of course they were too short for him. At least he wouldn't be sleeping on the floor. He'd just have to make sure he didn't float in his sleep after getting recharged during the day.

She stalked into the bathroom and he heard the shower come on with what seemed to him to be irritation. He must have done something to anger her, but what? How could he have insulted her or vexed her in some way? All he'd done is drive from the park to the motel while trying to make the same kind of small talk they'd been making for a couple of days.

I'll never understand women, he muttered silently.

He had no inkling that Bill Henderson currently felt the same way.

"Come on, Mayson, take a pain pill. It'll mellow you out."

"They don't give you pills now, Bill, just a button for the intravenous med dispenser."

"So push the button and mellow out."

"What are you, a hippie cop?" she snarled back. "I'll take a pain pill when I'm good and ready for it!"

"I thought you said—"

"Never mind what I said! I'll take the morphine when I know I really need it and not before!"

Bill sat down on the chair beside her hospital bed and crossed his legs. "Look, if you're worried about saying something classified or blurring out some kind of attorney-client secrets, I can tell you that every detective on this floor is as reliable as the tide in Hob's Bay. Even if you say something while you're whacked out on opiates, nobody's going to spread it around. They all know better."

She looked up and away from him. It made him think that the secret she was guarding so closely wasn't professional but personal. "I know that, Bill, but I – I just don't want to be impaired if I'm needed."

He reached out and patted her shin in what he hoped would be interpreted as a fatherly gesture. "I know you're concerned about Kent, but I don't think you have anything to worry about. We would've heard by now if they'd been caught. And I'd rather have Clark covering your witness than anyone else in the department. He's so honest that sometimes it even irritates me."

She snorted, but also relaxed slightly. "I know. That's not it."

He lowered his voice and leaned closer to her so the officer outside the door wouldn't hear. "You're worried about Kent being safe from Lois Lane, aren't you?"

She snapped her head around and glared at him for a moment, then turned away again, but not before Bill saw the quick glistening in her eyes. "And if I am? What's it to you?"

"There aren't any regulations forbidding a relationship between detective and ADA. Unless, of course, it interferes with one partner's fulfillment of his or her duties."

She blinked and dashed spilled moisture from her cheek with her good hand. "You think it's gone that far? You think I'm not doing my job because of – of my feelings for Clark?" She turned a sharp gaze to him. "Or that he's falling down on the job because of me?"

Bill shook his head. "I know Clark isn't over the line because he reports to me. And no one from the DA's office has said anything to me about you. So no, I don't think it's gone that far."

Mayson exhaled deeply, then looked down at the bed. "Then what are you trying to tell me in your oh-so-gentle way?"

He grinned for a moment, then rearranged his face and said, "As a man who's lived a lot of life and seen a lot more of it lived by other people, I'm not sure that you and Clark are going to make it as a couple."

Her free hand traced out an invisible pattern on the hospital blanket. "Why not?"

He sighed. "Because Kent's a nice guy. A really nice guy. But he's not that into you, as the kids say these days, not like you're into him. And he's so nice that he might actually go ahead and marry you to keep from hurting you. That's a recipe for disaster on both sides, and I'd hate to see you two kids crash and burn like that."

She nodded slowly, her hand still crawling over the blanket. "So what's your advice, oh wise and deep-thinking seer?"

"You won't like it."

"I already don't like it."

Bill sighed yet again. "Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you." He paused and took a deep breath, then said, "You need to back away from Clark. I don't mean ignore him or pretend you don't love him more than you love your own kidneys—" she snorted a pained laugh "—but you need to stop pressing him for a commitment. Enjoy the time you spend with him, and let him know that you enjoy it, but don't insist on more. If he loves you, he'll start spending more time with you on his own. If not – well, at least you'll know."

She flashed him a wan smile. "So now you're handing out relationship advice?"

"Only when I think I have something to say. And I'm done now."

She sniffed and turned her head to wipe her eyes again. "Good. All I need is for some tough cop to start a dating service for me. It'd be all over the wire services in no time flat and I'd never get another conviction."

"Sure you would. All you'd have to do is cry during your summation and the jury would convict the defendant out of pity."

They shared a soft laugh, then she reached for the plunger strapped to the bed rail. "I think I will take that pill now, even if it's in liquid form and intravenously administered."

Bill stood. "Good. I'll tell the crew to watch over you while you sleep."

"Thanks. For everything."

He nodded once and sketched a sloppy salute. "Just part of the service, ma'am." He turned to leave, then stopped and said over his shoulder, "I don't want to be there when Clark finds out the real reason they're headed to Denver."

Mayson sighed. "I'll have to be. I need to be the one to tell him."

"Right. Maybe he won't slug you."

"Maybe," she muttered.

Bill waited for a moment longer, then said, "I hope you know what you're doing. You do know that you're risking any kind of future you might have with him."

"Thought you said I didn't have a future with him."

"You know this will push him one way or the other, right?"

She didn't answer. Bill considered another comment, then decided he'd hurt her enough for one day.

He slipped through the door into the hallway and hoped she could take the pain when it came.

Lois listened for Clark's breathing to slip into that suddenly familiar rhythm that signified sleep, but he stubbornly refused to drop off. She kept trying to find a comfortable position, but no

matter how she twisted or turned or rolled or stretched or curled, the bed seemed to find a soft spot in her ribs or kidneys or belly and punch her in it.

After almost an hour, she abruptly sat up and snarled at the pillow before sailing it against the door. She tried to convince herself that she was angry at Lex, at the situation, at the lousy bed in the lousy motel, at Drake for foisting a terminal Boy Scout onto her, but she knew none of that was true.

She was angry at herself.

No. It went beyond anger. She hated herself.

She clenched her fists and pounded on the mattress so she wouldn't start crying.

She sensed, rather than saw, Clark roll over and prop his head up on his fist. "Can't sleep?"

"Shut up!" she snapped.

He sighed. "Lois, if I've said or done something to bother you or irritate you, please tell me what it is so I can apologize. I promise you, I never intended—"

"I said SHUT UP!"

Be angry, she thought. Stay angry. If you stay angry you won't reveal how weak you really are.

Suddenly his hand was on her shoulder. She snapped her head around and saw his outline kneeling beside her bed, touching her so lightly that a hummingbird might have alighted with more force. She turned away before they could make eye contact.

Seeing the compassion she knew had to be in his eyes would undo every defense she had.

She thought that he'd stop her when she turned and draped her legs over the other side of the bed, but he only kept that feather-light contact. She flinched for a moment, expecting him to slam her down on her back and dominate her as Lex had done so many times. Her body tensed, expecting that powerful thrust to force her onto her back.

It never came. The only thing that did happen was that the bedside lamp clicked on, its lowest setting giving the room a faded patina of old, shabby colors washed too many times.

The tension leached out of her body as she felt him sit on the far side of the bed. His hand drifted from her shoulder to her wrist with that same ghostly pressure. He was doing his dead level best to tell her silently that he was there for her, was ready to comfort her, but that it was totally her choice as to what happened next.

Lex had never given her that choice.

Her voice came out damp and garbled, but she could tell he understood every word.

"My father – he's a doctor, a surgeon. He specializes in – in prosthetic limbs. He's one of the best in the world. And he wanted me to follow in his footsteps."

She paused, but Clark had no comment. "He and – my mother didn't get along. He'd chase his nurses and they'd let him catch them. They divorced when I was fourteen and my – my sister Lucy was nine. My mom tried to drown herself with vodka and I tried to be perfect so my daddy would love me like he had when I was younger. My sister decided to fix the world and she shut me out of her life."

His hand moved and gripped her fingers. "Oh, Lois. I'm so sorry."

She squeezed his hand with all her strength. "I went into journalism instead of medicine. I couldn't stand the thought of working with him after – after I caught him in bed with yet another nurse. I even went to Mom's lawyer and he got the judge to increase Mom's alimony and pay my college tuition."

The tears started again and she sniffed. "Lucy decided she wanted to be a cop. She went to the Metropolis police academy, passed with flying colors, and was assigned to street patrol. She stayed there for three years and then made detective." She wiped her face with her free hand. "They started her off in the Ninth Precinct, on the west side of Hob's Bay."

Clark's hand became rigid. "I remember her now. I never met her, so it bothered me why the last name was so familiar." He let out a long breath. "Her funeral was – well, nearly every off-duty cop in the city was there to see her off."

"You don't know all of it." Lois paused and took a deep breath, then wiped her face with her free hand. "I married Lex a year before she made detective. She tried to warn me that he wasn't a good guy, that there was too much chatter about him in the locker rooms and the precincts for him to be clean and honest, too many cops who would clam up and leave the room when his name was mentioned, but I wouldn't listen. Stupid me, I married him just to show her I could." She clenched her free hand into a fist. "Not the only reason, but it was one of them."

Clark relaxed his grip slightly but didn't speak.

"Eighty-two days. That's how long it took before I learned something I wasn't supposed to know. Again, stupid me, I thought it was one of Lex's subordinates running an operation he didn't know about. I told him about it, thinking that he'd – that he'd thank me for helping him. But he – he did know. He set it up. And when I told him about it, thinking that he'd be so glad that I was helping him, he beat me." She jerked and sobbed again. "I tried to fight back and he beat me. Then he beat me some more. I ended up in his in-house emergency room. He beat me so badly I didn't know if I'd ever walk without a cane again."

He filled in the next piece with that velvet voice. "And Lucy found out."

Lois nodded. "I tried to keep it from her, but I couldn't. I think that was when she started digging up dirt on Lex in her off hours. I saw the file last year. Lex had stopped hiding things from me long before, but even I couldn't believe how much information she had. It wasn't all provable, some of it was from unsupported allegations from informants or her logical deductions, but everything – everything fit."

She sobbed again and stomped her feet on the floor. "I should have helped her! I should have told her who to talk to in the DA's office and who to stay away from! I knew how – how dangerous it was! But I didn't do anything! I didn't help her one little bit!"

Clark sighed. "And Lex had her killed?"

She nodded, unable to form the words.

His voice hardened. "All this time we thought she just walked in on a grocery store robbery gone bad. All the witnesses said she just turned around at the register and the thief was right in front of her with a combat knife. They all said she started for her weapon and took the blade in the belly before she could even identify herself." He hesitated, and when she didn't say anything, he continued, "She bled out in less than a minute. There was nothing anyone could do for her."

Her vision blurred and her voice shook. "That's – that's what happened. Except the perp was one of Lex's hired killers."

He hesitated, then said, "I'm sorry, but I have to ask you how you know that."

She wilted and fell back against his solid chest. "Be – because – because Lex introduced me to him – said that I had to – to behave or – or my parents would – would meet him."

He barely breathed out the words. "And he'd have them killed too?"

"Yes!" she wailed. Then she fell sideways onto the bed, her strength gone. Her hand still gripped his, but she knew it would but just a moment before he disengaged himself and left her alone forever.

And it was no less than she deserved. She'd allowed her own sister to die rather than risk any more pain. The only reason she was going to testify was revenge. There was nothing altruistic or noble about why she was doing what she was doing. She wanted Lex to die – or, failing that, to spend the rest of his natural life in prison.

But not because she was a good person. She wasn't, not now.

She was just trying to survive long enough to see justice done.

Her sister was dead. Her parents wouldn't stay in the same room with each other. Neither of them enjoyed being with Lois. Her father because Lex underwrote his research and Sam hated the fact that he couldn't pay for it all and transferred that resentment to his daughter. Her mother treated her like a leper because she sensed that her son-in-law was prototypically evil and she couldn't understand why Lois stayed with a man who terrified both of them.

She couldn't even tell her parents that she stayed with Lex to keep them alive.

And now this man – this good man, this honest man, this transparent and unselfish man – knew what she really was and any second now would push her far, far away from himself. She couldn't blame him, either. If she could have left her body behind, she would have pushed herself away.

But he didn't.

She suddenly realized that he had laid down behind her on the bed, his arms gently cradling her in his powerful embrace. He held her with a peculiar blend of ease and tension that seemed to promise that he'd never let her go unless she wanted him to release her. His heart beat against her shoulder with a power that filled her ears and thrilled her. The cords of muscle she'd admired earlier now enveloped her in a cocoon of safety and care, and she felt invulnerable.

If only he'd been there before she'd married Lex. She would never have given the billionaire a second glance. Too bad that it was too late for her to love him the way he deserved to be loved. And in a few days she'd be in federal custody and she'd probably never see him again.

There was no future for them, not together. It wasn't possible. All they had was now. The only thing she could take from him was his gentle and unyielding presence. She would make herself be satisfied with the memory of tonight, his arms wrapping her in his compassion and comfort as she wept bitterly.

Chapter Eight

Lois finished packing as Clark checked them out of the motel. She'd almost expected him to try to get up close and personal with her after her little episode the night before, but he hadn't done anything but let her cry herself to sleep in his arms. She'd awakened just before five in the morning, and Clark had occupied his usual guard position at the foot of her bed, ignoring the other bed and taking up any space on the floor that might have allowed an intruder access to the room.

He opened the door and did a scan of the room to make sure they hadn't left anything, then he put his hand out for her bag. "Ready to hit the road?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yeah. Breakfast at the drive-through, I take it?"

He shrugged. "I think we can risk the local diner if you want eggs or waffles. It's not likely the man we're thinking about would have eyes this far west."

She handed him her suitcase. "Actually, eggs and waffles sound good to me right now. It'd be a nice change from the usual microwaved breakfast burrito."

"Good. There's a pancake place between here and the interstate, small enough to be barely noticeable but big enough for us to hide in."

"Ready when you are."

"Then let's go."

Nigel's anger threatened to overflow on Asabi – a dangerous problem of which they were both quite aware. "I understood that you had a lead on Mrs. Luthor yesterday."

Asabi answered as softly as he could. "I also understood that to be the case. However, the operative who thought he had spotted their vehicle was unable to locate it on the highway. She believes

that they have either gone into hiding or are traveling on back roads to avoid being identified."

Nigel forced himself to calm down. It wasn't Asabi's fault that their quarry had seemingly vanished. The tall Indian had as much to lose as anyone else should their employer be convicted by her testimony – testimony which would incriminate both Asabi and Nigel equally.

Nigel sighed. "So we are still proceeding under the assumption that they are going to Denver?"

"That is my firm belief. And I have no evidence which would contradict that belief."

"Might they not still arrive in Chicago?"

"It is possible, of course, but they have had sufficient time to do so already. And we have enough assets in Illinois to let us know of their arrival were Chicago their destination. Nor do I believe they will go to New Orleans. Mrs. Luthor has enough verifiable information to place the entire Mafia organization in south Louisiana at risk of immediate arrest. They have nearly as much to lose as we do, and we cannot risk letting them acquire her. They would use her knowledge against us in a most violent manner."

Nigel frowned in thought for a moment, then said, "I agree with your analysis. I think we should place a cordon around Denver and wait for their arrival while continuing our active search for them. There is still a chance that we are mistaken in our deductions."

Asabi hesitated, then bowed. "As always, I bow to your superior wisdom." He took one step backward. "With your approval, I will issue instructions to fulfill your desires."

Nigel turned back to his desk as he flipped a wave at Asabi, who backed up to the door and silently slipped through it. The man was uncannily silent, and Nigel knew him to be efficiently deadly when necessary. He was an opponent who must not be underestimated.

Nigel wondered if Mr. Luthor understood the delicate balance that his two closest associates maintained to serve him, or how explosive the result would be if they were to actively oppose each other. Few in the city of Metropolis would be safe in such a circumstance.

The five-hundred-mile drive from Terre Haute to Manhattan, Kansas, had been mostly silent, although it wasn't an uncomfortable silence. Twice, Clark had asked Lois' permission to find an all-news station to see if there was any word on Mayson's condition. Neither attempt had yielded any new information.

While Lois was driving west on I-70 that afternoon following yet another drive-through lunch, Clark had scoured the morning edition of USA Today he'd bought in the pancake diner earlier. The only story referring to their situation was a mention of Sheldon Bender, Lex' lead attorney, filing a motion in federal court for a three-week stay in court proceedings to continue examining the evidence against his client. Judge Wenzel had promised a ruling on the motion within three business days, but hadn't seemed inclined to grant it.

Clark folded the paper angrily and almost threw it down on the van's floor. Lois glanced at him and said, "I'm sure she's going to be fine, Clark. If she were – if she wasn't – I mean, they would have said something to the media by now."

He nodded. "I know. I just can't help being concerned."

"I understand. Girlfriends like her are rare."

His snort drew her attention. "What does that mean?" she asked. "You don't think someone like Mayson is rare?"

"Irrespective of how rare she might be, Mayson isn't my girlfriend."

"You sure about that? From what little I saw, she'd really like to be."

He sighed. "I know. She's been kind of pushing me in that direction for over a year now."

Lois risked a longer glance. “She’s ‘kind of’ pushing you?” He nodded. “And you don’t want to go down that road?” He looked back at her and shook his head. As she returned her gaze to the road and corrected for lane drift, she said, “Then why don’t you tell her how you feel about her? Or, rather, how you don’t feel about her?”

He snorted again. “You’ve never been on the receiving end of Mayson Drake’s undivided attention. I’ve seen a number of bad guys on the stand testifying in court who have just crumbled under her questions. And that stare?” He shivered. “Sometimes I think she could bore through stone with it.”

Lois chuckled. “Aw, the big bad detective is scared of the itty bitty blonde ADA.”

He frowned at her. “Yes. At least, a little bit.”

They shared a quiet laugh, then Lois asked, “How come she hasn’t gotten the idea that you’re not that into her before now?”

“Oh, she has. That’s why we almost had a fight in the courthouse just before we picked you up.”

“Ah. I thought I picked up some tension there.” Lois paused, then flipped on her turn signal and moved to the right lane. “Have to make a pit stop at this gas station coming up. We could use some more go-juice, too.”

“I’ll pull some cash out of the money belt.”

“And I’ll be Joanne Clark once again, bored housewife who’s craving a chocolate treat.”

He smiled. “I can take a hint. How about some Double-Crunch Double-Fudge bars? I hear they can knock down a craving like that before half the bar is gone.”

“That will do just fine, Jerome.”

“How are you doing? Want to drive some more?”

The question unexpectedly stung. Lex had never – never! – allowed her to drive herself anywhere. She hadn’t been behind the wheel of any vehicle since before she’d married the monster. She’d always been chauffeured – make that guarded – everywhere she’d gone without her husband, whether to work or a social engagement or to one of the domiciles Lex called home. He’d sold her Jeep Super Cherokee the week after the wedding, after pointing out that she wouldn’t ever need to drive herself anywhere again.

At the time he had sounded loving and caring.

Lois abruptly decided that when all of this was over, when she got out of prison – whenever that might be – she’d wangle a way to buy a big SUV. Something large, like a Ford Expedition or a Chevy Suburban, but not as big as military surplus Hummer. That was more like a tank than a car, and she couldn’t think of where she’d park it without paying for at least two spaces. But she could get the Suburban with a thirty-five gallon gas tank, big enough to fill up and drive all day—

Clark touched her elbow. “Earth to Lois. Are you still there?”

“What? Oh, oh, yes, I’m sorry, I was just – daydreaming.”

“Nothing wrong with that. But if you’ll turn off the ignition, I’ll take care of the gas and the chocolate. You go run your errand and—”

“I want to drive the rest of the afternoon.”

He blinked, then nodded. “Okay. We’re a little more than a hundred miles east of our destination for the evening, so we don’t have to hurry here. Just remember that it’s best if we don’t stop in public for too long.”

She turned off the engine and slid the keys into her pants pocket. “Really? Is that why we spent an entire day at that park?”

One side of his mouth smiled. “We weren’t on a major highway then. Even the octopus reach of Lex Luthor couldn’t put watchers in every little out-of-the-way place between Metropolis and every federal court this side of the Rocky Mountains.”

She nodded back. “You’re probably right. And I don’t think I’ve thanked you properly for that day by the lake. I really do feel better for it.”

He opened the door and put one foot on the concrete. “Come on, Joanne, we haven’t got all week. You want chocolate, I’ll get you chocolate.”

His sudden bad Yiddish accent startled her into smiling freely. She opened her own door, and as she stepped down, she said, “We’ve got all the time in the world, Jerry. Try not to spill gas on your pants this time.”

Clark directed her to pull off the interstate at exit 313, where the sign listed Manhattan, Fort Riley US Army base, and Kansas State University as possible destinations. He then guided her north on State Highway 177 to the small town of Manhattan.

As they pulled into the parking lot for the Texas Roadhouse, she asked, “Is there a link between this Manhattan and the one back east?”

Clark grinned. “Actually, there is. The city founders back in the 1850s wanted to call the place ‘The Little Apple’ to both link it to and set it off from the New York boroughs. It’s more of a tired joke now, but there are a couple of shops where you can get T-shirts that refer to the city that way.”

She shut off the engine and stepped out of the van. “Is the food good here?”

“The food’s excellent as long as you’re looking for Texas cuisine in a chain restaurant.”

They swung into step beside each other, close but not touching, smiling lightly but not too brightly. “Will they at least cook my steak until it’s well done?”

He laughed. “What? You don’t like a steak so rare and fresh that it moos when you cut into it?”

She goggled at him. “Tell me they don’t serve steak tartare! That’s awful!”

He shook his head. “I don’t think the state health department will let them serve anything that undercooked. But I do remember a high school football game when I was a sophomore and we descended on this place en masse, and when one of the cheerleaders was asked how she wanted her steak she told the server to just wave it over a match.”

Lois stopped on the sidewalk leading to the door. “You’re kidding. I mean, you are kidding, right?”

He laughed again. “No, that actually happened. They didn’t give it to her like that, though. Her steak came out rare but cooked.”

“Did you guys win the game?”

“I didn’t play much in that one, but yeah, we won. The game here my senior year was better.”

“How much better was it?”

“Smallville Crows 44, Manhattan Indians 13. I kicked three field goals and five extra points, intercepted two passes, broke up six others, and made twelve tackles from the free safety position.”

“You weren’t the quarterback?”

“Nope. We had a junior named Buster James who could stand on the thirty yard line and throw the ball through the goal posts at the far end of the field. He threw three touchdown passes and ran for another one in that game before he got tackled hard and hurt his throwing shoulder in the pileup. Poor guy never could throw like that again. He would have been a really good college quarterback.”

“And where did you play college ball?”

It was as if the plug had been pulled from a sink full of soapy water. All the good feelings he’d been sharing with her up to that point just swirled down the drain. “I didn’t.”

She was so startled by the sudden transformation that she couldn’t think of anything to say. It felt as if they’d stepped back to their initial meeting when he’d been grim and determined with little or no sense of humor evident.

He turned toward the door and pulled it open. “Come on, let’s get something to eat. I’m hungry, and I’m sure you are too.”

Clark knew he was being harsh with her. He knew it wasn't her fault that he'd suddenly been awash in remembered grief and guilt and regret for lost opportunities. But he remained silent as he carried their bags to the room.

One king-sized bed, which meant he'd sleep on the floor at the foot of the bed again. He tried to tell himself that it didn't matter where he slept, that he didn't know Lois well enough to be involved with her, that the desires and feelings welling in his heart when he looked at her or stood close to her – or worse yet, when she laughed – couldn't have planted themselves there in the brief time they'd known each other. Besides, she was a witness in a vital felony case against a mass murderer. He needed to be objective, he needed to remain aloof and apart, he needed not to sigh over her profile as she sat in the driver's seat of the van and—

Enough! he insisted. She's not a potential girlfriend or mate or even a bowling buddy. She was going to testify and then go to jail, probably for several years. By the time she got out, she'd have forgotten him altogether.

Then she touched his elbow. "Clark? Do you want to talk about it?"

He blinked twice, then gently laid the luggage on the end of the bed and sat down beside it. Lois pulled the room's single chair away from the desk-in-name-only and sat with her hands in her lap, separate from him yet still close enough to reach out touch him.

He took his glasses off and rubbed his face. "I got the game ball that night. Everybody cheered for me, even Buster. The trainers had his shoulder strapped down and his arm in a sling, but he wouldn't leave for the hospital until the team came into the locker room. It should have been a perfect end to my high school career."

She waited for him to speak again, and when he didn't, she whispered, "But?"

He looked at her face – her caring, sympathetic face – and turned his head away again. "It seemed like half of Smallville was there. My parents, of course, and the girl who'd promised to go to the senior prom with me." He glanced up at her puzzled expression. "Country folks tend to commit to things earlier than city folks do."

"Ah. And then?"

He closed his eyes and dropped his head. "I was showered and changed and dressed and whooping it up with the rest of the team when Rachel – she was my prom date – grabbed me on the way to the bus. She'd been crying and – and she told me that my dad was on his way to the hospital with chest pains. Coach didn't blink at all, he just told me to go with her and be with my parents, that he'd tell the team what was going on."

He felt her grip his big hands softly but firmly in her small ones, as if she was promising him something. "What happened next?" she breathed.

He lifted his head and opened damp eyelids. "I got to the emergency room and found my mom sitting beside his bed. They had him on oxygen and had all kinds of wires and tubes stuck in his arms. He was awake enough to wave me closer and tell me how proud he was of me. I told him I just wanted him to go home with us. He said he'd do his best."

When he didn't say anything else, she kneaded his hands lightly and asked, "What happened next?"

He pulled a hand loose and wiped his eyes. "They took Dad to Intensive Care in Wichita General. Mom and I stayed with him for four days. At first he seemed to get better, but his heart – there was too much damage and – and he died in his sleep the following Tuesday afternoon."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Lois swipe at her cheeks. "Oh, Clark, I'm so sorry. Is that why you didn't go to college?"

He nodded. "I gave up my athletic scholarship and stayed on

the farm to help Mom. Rachel spent a lot of time there too, and by the time the fall harvest was in, she'd convinced me to apply to her father to work as a part-time county deputy. It was really kind of her to do all that, too, given – given what happened at the prom."

She waited for him to continue, but when he didn't, she whispered, "Can you tell me what happened at the prom?"

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before speaking. "We were having a really good time. She hinted that she wouldn't mind if I found a quiet place for the two of us on the way home, then asked me to get her a drink. When I came back, two of the basketball players had pushed her behind the bleachers and were giving her a really hard time. I got mad when I saw that her dress was torn and pushed them away harder than I had to. When I got her home, her dad assumed the worst and almost attacked me. I guess they both felt guilty over that, and that's why he offered me the job."

She patted his hand. "I bet you were great at it."

"I guess I did pretty well, because he convinced me to go full-time in the spring. By then my mom was working on her art and she'd leased almost all the pasture land to other farmers. It was a lot less work and we had a steady income from the leases, but if it hadn't been for my deputy's paycheck, the farm would've gone under."

"How long were you with the county?"

"About three years. By that time, Mom's art was selling well enough on the west coast and in Mexico that she was supporting herself. She practically threw me out of the house and made me go to Metropolis to attend the academy. Thanks to my experience, I graduated with honors and eventually got my detective's shield." He chuckled. "It was quite a culture shock, too. One month, the worst crime I'd investigated was some high school kids rustling cattle while drunk. My first week out of the academy, I responded to a domestic disturbance where a man took his wife and baby hostage and threatened to shoot them. My partner and I managed to end that one without any injuries, but it was still a really weird day." He sighed and shook his head. "I wouldn't blink at something like that now."

"What happened with Rachel?"

He hung his head and closed his eyes for a long moment, then sat up again. "She went to Kansas State, got a degree in criminology, then came back to the Smallville sheriff's department as a dispatcher and worked her way up to county detective. She ran for sheriff two years ago and won, her father retired, and now we see each other occasionally at holidays or reunions." He filled his lungs and let the air out in a big sigh. "I really think that was for the best. She and I don't have the same dreams for our lives."

Her hand touched his as if she were afraid he'd bolt like a frightened deer. "Even so, your life didn't turn out like you expected it to, did it?"

Something in her tone of voice made him look up at her. He could see the same thing in her eyes that he felt every time he thought back over those years, that the present he had now wasn't what he'd signed up for and he didn't quite know how it had gotten that far off track.

He turned to face her more directly. "I guess your life didn't either."

She sighed. "No. A little over five years ago, when the Daily Planet was bombed out of business, I was – I felt like I had nothing to stand on, nothing solid under my feet. Lex came along and proposed to me and I felt like I had a solid foundation again, that as Lois Lane-Luthor I could do the same kinds of things I'd been doing before, busting the bad guys and making the city better."

She pulled her hands away and crossed her arms over her chest. "But it didn't last. I was an assistant editor and producer of some of the hard news pieces the suits upstairs let us run. It wasn't

long before I saw a pattern – if the segment questioned the business practices at any of Lex' subsidiaries, the piece got cut. I went to Lex about that and about some side deal one of his high-level assistants was running. I thought he'd be thrilled to find out what was going on so he could fix it. Instead, he – I got all up in his grill and he beat me up for the first time."

Now he reached out to take her hands. "Oh, Lois, I'm sorry."

She leaned forward over their rejoined hands. Her tears dripped on his fingers as she continued her tale. "That was the first time he hit me. It wasn't the last. He never left bruises on my face or my forearms or lower legs. And he always gave the doctor a reasonable excuse – she was injured during a martial arts workout, she fell off the parallel bars, she slipped on a piece of soap in the shower – and they were paid well enough to pretend to believe him."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I know this is a very insensitive question, but – didn't you ever try to get away? Didn't you look for any way to escape?"

She nodded. "Yes. Yes, I did. And every time I wasn't where he'd told me to be, one of his goons would find me. Sometimes he'd send Asabi with me. He's from India and he acts like he's gentle as a lamb. But I've seen him cripple people with his bare hands. He worries me, but Nigel St. John scares me. He's a former MI6 agent from England and he always carries a handgun and a knife. And I don't mean a little folding knife, either. The blade is about seven inches long and sharp enough to cut through bone. I think he likes to kill."

"I see. And you think they're trying to find you?"

"No. I know they're trying to find me. And if they do – if either one of them does – I'll either go back to Metropolis with my parents literally under the gun, or I'll be buried in an unmarked grave in some wooded area. And anyone with me, anyone helping me, will be dead."

He nodded. That explained a lot, like her mood swings and her defiance of Luthor despite her obvious fear and her hesitance in reaching out to Clark, even as a friend.

"Don't worry," he assured her. "You'll get to Denver in one piece. I promise."

She blinked at him and looked away. "Don't make promises you may not be able to keep, Clark. It'll hurt too much if you have to break them."

Lois opened her eyes and felt a muscular arm across her belly. Reflexes honed by years of abuse made her shrink in on herself, hoping against hope that Lex wouldn't decide that this was a good morning for sex.

But the moment she moved, the arm lifted and released her. She grabbed at the covers to jump out of bed before he could encircle her again—

Nothing happened to her when she moved.

Then she remembered. She'd spent the night in a budget-friendly motel room with a police detective. She was on the run from Lex in Kansas and was working her way west to surrender to federal authorities in Colorado.

And Clark wasn't going to force her to do anything she didn't want to do.

A glance at the clock told her it was a few minutes before six in the morning. She turned to look at the other side of the bed for a moment and saw the tall, handsome, broad-shouldered man lying on the covers, his head propped up under his hand and a half-smile gracing his face. "Good morning," he almost drawled. "You can have the bathroom first."

Lois took a step toward the bathroom and tried to force her breathing to slow. Manhattan, Kansas, that's where they were. The Little Apple. They'd had steak at some franchise restaurant whose name she didn't remember in what passed for downtown in that little burg, then they'd come back to the motel and talked for over

an hour about their lives and how neither one of them had signed up for who and what they were now. They had agreed that life wasn't fair, and then she'd leaned back against the soft but unyielding power of his chest and had slept soundly all night long.

Too well, she thought. She shouldn't feel this relaxed, this at ease with him. She'd been under the covers and he'd lain on top of them, but there was still too much intimacy this morning. She couldn't do this to him.

She definitely shouldn't do this to herself.

Yet she couldn't help but trust him. He hadn't taken advantage of anything she'd said or done during the entire trip, not even last night when it would have been easy for him to do so. After hearing his story, she'd wanted to comfort him, to somehow ease his pain, but she knew it would have been the worst thing she could have done. He needed to protect her from Lex and his cohorts, and not because he thought he was in love with her.

She carried her suitcase into the bathroom and closed the door. My life really sucks, she told herself.

And whose fault is that, she replied.

Mine, of course, she responded, and we both know it.

She looked into the mirror and moved to see around the crack across the top. She looked surprisingly good to herself. Younger, or maybe just more rested and relaxed.

And that was ironic. She was running from almost certain death into a prison via a public trial which would reveal to the entire nation what an utter idiot she was, yet she looked and felt years younger and more rested than was reasonable to expect.

A sudden tap on the bathroom door startled her. "Lois?" Clark called. "I'm going to go fill up the van. There's a convenience store next door, so I won't be gone long."

She got her breathing under control. "Okay. I'll be ready to roll when you get back."

He backed into the parking space in front of their room and turned off the key, then sat in the driver's seat with a slight smile on his face. Last night had been wonderful. He and Lois had each opened up to the other and revealed some inner thoughts, things that he'd never told Mayson and which he was certain Lex had never heard from Lois. He opened the door and paused, wishing that he was really on his way west with his wife to visit family and friends. For that brief moment, it didn't matter that none of it was true or that the probability of its coming true was too close to zero to make a difference. It was a nice fantasy—

Then he heard it.

A low, near-whisper of a voice, muffled by distance and a closed car window, the kind of thing he'd trained himself to ignore under usual circumstances.

Unless, of course, he heard his name mentioned.

"Yeah," the voice repeated, "Kent and Lane. Yeah, I'm dead sure. Cause I'm lookin' at him right now. He's about a hundred feet from me, just getting out of that white van. Just filled up the gas tank. Well, it's almost dawn here in Kansas, so I think they're leavin' town. No I ain't followin' him! Cause he got himself a reputation when he was a cop here several years ago and he's not someone I'm gonna tangle with again! Yeah, he busted me! Look, I ain't scared, just smart. But – okay. Okay! I'll call you back if they go anywhere but west on the interstate. Yeah, you can see the highway from here. No! I told you I ain't followin' him! Yeah, if you don't hear from me – Fine! Just send the money!"

Clark watched from the corner of his eye as the man punched the phone off in apparent frustration and threw it into the passenger seat. He thought back to some of the arrests he'd made in and around Smallville – yes, he remembered the guy. Billy Parsons, high school dropout, petty thief, tried to run with a bad crowd but couldn't measure up to their standards. Clark had arrested him for marijuana possession not long before he'd moved to Metropolis.

Should have checked on his sentence, thought Clark.

They had to get away without Billy reporting on them. But how? He couldn't arrest the man, nor could he ask the local police to do so. Billy hadn't broken the law by making a phone call. But he'd reported seeing the van and given their location to someone.

They had to get away fast.

He considered taking Billy's car, but aside from the fact that it probably was a traffic stop away from an arrest, it looked as if it might break down the moment he started it again. A quick glance into the engine compartment told him that Billy only changed the oil when he absolutely had to, didn't seem to know why the motor should have a clean distributor cap, had allowed the spark plug wires to degrade, and apparently didn't understand that the 'check engine' light meant he should have the engine checked. The tires were so thin that the two on the driver's side had no appreciable tread left.

That idea was a non-starter, just like the car.

Then he thought of another possibility. About five slots further up, on the other side of Billy's car, was a much newer Plymouth PT Cruiser with the phrase "Just Married" scribbled on the back window. He looked closer – yes, it was soap and not shoe polish, which meant he could get rid of it easily. He risked a glance into the room in front of the car and saw two young people sleeping in each other's arms under the sheet and clothing strewn around the room. If they were typical young honeymooners, they wouldn't know their car was gone for at least several hours.

Now all he had to do was figure out how to get rid of Billy.

Chapter Nine

Billy hung up the cell phone and sat in his car. He knew he was bouncing too much, knew that he was making his old clunker rock and was risking calling attention to himself, but he couldn't help it. He needed some weed to mellow out, maybe some meth to jack himself up again, some cash to buy some food, and find a place to crash for a couple of days. The only thing he'd eaten in the past two days had been a couple of stale donuts he'd lifted from a picnic table, and he hadn't smoked anything since that one joint the day before the donuts. He was really jonesing for that weed.

If he hadn't needed the weed so much, he'd never have agreed to tail the van. And he sure wouldn't have even thought about dropping a dime on Kent. Billy remembered him all too well from a previous run-in they'd had prior to Billy's latest stint as a guest of the state of Kansas. And Kent had no sense of humor where Billy was concerned. It was like the cop went out of his way to bust Billy for no reason at all. Billy had no hope that Kent would be nicer to him because he was wearing civvies instead of his uniform.

He watched Kent walk back into the motel room, then watched the woman bring two suitcases to the back of the open van. She was hot, too, so he didn't mind looking at her. Of course, she'd never give him a second glance unless she was drunk or stoned. Still, looking didn't cost anything—

The passenger door burst open and Billy felt a hand grab his shirt and another grab his right arm and suddenly he was on his feet looking up at a face he'd hoped he never see so close to him again for the rest of his life.

"K-Kent!" he stuttered. "Wh-what're you doin' here?"

The big man pulled him closer. "I'm working, Billy. How about you? You working?"

"Hey, Kent, I – I don't—"

"You're looking for me, aren't you?" Kent lifted him off the asphalt a couple of inches and shook him like a rag doll. "Who'd you call just now?"

A woman's voice cut through Kent's angry glare. "Easy, Clark, just set him down gently. He can't answer questions if he's turning blue."

Billy dropped back to the ground and gulped in some much-needed air. "Look, I'll tell you everything, okay? Just cut me some slack!"

Kent's eyes seemed to glow red-hot, then he said, "Tell me who you called."

"I – I don't know the dude's name! Just the number. Guy's got an Indian accent."

"Help desk Indian or attack-the-wagon-train Indian?"

"Th-the guys with the turbans!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Billy saw the woman's face turn pale. Another shake from Kent got his attention.

"Billy! What did you tell them?"

"J-just that I seen you and you was gonna leave."

"What else!"

"Nothin'! Nothin', I swear it!"

Kent's voice dropped a register and he tightened his grip on Billy's collar. "You weren't going to call them back and let them know which direction we took, were you?"

Billy blurted out, "Yeah, he said – how'd you know that?" He looked at the woman, hoping for a little help. He didn't get it. The woman's eyes narrowed and she frowned at Kent but didn't speak.

Kent shoved him back against his car and let him go. "Whatever they're paying you, it's not enough. Lois, aren't there some cords on those drapes in the room?"

"I think so," she answered, "but we can always use electrical cables or duct tape if we need to."

Kent's eyes glanced down, then he smiled.

Billy always hated that smile.

"Never mind. Good old Billy has a coil of nylon rope in the back seat of this pile of junk he calls a car. I guess he has to have it towed somewhere every couple of days."

The woman opened the driver's side rear door, looked around for a moment, then stood. "Found it," she announced. "Yech. What did you do with it, Billy, soak it in urine? This thing really stinks."

Kent smiled even wider. "Even better."

Billy had always been scared of that smile.

Kent stepped closer to the woman and Billy thought about running. Then he remembered all those times before when he'd tried to run from Kent. His record escape from the big cop was about nine feet, and that was because there were three other guys being arrested at the same time and Kent was a little distracted.

He didn't run. He didn't even try to listen in on their conversation.

Clark secured Billy in the back of the van, gagged and tied to the supports under the back seat. Lois tested one of the knots and was impressed by Clark's myriad talents once again. Billy the weasel wasn't going anywhere unless someone cut him loose.

As instructed, Lois put their suitcases on the ground beside the van's front tire and waited while Clark silently opened the door of another car along the parking lot and sat in the front seat for a moment.

Then he broke open the steering column. With his bare hands. She couldn't believe it. Boy Scout Clark Kent, MPD detective, her escort to eventual freedom, was stealing a car.

Like a pro, she thought. A very strong pro.

Without starting it, he pushed the car out of the slot and turned it 90 degrees. Lois picked up the suitcases and walked to the back of the car, trying to decide whether or not the "Just Married" title on the back window was funny.

She decided that it was too attention-grabbing and that Clark would have to clean it off as soon as he got the chance.

She climbed into the passenger seat and hoped that there was enough gas in the car to move it down the road. She also hoped that the car wasn't well-known, or they'd have a local police escort whether they wanted one or not.

So Lois dropped open the map box and found the title. The car

was registered to Mickey Wilson of Olsburg, Kansas. "Hey, Clark, where's Olsburg?"

Clark stepped into the driver's seat and pushed off with his left leg, sending the car down the slight incline to the road below. "It's a little bedroom community north of here on highway 16. Why?"

"Because that's where this car is registered. We're not going north, are we?"

He closed the driver's door, then pushed in the clutch and moved the gearshift to second. "Hadn't planned on it."

"Good. Maybe no one will notice us. We're not exactly the newlyweds who parked this car at the motel."

"True," he chuckled. He turned the ignition switch and released the clutch. The car jumped, then the engine started running a bit roughly as he moved up through the gears. "We're heading south to I-70, then west to highway 77 and down to Wichita. We'll pick up I-35 there and head south through Oklahoma to I-40, then we'll turn west again."

"Won't someone recognize this car?"

He turned the wheel and headed south. "We'll have to take that chance. I think we can get far enough to switch vehicles once more."

She sighed. "I sure hope so. I've never ridden in a PT Cruiser before and so far I don't like it."

"What? Why not?"

She made a face at him. "Cause it's butt-ugly. It looks like the love child of a Volkswagen and a Studebaker. It's overpriced, underpowered, scores poorly in crash tests, and it's uncomfortable on long trips."

She was oddly pleased to see his mouth twitch as if he were fighting a smile. "Then I'll see if we can do better with the next one."

She turned and looked out the back window. "Oh, and can you do something about that 'Just Married' logo back there? It's probably a bad idea to steal a car with something that obvious on it."

"I think I can help you there. We'll have to stop for gas pretty soon anyway. The actual newlyweds apparently weren't thinking about a long drive today."

"Can you start it again without pushing it?"

He nodded. "I just did that to keep from alarming the couple. All I'll need to do is find a self-service station and a squeegee with some clean water. I hope nobody's curious enough to check us out."

"Me too." She hesitated, then said, "I wanted to ask you something."

Clark glanced at both rear view mirrors. "Go ahead."

"Okay." She paused, took a deep breath, then said, "'Help desk Indian or attack-the-wagon-train Indian?' Where the heck did that come from?"

His mouth twitched again as he answered. "I knew Billy would understand what I meant. He's not exactly the sharpest light bulb in the cabinet. And we didn't have time for a long conversation."

She felt her cheeks tighten into a smile. "Good. I mean, that's good that that's what you meant." Then her mouth flattened. "Just don't take Asabi too lightly, okay? He's probably the one running the pursuit."

"As opposed to whom?"

"To Nigel St. John, dear Lex' right-hand man, the former British foreign agent. Knows at least twenty ways to kill people bare-handed, dead shot with any firearm I've ever heard of, and no scruples to speak of."

Clark's face morphed serious to match her tone. "Sounds very dangerous."

"He is. And he probably would just as soon I didn't take another breath on this earth."

He nodded slowly. "Then we'll do our best to stay out of his

way."

Nigel was about to open his office door when he heard his name called. "Mr. St. John! Good news, I believe."

Nigel looked at Asabi's smiling face and relaxed ever so slightly. "I would agree that we are due for some. Please, come into my office and give me the details."

Asabi bowed and gestured for Nigel to precede him. As soon as the door was closed, the Indian mystic tilted his head and rubbed his earlobe.

Nigel nodded at the code gesture asking about hidden microphones. "You may speak freely."

"Good. They have been spotted."

"Where?"

"In Manhattan, Kansas, along Interstate Highway 70. I have dispatched a team to take them into our custody. We should have them within half an hour."

Nigel nodded. "Do you have a contingency plan in place?"

Asabi's smile faded slightly. "Sir, please remember that we are already using a contingency plan for our primary contingency plan. Were we characters in an overly complex espionage novel, this would be our plan D, having already failed at plans A, B, and C."

Despite his tension, Nigel smiled thinly. "You are correct, as usual. Very well, Mr. Asabi. How will we know that we have them?"

"My associate will call me by mobile phone and tell me that the bouquet of green gladiolus has been received. Any description of the bouquet will inform me of the condition of our two lost lambs."

Nigel's smile grew. "Lost lambs?"

Asabi shrugged. "It seemed an appropriate metaphor."

"Agreed. But if the unthinkable happens and they are not captured?"

"Then I will hear that the delivery of red hibiscus has been delayed. But I do not anticipate such an eventuality."

Before Nigel could respond, Asabi's pocket chirped. The tall Indian nodded apologetically and slid a cell phone out of his jacket pocket. "Hello? Yes, this is he. Oh? I—I see. Thank you. No, please continue to attempt to complete the delivery. Yes."

His face fell as he returned to phone to his pocket and turned to face his partner in crime. Nigel asked, "Hibiscus?"

The dark man's gaze dropped to the floor and he nodded. "I fear so. They located the van but did not find Mrs. Luthor or her escort. Our contact in the area was secured within said vehicle and had no idea in which direction they had escaped."

Nigel sighed. "And now we have lost them once again. Additionally, we do not know what vehicle they might now be using, nor do we know their final destination."

Asabi shook his head. "I disagree. It is true that we do not know their vehicle or direction of travel, but I am now convinced that Denver is their final destination. We should seek to prevent their approach from any direction, using all available personnel."

Nigel frowned in thought, then nodded. "Agreed. Will you see to those details?"

Asabi bowed again. "I shall. And I presume that you will continue to seek information to be found here in Metropolis which may aid us?"

"You presume correctly, sir."

"Then I must complete my arrangements and allow you to complete yours. Until later, my friend."

Asabi silently slipped out the door and closed it behind him. Nigel shook his head and began thinking. The other man was not in Nigel's class as an operative, but neither was he stupid or incompetent. The Lane woman and her escort were either the luckiest people in the Midwestern United States, or they were receiving help from some source unknown to Asabi and his

organization.

At any rate, it was Asabi's job to catch Mrs. Luthor. It was Nigel's job to figure out what she knew.

He sat at his desk and pulled out the photographs he'd collected from Cathy Ames the night before. He'd spent over an hour staring at them, then realized that he was falling asleep instead of gaining understanding of them, so he'd put them in his briefcase and gone to bed.

Now he was refreshed and ready to attack the problem once again, this time with a clear head. He laid the photos side by side in front of him.

The first thing he noticed was that Mr. Luthor's design was slightly smaller and somewhat simpler than Mrs. Luthor's. That had to be significant, but without more data he didn't know what that significance might be. He then noted that the intersecting lines in each design, while similar, were not identical. Ms. Ames' insistence that these designs contained encrypted information seemed more plausible and less an illusion or just wishful thinking than he had first assumed. Perhaps the numerical relationships of the intersecting lines conveyed the data to the knowledgeable observer.

He reached into his briefcase and pulled out two books his operative had given him with the photos, one a primer on fractal design and one a high-level publication containing more specific details. Nigel nodded with silent appreciation to Ms. Ames' conclusion that he did not have the necessary knowledge to decipher these fractals.

He hadn't spent an hour on them, though, when he slammed the primer shut in frustration. Given sufficient time, he was certain he could decode the meaning behind these images, but he didn't have that time. What he did have, however, was a mathematics professor at Met U who was at his beck and call, having been rescued from a severe beating from her bookie when she couldn't cover her lost basketball bets of the previous winter. Not even college math professors could figure out a winning betting system, even when the games themselves were honest.

He picked up his phone and dialed her office number. He was determined to understand the messages in these images no matter what — even if he had to forgive her entire debt to him.

Not once during the entire morning did Nigel consider how attractive Lois Luthor's rear end might be.

Both of them could see the sign for the I-70 entrance ramp. Clark pulled up at the pump farthest from the convenience store's office. "Give me a few bucks and I'll get us some soft drinks," Lois offered. "I'll pay for the gas, too."

He nodded. "Okay. But let's not dawdle."

She held out her hand and accepted the bills from him. "Who, me? Haste is my new middle name."

Clark set the nozzle to fill up the tank, then he attacked all of the windows with the squeegee. He hoped that if he worked on all of them, it would be less obvious that the back window was his primary target.

He'd worked around to the driver's window when a middle-aged woman pulled up behind him in a late-model cherry-red Chevy Camaro. He didn't look at her, didn't acknowledge her presence at all, but he could feel her gaze boring into the side of his head.

Then he heard her sneakers slip along the concrete toward him.

She paused at the back of the car, then walked up to him in a too-casual manner. "You like this car, mister?"

He shrugged and started on the windshield. "It's okay for what it is."

"I'm glad you think so," she answered. "My daughter's husband owns one just like this. Same year, same option package. He thinks it's terrific. Of course, he got a good deal on it from his

new father-in-law. My husband. He owns a couple of dealerships not far from here."

He stopped cleaning and looked at her. The woman's gaze was hard as iron and her right hand was in her pants pocket. Clark took a quick glance in the pocket and saw a snub-nosed .38 Special revolver with her hand nestled around the handle.

He also saw a slip of paper with a phone number, one with a New Troy area code.

That might mean nothing. But it might mean a great deal.

"Ma'am, was there some specific point you wanted to make?"

She nodded without taking her eyes from his. "I have this thing where I memorize license plate numbers. Kind of an occupational hazard, you know, me being a cop and all. Funny thing — the plate on this car has the same number as the one on my new son-in-law's car. I'd even be willing to bet real money that the VIN on this car matches the one on his title. Of course, since he just got married last night, I doubt he's missed it yet, being on his honeymoon and all. That why you stole it?"

The woman's face suddenly changed and she jerked slightly. "I bet you can tell the difference between a finger and a pistol barrel," Lois whispered from behind her. "Am I right?"

The woman slowly took her empty hand out of her pocket. "I can. And that's not a finger."

Lois slipped her hand into the woman's pocket and retrieved the small five-shot revolver, then tucked it into her waistband out of sight. "Get in the back seat."

The woman didn't move. "It won't do you any good. Even if you kill me, they'll catch you before long."

"You let us worry about that," Lois growled. "Get in."

The gas pump chose that moment to snap off and they all jumped a little. "Watch her while I get in the car, Kent."

He nodded. "Give me a minute. I have an idea."

Lois glanced at the convenience store's office. "It better be a good one. And a quick one."

He waited while Lois stepped back to the Camaro and picked up the driver's purse and casually hurried around the car and climbed in. Then he opened the back door for the woman cop and stood back until she could close the door without hitting her shoulder. Then he opened the rear hatch and rummaged through his suitcase until he found his cell phone.

He hoped Lois wouldn't get too alarmed at what he was about to do.

Bill Henderson was worried. There was a lot of activity among Luthor's minions, even though they still didn't seem to have a good handle on where Kent and Lane were. Bill just hoped they were still alive and moving west.

Then his desk phone rang. He reached for the handset and thought for a moment, then told himself it couldn't be them.

"Uncle Bill, this is CJ. Just checking in to let you know we're okay."

Bill's eyes nearly bulged out through his glasses and he took a quick breath to steady himself. "Uh — right. Everything okay on your end?"

"Well, we're having to make a northerly detour, but we're still on schedule for Sacramento. Joanne says to tell you we're having a ball."

Joanne had to be the Luthor woman. And apparently she'd warned him about being traced while using his LexTel cell phone. On top of that, they'd had some trouble. Bill hoped it wasn't serious trouble.

"Ah, sure, fine. You two have a good vacation, okay?"

"It's been fun so far. Oh, can you tell Mom that her goodie bag was delicious? I'm sure she'll want to know. By the way, how's her cold doing?"

"Her cold? Oh, it's doing much better than expected. She'll be up and around before you know it."

"Thanks, Uncle Bill. That's really good news. Tell the family Joanne and I said howdy."

"Will do, nephew. Don't you have too much fun, you hear?"

Clark's easy laugh sang back to him. "We won't. See you in a few days."

The line was disconnected and in a moment Bill heard the dial tone.

Well, that was an interesting call. It seemed that Lois Lane Luthor was serious about testifying. And obviously Clark was still free and in control of whatever situation they were in.

He thought about telling Mayson about Clark's call, and then realized that she was Mom. He wasn't sure about the goodie bag, unless it meant that they'd made good use of the money belt and fake IDs for the Luthor woman which Mayson had given them.

Now if the bad guys would only take the bait and head north away from them, maybe they'd have a shot at getting through to Denver after all.

Clark hung up the phone but didn't switch it off. He leaned into the older woman's car and slipped the phone under the front seat, then slid the keys out of the ignition. Good old trusting country people, he thought.

He trotted to the convenience store and stuck his head in. "Hey, you guys know the lady who owns that Camaro?"

An older man nodded slowly. "Yep. Sue Riordan. Why you wanna know that?"

"She said she's on a case of some kind and her car's too conspicuous. She asked me to ask you guys to put it in your garage for a little while."

"Sure. You got the keys?"

Clark tossed them to him underhanded. "Thanks. She said she'd be back before dinnertime."

The man smiled and nodded again. "That Sue. Good-lookin' woman, better cop. Never gives up. Be glad she ain't chasin' you, bud."

"Oh, I am. Thanks for everything."

Asabi's people arrived no more than twenty-five minutes later. Having triangulated on the LexTel phone's location, they popped out of their black windowless van looking to the store manager like an invasion force from a UFO.

"Hey, Lester?" the owner muttered.

"Yeah, Verne?"

"Get on the horn and call the sheriff. Tell him to bring lots of backup with shotguns right now. We got us some unwelcome visitors."

Lester, who'd been watching through the front window of the store, silently turned and stepped into the office and closed the door. Five seconds later, one of the men outside came in and gave the manager a plastic smile.

"Hey, old-timer," the man said. "You see a younger couple come through here recently?"

"How recently?"

"This morning."

Verne made a show of thinking hard. "Well, there was them two teenagers about eight-thirty or so. Backpacking through the heartland of America, they said."

The visitor's smile dimmed slightly. "Not looking for them. The couple I'm looking for is around thirty."

Verne chuckled. "Thirty is a lot of people for a couple, mister."

The man's expression conveyed his belief that he was dealing with the village idiot. "No, I mean the man and woman I'm looking for are each around thirty years of age."

"Oh, okay. What were they driving?"

"I don't know."

Verne looked at him for a long moment, then asked, "What do

they look like?"

"Uh – man's about six-three or so and broad-shouldered, woman's about five-six and slender. Might have dark hair. Or maybe blonde."

Verne waited another long moment. "That's not much of a description, mister. There's lots of people around who look like that."

The man's eyes narrowed a bit. "We know they were around here about half an hour ago."

Verne shook his head. "No couples come through here that I saw at that time who fit that description. Closest I saw was Mr. and Mrs. Unger, and they're both over fifty."

"Look, pal, I got to find those people!"

Verne looked over the man's shoulder and saw four patrol cars crunch to a stop on the gravel. "Well, you could ask the sheriff if he's seen them."

"We don't have time to go find your sheriff!"

"You don't have to. He done found you."

The man snapped his head around and froze for a moment, then turned back to see that Verne was now holding a .40 caliber Glock in his right hand. "I'm a reserve police officer, mister. You just stand where you are and don't make any sudden moves."

The man started to say something, then apparently thought better of it.

"I hope your friends out there don't get too excited," Verne offered. "Them deputies are all good wing shots, and every one of 'em brings home the legal pheasant limit in the fall. And a man's a lot bigger target than a pheasant, don't move as fast, and those deputies' shotguns – they call 'em riot guns in the city – is all loaded with seven of those twelve-gauge three-inch double-ought shells apiece. Put a hole right through an engine block up close like that."

The man sighed. "They were here, weren't they?"

Verne fixed him with a stare. "As it happens, mister, I ain't seen a car with just two thirty-somethin' people in it leave my store all day."

It was true. The car this city yahoo was asking about had left with that thirty-something couple and Sue Riordan in it. Verne didn't know the couple, didn't know how honest or trustworthy they were, but he knew Sue, and it was plain as a cow pie that these men were up to no good. Anybody being chased by dirtbags like this clown couldn't be all bad. And by the time Sheriff Spencer finished with the guys from the van, those two kids would be so far away that they'd not be found until they decided to reappear.

He hoped he was right about them. He liked Sue a lot.

Lester opened the office door, carrying a Smith & Wesson .357 magnum revolver in his hand. "I'll go tell the sheriff you got one more in here. 'Less you need some help with him."

Verne grinned and wiggled the Glock in the bad guy's direction. "Naw. He's a real cooperative sort of fella, ain't ya, pal?"

The man nodded once. He obviously knew when he was outmaneuvered and outgunned.

Chapter Ten

Sue Riordan was irritated with herself. She'd made a rookie mistake and moved in on a suspect without backup before finding out if he had an accomplice. The only consolation – and it wasn't much of one – was that the little PT Cruiser hummed south on highway 77 toward Wichita more smoothly than her new son-in-law had ever handled it.

She slowly leaned back and reviewed her situation. She was unarmed and in a car with two people who'd taken her hostage – at least, that's what she called it. There was a definite lack of tension in the snatches of conversation they let her hear, and aside from being ordered into the car she hadn't been threatened or

forced in any way. They weren't even paying close attention to her.

She gathered that the woman was running from someone or something and that the man was helping her, but they didn't seem to be together in a romantic sense. It was more like he was her escort – no, that wasn't right – he was her guardian, her protector.

Neither of them gave off any kind of violent or unpredictable vibe, which made Sue wonder what kind of weapon the woman had stuck in her back. "Hey," she called softly.

The woman turned to look at her. "Yes?"

"What did you put in my back?"

The woman almost suppressed a grin. "Oh, that." She leaned to one side, pulled something out of her pants pocket, and showed it to Sue. "It was this thing."

Sue stared. "You took me with a four-inch long three-eighths-inch truck bed bolt?"

The woman looked at the metal in her hand and shrugged. "If that's what this is, then yes."

"That's what it is. Even says 'Chevy' on the bolt head."

The woman chuckled. "I guess that's a nice souvenir of this trip, then."

"Where'd you get it?"

The woman chuckled again. It was a calm, sane, low-stress chuckle that didn't fit their situation and which further confused Sue. "Off the asphalt beside the air pump at the gas station. I guess someone dropped it. Recently, too. It's hardly rusted at all."

Sue shook her head. "The things you find on the ground at Verne's gas station." She shrugged. "So now what? What happens to me?"

It was the big question. If these two were insane thrill-killers, she didn't stand a chance. And it would account for the lack of tension in the air. Crazy murderers don't exhibit the same stress markers normal people do.

Instead, the man asked, "You're wearing sneakers, right?"

"Uh – yes."

"How much tread is still on them?"

The question made no sense to Sue, but then again she wasn't the one holding a hostage. "They're only about two weeks old. Why?"

The man looked at the woman for a moment, then lifted his eyebrows. She held his gaze for a breath, then shrugged. "I don't see how it can hurt things now."

He nodded. "My name is Clark Kent. I'm a detective with the Metropolis Police Department."

Sue blinked. "Little out of your jurisdiction, aren't you?"

"I guess so, from a certain point of view. I'm escorting Lois Lane-Luthor to a federal courthouse so she can testify against her soon-to-be ex-husband Lex Luthor."

"All by yourself?"

Kent's voice hardened and he glared at her in the rear-view mirror. "That wasn't the original plan. But yes, it's just the two of us now."

"I see. Tell me, why did you want to know about my shoes?"

The Luthor woman answered, "Because we're not going to hurt you, but we also can't let you report our position right away when we let you go. We're going to let you out on the side of the road in a little while."

"And you two just happened to have that plan in reserve?"

The woman grinned. "No. But I knew Clark wouldn't hurt you, and I don't want to either. We can't very well take you all the way to Los Angeles with us, so the only thing we could do is drop you off some place where you could walk to get help. By the time you report in, we'll be long gone."

Sue sighed. "That's a relief."

Both Kent and the Luthor woman smiled, then she reached down into Sue's purse. "The only thing we're going to take is your cell phone battery. I don't want you to have to rebuild your contact

list, but we can't let you call in as soon as we're out of sight, either. If we're caught, it might mean that we'd die."

Sue frowned back. "That's a little dramatic, don't you think?"

The woman's eyebrows drew down and her voice came out clipped. "Would you rather have some more drama with it? Because if it will convince you, I can do that."

Sue lifted her hands in mock surrender. "No, that's okay. It's actually more convincing without the histrionics."

"Good. Clark, you know the state better than I do. What's a good place to drop her off?"

"Hmm. Just before the town with the traffic circle."

The brunette woman looked at him wide-eyed. "There's a town around here big enough to need a traffic circle?"

The man chuckled. "Not really. It's an intersection just north of one of these little towns where several state roads, highways, and farm roads come together, and I guess it made sense to someone to put in a circle instead of a bunch of confusing stop signs."

"Right. And here I was thinking that it would ease the heavy traffic flow on this road."

Sue relaxed even more. She wasn't sure how much she believed about what she'd been told, but she was fairly certain that they wouldn't hurt her as long as she didn't do anything stupid. She only hoped her supervisor would believe her when she turned in her report explaining how she'd lost her backup weapon.

True to Clark's word, he pulled off the road at a wide spot about six miles north of Florence and let Sue Riordan out of the car. No other vehicles were in sight, so she decided to take a slight risk.

She tapped on the driver's window and said, "Hey, can I have my gun back?"

Kent frowned as he rolled down the window, then he shook his head. "Sorry, no. I don't know you, and I'd really rather not risk getting into a shootout with you, so we'll keep it until we get where we're going. You are a police officer, after all."

She noticed that he didn't mention their final destination, which tended to suggest that the apparent slip about California was exactly that – a slip – and not misdirection. "I don't have another weapon in my purse. Can I at least have that?"

"Sure." Kent handed it out the lowered window and gave her a jaunty salute. "Sorry for the way this sounds, but I hope you don't get a ride too soon."

"Yeah. I don't like that, but I understand it." She stood and stepped back from her son-in-law's car. She did not, however, return the salute.

He pulled away smoothly and headed south toward the traffic circle which had amused the brunette. Sue blew a breath out of her nose and started walking, hoping that a sympathetic driver would show up soon. At least she was alive and uninjured.

As soon as she called her boss and reported in, she'd have to call her daughter and tell her that their car had been stolen and was headed south toward Wichita the last time she'd seen it. As much as she dreaded that call and the fallout from Mary Ellen's inevitable temper tantrum, she dreaded the next call – the one to that guy from India – even more. Despite the reward she'd been promised, she'd also have to tell him that a woman – one who apparently wasn't a hardened criminal after all – had gotten the drop on her. With a bolt for a pickup truck bed, no less.

She decided not to volunteer the part about the bolt being jammed into her back.

Lois looked at Sue Riordan through the back window as long as she could see her. "She's going to report us, isn't she?"

Clark nodded. "She's a cop, so she pretty much has to."

"And I just realized that if we really were going to LA, we'd probably take I-40 West all the way."

"Don't worry about it. We're going to pick up some alternate transportation pretty soon."

"Oh? There's a car rental place up ahead in that town that's so big it needs a traffic circle?"

He chuckled. "You need to let go of that, Lois. And yes, I know where to get another car, assuming Kenny Webster is still in business."

She crossed her arms and gave him an eyebrow dip. "Is he one of your buddies like Billy? Or is he at all legit?"

"Oh, Kenny is as legal as he needs to be. And since I'm going to tell him that I'm on assignment and I need a clean car and that I'm giving him a sizeable cash deposit, I can trust him for a day or so. We won't need to fly below the radar any longer than that."

"Will we have to tie him up too?"

He grinned wide and shook his head. "He won't see you at all. You're going to be hiding in the trees outside his property. Your husband's – sorry – the snake's top advisors wouldn't be too trusting, but any bad guy who questions Kenny is going to be somewhere near Billy's level of intellect. Assuming anyone finds Kenny, he'll ask if Kenny's seen a couple in a PT Cruiser. The only person he'll see is me, so the truthful answer will be no."

She nodded. "Pretty crafty, copper."

"Detective, if you please."

"Okay. 'Pretty crafty, detective.' Better?"

"Much. Okay, hang on. Here's the traffic circle."

Lois stared at it as they approached. The only other vehicle she saw was an old pickup truck held together by rust and what looked like telephone wire, coughing blue smoke as it turned from heading north to head east. Clark turned the wheel and headed west.

She turned and watched the rattletrap pickup vibrate down the road for a moment, then straightened and said, "I hope Kenny has something better than that."

Clark laughed. "Don't worry. He's got all kinds of cars. I promise to pick one you'll like."

Clark shook hands with Kenny, who laughed softly. "Never set you up with a clean car before. It's a new experience."

"New for me, too."

"Hey, Clark, how long you want me to hold on to that Plymouth?"

"Give it until late tomorrow afternoon. If anyone but the police ask you where you got it, it was abandoned and you towed it in from Highway 56 between Canada and Hillsboro. You didn't get a chance to search it for papers until then, and the title was under the front passenger seat. That's also when you found the broken steering column."

"But you want the cops to have the whole truth?"

"As much as you can tell them without getting yourself jammed up."

Kenny laughed again. "Got it. Man, you still think up the best stories."

"Don't forget this one. It might save your life." Clark took a business card out of his wallet and wrote his address on the back. You send me the title paperwork on the new one as soon as you can."

"You do know that until I get that paperwork back, even with the bill of sale I made up and the two grand you gave me, it kinda looks like you stole the car from my lot, right?"

"Yep. Keeps you in the clear."

Kenny's expression darkened. "You saved my life when we were in high school. You know I'll cover for you as much as I can. It would help if I knew what was going on, though."

"I know, Kenny. But you need to stay away from this one or I'll have to come back and save your sorry butt again."

"Fine. Don't give me details. I like not knowing. It's simpler that way."

Clark grinned to soften his words. "In this case, you're exactly right. Be safe, buddy."

"You too. And don't wreck my car before you pay for it!"

Clark waved and climbed into the front seat, then started the car and headed east again. He hoped Lois would approve of his choice.

Apparently she did. "Clark, is this – I mean, good grief, it is! It's beautiful!"

"You don't mind the blue trim instead of the red?"

"Are you kidding? It's fantastic! We all called this car the Farrah Special in high school! I test-drove a used one years ago and loved it! I begged my dad to buy me one but he never would! The only thing that could possibly make it better would be if it were a rag-top!"

He opened the trunk and motioned for her luggage. "Come on, we've got to get going. I want to make Amarillo before we stop for the night."

"As long as I'm driving we'll get there before dark! I love this Mustang!"

He grabbed her arm as she tried to run past him. "Hey, hold on now. How about I let you drive after we get to I-40? This car isn't quite stock and you'll need some open road to get used to it."

"But—"

"Come on, get in the passenger seat. I promise to let you drive it today."

"It's a car! What's all that different about it?"

"Well, first off, someone put a 351 V8 under the hood and matched it with a four-speed racing transmission. Second, it's been upgraded with a racing suspension, so it'll corner like a scared jackalope. Kenny said it'll do over 130 in the quarter-mile, but I'd really prefer we didn't try to go that fast in it."

"But you are gonna let me drive it, right?"

"Yes, Lois, of course, Lois, you'll get to drive it."

"You'd better let me! Or I'll push you out the door on the highway and take off without you!"

He gave her a half-grin. "You know, I think you just might do exactly that."

They slipped onto I-35 going south at Wichita. Lois frowned at Clark and said somewhat pointedly, "I thought we were going to stay off toll roads because they were easy to trap people on."

"Normally I'd agree with you, but we're kind of in a time crunch. Putting miles behind us is more important than being inconspicuous now. Besides, if anyone is looking for us, they'll look for a burgundy 2001 PT Cruiser headed west on state highways instead of a blue-trimmed white 1977 Ford Mustang II Cobra II on the Interstate until tomorrow afternoon, by which time we'll be closing in on Denver. That single mention of LA to Ms. Riordan was a good idea. At least it'll give Asabi and Nigel more worries."

In a slightly more relaxed tone, she replied, "Okay, that makes sense. Are we going to stop in OKC for lunch?"

"That's my plan. We won't get there until early afternoon, and we'll need to hit one of the drive-through windows west of downtown to save time." He gave her a quick sympathetic glance. "Sorry about that."

"So there's nowhere to stop in Kansas? I'm getting pretty hungry."

"I think there's a Mickey D's not too far ahead, but I'd rather not stop in Kansas. Kenny's a good guy and a friend, and I don't want him to get too jammed up if someone finds the car we gave him." He turned for a moment, then shook his head. "Rats."

Her head snapped around. "There's rats in here?"

"No, no! I meant it like 'drat' because I've got some trail mix in my suitcase, but we can't get to it without stopping."

She peered ahead of the Mustang's hood. "I'll make a deal

with you. You stop at that Mickey D's so I can find a ladies' room and you grab the trail mix from the trunk."

He glanced at her again. "Is that because you're hungry?"

"Yes. And because I don't want to flood the front seat."

Clark laughed and nodded. "You really do drive a hard bargain, Lois. But you've got a deal. We can top off the gas tank, too."

She grinned slightly. "For a Kansas boy, you don't seem to want to spend much time in the state."

"Just be glad we have some place to be and a mandate to get there quickly. Otherwise I'd take you to my mom's farm near Smallville. She'd hide us and feed us and do her best to protect us. All we'd have to do is farm chores to cover our room and board, assuming she didn't recruit us to help her weld a sculpture."

Instead of continuing the banter, she turned to face the dashboard and almost whispered, "But you won't put her in danger, will you?"

"Not if I can help it, no."

She whipped her head toward him and frowned as if thinking. Uh-oh, he thought, I shouldn't have heard that.

But she surprised him. "I'm not sure I'd give my parents the same consideration. We're not exactly on the best of terms. Especially since—" she stopped and swallowed hard "—since Lucy died. I don't know if they blame me or just think I'm wasting my life and my talents, but it's like — like Lucy's death put a wall between us that they don't want to pull down. Nothing I say or do will make them change their attitude toward me."

"What you're doing now will."

She shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe if — but I can't control their feelings. All I can do is the right thing right now."

"That's all anyone can do, Lois. Don't beat yourself up over it."

"I'm not." She hugged herself as if she were cold. "I just hope I — that we get to Denver alive and healthy."

"You will. We both will."

His flat, determined declaration seemed to surprise her. "You can't promise that, Clark. No one can make the future happen just by saying you'll make it so."

He gave her a raised eyebrow. "I can come closer to keeping that promise than anyone else you know. Including your old Hissy-fit soon-to-be ex-hubby."

Asabi hesitated at Nigel's office door. He'd never done that before — but then the stakes had never been this high before.

When he finally knocked, Nigel called "One moment, please," from inside. Asabi heard some indistinct conversation between a man he assumed was Nigel and a woman. He stepped back from the door and clasped his hands behind his back to wait.

After nearly a full minute, Nigel opened the door. Asabi assumed that his lack of an administrative assistant was due to Mr. Luthor's expressed dislike of the additional security exposure, just as Asabi's habit of opening his own office door was.

A short, dowdy, middle-aged woman stepped out and turned down the hall without acknowledging Asabi in any way. Nigel stepped out of the doorway and gestured for Asabi to enter.

"Thank you, Mr. St. John. I have some news which you should hear."

Nigel sighed. "I have been hearing variations on the ancient chestnut 'good news and bad news' for several hours. I hope you do not bring more ambiguity to me."

Asabi shook his head. "Sadly, I do."

"Then let us get it over with."

Asabi waited for Nigel to close the door, then said, "We have them located. They are most likely driving west from somewhere near Wichita, in Kansas, toward Denver. They were last seen in a late model burgundy Plymouth PT Cruiser whose license plate number we have in our possession."

"I assume that is the good news."

"It is. The bad news is that we have no active assets available for either capture or even close observation. Mr. Kent's ingenious deed with his phone led to our area's entire operational team being apprehended on illegal weapons charges. Other charges are surely pending."

Nigel sighed. "This young man is more resourceful than I first believed. And he has begun to try my patience severely."

"A perfectly understandable reaction, Mr. St. John. I have alerted our assets in Colorado to attempt a capture, but I am not sanguine about their chances of success."

"They are following your instructions, are they not?"

"They are. But they do not know Mr. Kent by sight, only by his photograph and description, and we must assume that Mrs. Luthor will have altered her appearance by this time. They shall, of course, do their utmost, but I suspect that our assets in Colorado will have a better opportunity to capture them the closer to Denver they travel, as our associates are rather few in number."

Nigel frowned as if in deep thought for a long moment, then nodded. "I tend to agree. Please keep a tight rein on that part of the search operation. I will continue to focus on this end—" he stopped and coughed as if covering a chuckle.

Asabi didn't ask about the almost-laugh, but he was curious about Nigel's current project. "Have you met with any success in your current endeavors?"

"I have made significant progress, yes. I do not believe that Mrs. Luthor simply awoke one morning last week and decided to betray her husband. Rather, she has been planning her actions for some time. I strongly suspect that she has hidden a record of her investigations on a computer somewhere, and I believe that I am about to discover its physical whereabouts."

"The latter is excellent news, although if you are correct about her long-term plans, it does not bode well for either of us."

Asabi had seen Nigel stare down underlings who had spoken out of turn and business "associates" who had initially declined to perform the actions requested by Mr. Luthor. But he'd never felt that stare directed at his own face. Only his life-long self-discipline and control enables him to return it without flinching.

It was, possibly, the most difficult thing Asabi had ever done.

Just before Asabi would have taken a step back and broken the contest, Nigel growled and crossed his arms. "You are, unfortunately, quite correct. I imagine that you have one or more contingency plans in place should the unthinkable happen to Mr. Luthor."

"If either of us has such a plan in place, then that to which you refer as 'unthinkable' therefore becomes the 'thinkable.' Merely having such a plan in place is tantamount to doubting our eventual success."

Nigel's mouth twitched. "I would rather classify such a plan as 'being ready for anything.' Having a contingency plan in place does not mean admitting doubt."

Asabi bowed his head slightly to show his agreement. "Your point is well taken. I must now depart to watch over the progress of our western operatives. I will leave you to your tasks, which you appear to have well in hand."

Nigel nodded back, then tilted his head to one side and said, "I am curious to know your precise instructions to your operatives. I assume that they were instructed to retrieve Mrs. Luthor and return her to us in good health?"

Here it was, the thing Asabi had hoped to avoid. Being pinned down by his cohort in Luthor's empire was not on his to-do list for his life, much less for this conversation. He preferred to operate off the record as much as possible so as not to be accused of going off the reservation, a phrase he still wasn't sure he grasped completely.

But he couldn't duck away from a direct question.

"I instructed them to stop Mrs. Luthor by any means. If it is

possible, they will capture her alive and unharmed so that she may be returned to us in that same condition.”

Nigel smiled without humor. “Let us hope that she makes that portion of their task impossible.”

Asabi bowed and turned away. He closed the door gently and made his way down the hall to his own office, thinking that while he'd known that Nigel didn't like Lois Lane Luthor, he'd never quite grasped the depths of Nigel's hatred for the woman. Neither had Asabi known that Nigel had so little regard for their common employer's wishes. It was a recipe for an epic disaster, one which would not be contained to Nigel and Mr. Luthor.

He would deliberately avoid standing between Nigel and Mr. Luthor in the future, whether physically or figuratively. And, if possible, he'd avoid making Nigel angry for any reason.

He wouldn't put it past Nigel to murder Mrs. Luthor in public in broad daylight if the opportunity presented itself.

Chapter Eleven

Clark drove the Mustang down I-35 until they reached the northern outskirts of Oklahoma City, where Lois spotted a Chick-Fil-A on their side of the road. Instead of hitting the drive-through lane, though, Lois convinced Clark to go inside and sit in a chair that wasn't buzzing down the highway at sixty-five miles per hour.

“See, isn't this better?” she bubbled. “We can focus on what we're eating instead of worrying about staying between the white lines on the road. And if you drop some food, you don't have to dig underneath yourself to find it.”

Clark chewed and swallowed, then took a big drink of tea. “I admit it, you're right. Food tastes better when you're sitting still.”

“Of course I'm right. Hey, how long before we get to Amarillo?”

His eyes narrowed and he glanced around the sparsely populated seats near their booth. “Let's keep our voices down, okay? The odds are better but we're not exactly in the clear yet.”

“You really think they're looking for us here?”

“Can't be sure, of course, but I wouldn't be surprised if there was an All-Points Bulletin out on us.”

“Sorry. I'll be good from now on.”

“I certainly hope so.” He waited for a moment, then said, “I think we'll get there by about eight tonight, assuming you don't have a lead foot in this car and rocket us down the road. We don't need a ticket for going over warp seven.”

“Warp seven? How very Trekkie of you.”

“The proper term is Trekker, and my instructions stand. Once we get out of Oklahoma City, the speed limit goes up to seventy. I don't know how much attention those licenses will stand, so the helm officer needs to stay below warp seven point two.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “Killjoy.”

“Can't afford to be stopped and you know it. Oklahoma Highway Patrol officers are not recruited for their sense of humor.”

“Nuts.” She pouted for a moment, then perked up. “Hey, just how fast will Farrah go on the highway, anyway?”

“I think she'll do a steady warp nine pretty easily. Maybe even warp ten if the tires are really as firm as they look.”

Lois grinned. “You sure I can't find out myself?”

“Lo-is!”

“Okay, boss man, I'll drive like a little old lady.”

“But not the one from Pasadena, I hope.”

They shared a soft laugh. “No, not her,” Lois insisted. “But I do love to have fun, fun, fun in my 409.”

“No fair! Only one pop song reference per sentence is allowed.”

“Then why do you get to use all the Star Trek references you want to?”

He leaned closer and mock-growled, “Because I have a badge, lady, and I'm not afraid to use it.”

“Boy, do you ever suck the life out of a party.”

Nigel stared at the fax he'd received from the math professor. He'd assumed that Mrs. Luthor had secreted some confidential information somewhere, but he would never have believed that she'd been this good at hiding it.

He shook his head. Staring at the paper would not change the information contained within its text.

At least he now had two IP addresses, one of which was supposed to hold a spreadsheet containing years of information on Mr. Luthor's criminal enterprises. He'd already typed each of the series of numbers into his Netscape web browser, but all he'd seen on his screen each time was a request for user identification and a password.

The additional text on Mrs. Luthor's rear end had been utterly confusing. He didn't know what was a user ID, what was a password hint, and what was nonsense. There was text which appeared to be longitude and latitude, down to the second, which might direct him to the location of the computer he needed. But there were four such sets of numbers, and the professor had warned him that even though she'd decoded the information in the fractals, she had not had the time or the resources to discover the underlying meanings or discern any relationships among the items.

The password hints in her tattoo were equally as puzzling. One, apparently, was “Rene Descartes,” an obvious reference to the Renaissance philosopher who was said to have sought vainly for an honest man. That could point to the real password – it might even be the real password – but it might also be misdirection, it might be meaningless, or it might even initiate a self-destruct sequence on the server.

Or it could merely be a taunt.

Mr. Luthor's tattoo was smaller and yielded fewer terms once it was decoded, but it was nearly as frustrating as the larger one. One of the text strings in his image was “Roy Rogers,” which as unrelated to the documents he sought as anything else. The only word which might have some real relevance to Mr. Luthor's tattooed information was “Rosebud,” which might be a real clue or might be a time waster.

He decided to risk trying the IP address from Mr. Luthor's tattoo with one of the text strings. It might be dangerous, but it also might be his last chance to locate the computer where the evidence was stored.

After hesitating a moment, he brought up the second screen with its request for user id and password. He typed in “Roy Rogers” for the user and “Rosebud” for the password.

The screen went blank.

After a long moment, the screen flashed the words, “Retrieving requested information.”

Then a video image filled the screen.

A young, slender, red-headed white man wearing a green sport coat over a striped shirt was singing into a microphone while weaving across a stage as two young women danced behind him. The song was one Nigel had never heard, but it was one whose irony he recognized immediately.

Never gonna give you up, never gonna let you down

Never gonna run around and desert you

Never gonna make you cry, never gonna say goodbye

Never gonna tell a lie and hurt you

The music continued as the scene on the computer screen froze on one of the dancing women. Then a line of fuzzy text marched across the screen. When it was centered, the text became clear.

CONGRATULATIONS – YOU'VE BEEN RICKROLLED

Rather than express his fury, Nigel slowly nodded at the screen. He'd been taken for a ride, to be sure, but now he had confirmation that Lois Lane Luthor was behind this. No one else would dare to taunt Mr. Luthor or his lieutenants in such a fashion.

He also knew that the other website almost surely contained the information he sought. If Lois Lane Luthor believed that he would stop now, she was wrong.

It was her first serious mistake. And Nigel would do his best to be certain that it would be her last.

State trooper Renee Woods frowned at her computer display and pondered her options. A classic white Mustang II with blue trim hummed west on I-40, its speedometer dancing just above and below the posted speed limit of 70 miles per hour. The two occupants seemed to be enjoying the journey, as the woman driver and her male passenger often exchanged frequent smiles and occasional laughter. The Oklahoma state trooper following at a distance considered stopping them to verify that they weren't the couple she'd been warned about, but if they were fugitives their behavior didn't make sense to her. These two weren't trying to hide anything, including themselves, the license plate check had come back clean, and the car was nothing like the one in the APB. There was no probable cause to pull them over, so Renee decided to keep looking.

It was close to seven in the evening by the time Lois pulled into the Motel 6 parking lot and let Clark out by the front door. Within five minutes he was back, wearing a smile Lois didn't recognize.

"Ground floor around back. There's a Chinese place across the road that will deliver to the room, or we can walk somewhere close. Your call."

She frowned as she turned the key and shifted into first gear. "Chinese is fine with me. And why are you smiling so funny?"

He chuckled. "I asked for directions to Hoover Dam, and she said that Vegas was prettier, and if there wasn't a beautiful woman waiting for me in my car she'd eat my spare card key."

Lois bit the inside of her mouth to keep from laughing. "What did you say to her?"

"I asked her if I had to eat my card key if I lost the bet." Lois guffawed, and Clark continued, "That's just what she did. Then I asked her if she took cash with a deposit, and she said that if I ate the card key I wouldn't have to pay for the room."

Lois' shoulders shook. "So you're too full to eat now, right?"

They shared a laugh. "I decided not to push things with her. She reminded me of my mom, so I'm still hungry."

The door opened and Lois snapped on the light. "I'm just saying, the Chinese food in Metropolis is much more authentic and it tastes better. And it isn't cooked by Mexicans, either."

Clark locked the door and sighed. "Do you know how few ethnic Chinese there are in this part of Texas? California and Oregon, yes, but not in the Texas panhandle. Most of the folks who do the restaurant work around here are either of Mexican or Native American descent. A lot of them grew up on one of the reservations just west of here."

She squinted at him. "See my previous comment. That may have been the blandest and cheesiest food I've ever eaten." She put a fingernail in her mouth and worried at something between her teeth. "And why do they call it a panhandle, anyway?"

"Just look at the north-west portion of the state map. This area looks like something you could grab and hold or even wave the state around in the air with. We're also heading through the Oklahoma Panhandle tomorrow morning, and don't roll your eyes at me in that tone of voice."

"You're sure that's the quickest way to Denver from here?"

He reached for the TV remote. "Yes. Mayson's map pointed us into New Mexico on I-40, then up to Denver via state highway 84 and I-25, but that's a good ten-hour trip even at New Mexico and Colorado highway speeds and taking into consideration the way you drive." He ignored her repeated eye roll. "And taking 287 to

84 into Colorado to I-25 to Denver is more direct. Being on the state highways will cut down on the likelihood of our being spotted, too."

"Fine. You want the bathroom first?"

"You go ahead. I want to see if the national news has anything on the case."

Lois ran the brush through her hair a final time, then stopped and took a good look at herself. She tried to see herself objectively, as if she didn't know herself. Of course she couldn't, not completely, but she gave it a good try.

She saw a slender woman in her early thirties, the slightest hints of gray tinging the part in her still-lively dark hair, framing a face with fewer wrinkles and stress lines than she might have expected. Of course, Lex' insistence on maintaining her youthful appearance through regular exercise and the occasional minor cosmetic procedure would account for some of that. Her narcissistic husband desperately needed a youthful wife to reinforce his public image of continued strength and virility.

The contrast between Lex and Clark was striking. While Lex wanted her to serve his ego, Clark seemed to care almost nothing about himself. He wanted her to trust him, of course, but in the beginning it was because he needed her cooperation to protect her. The days since their "swim date," as she called it in her head, had been different. He'd let down some of his protective walls and allowed her to see inside his heart. She wondered how much of his heart he'd revealed to Mayson – then decided it didn't matter. If Mayson had had the death grip on his heart she wished she had, he wouldn't have opened up to Lois so easily.

And, truthfully, she'd reciprocated and opened her heart to him. It had been a scary thing to do. At first she did it out of fear, to pull him closer to her and make him more likely to stay with her, but that had quickly shifted as she'd seen how open, how trusting, how honest, how – how very *good* he really was. He was, without a doubt, the best man she'd ever met. Not even the walking Federal disaster that was Lois Lane-Luthor, the triple-L herself, could destroy his character.

Again, perhaps it was the conspicuous differences between Clark and Lex that made her smile, but perhaps it was the fact that he'd spent the entire trip protecting her and keeping her safe. She doubted that any other man would have been as non-judgmental and compassionate with her. And no one else could have guarded her so well. Just look at how quickly he'd picked up on Billy and his—

How did he do that, anyway?

How did he know Billy was spying on them?

How did he even know Billy was there?

And that wasn't the whole of it. How had he reacted so quickly in the garage shootout? He hadn't saved Mayson from being shot, but keeping Lois safe had been his mission and she'd seen the trap before he had. Still, he'd put her on the ground behind the car before she could have hidden herself. And he'd deliberately put himself between her and the bullets flying around without any suggestion that he feared being shot.

Why hadn't he trusted Sue Riordan, a fellow cop? Had he seen or heard something that had tipped him off? If so, why hadn't he shared it with her?

Why had he changed cars again so quickly? Was it just to keep them invisible or was he really that suspicious? If he was that suspicious, what were his reasons?

And what had he said about their swim date? That he just wanted to spend the day in the sun? Why? What did the sun have to do with his choice? Granted, it was a good idea. The day had relaxed both of them and probably driven Asabi and Nigel a little bit crazier than they already were. But Clark had spoken of the side trip as if it were something he needed to do for his health. Did he have a vitamin D deficiency that only sunlight could take care

of?

Other things came to her mind, like the way he squinted slightly any time they pulled in to buy gas or use the bathrooms or buy food. If she hadn't known better, she might have thought he was trying to look through the walls.

Another thought broke over her musings.

The trip was almost over and she wished it weren't. In fact, she almost wished that he'd sigh deeply in the morning and suggest that they just take off for Canada or Montana or Idaho and just disappear. The thought of the upcoming trial, the constant threat of Lex having her murdered, her own culpability in his crimes – everything seemed to cascade down on her at once.

She wanted it all to be over. She wanted the entire thing to end. She wanted to fly away to an island in the Pacific or the Caribbean and stay with Clark for the rest of her life.

The fantasy engulfed her, buoyed her, lifted her heart and mind and relaxed the furrow between her eyebrows. For a long moment, she leaned against the counter, closed her eyes, and fantasized about going to sleep in Clark's arms and waking up still entangled with him the next morning, every night for the rest of her life. They'd live simply, using the cash in the money belt until it was gone, then she could pick up shells on the shore and sell them to tourists or sailors passing through. He could take casual work on the docks, or maybe they could open their own place and have live music every Wednesday and Saturday evenings. They'd take turns behind the bar, and maybe they'd hire a part-time cook for simple meals and snacks. No one would get drunk and start a fight or Clark would throw them out. And Lex would never find out where she was.

It would be beautiful.

If it could only happen for real.

But she couldn't avoid her appointment with the court and she knew it. She had to testify. She had to put away an evil man and help the authorities dismantle his organization. There was no time to moon over an impossible fantasy.

She stared at her tear-stained reflection and decided to take a shower. She could cry in the spray of the water and no one would ever see the evidence.

Clark checked the station listing for the motel TV and selected one of the 24-hour news channels. Anything but Luthor News Network, he mumbled to himself. At least the others had a chance of telling the truth.

He sat through a report on an earthquake in Chile and a flood in Bangladesh. As always, the mention of innocents being in danger cut him deeply. He could have helped at either place, maybe both. He couldn't have stopped either disaster from happening, but surely he could have saved a number of lives.

But he couldn't leave Lois alone. As brave and capable as she was, it would be like staking out a goat for a tiger. Great bait to bring the tiger in. Not such a good thing for the goat.

He had to finish this job. Maybe then he could think about helping out at other places, other bad events.

And he liked this job a lot more than he should.

It wasn't the tension of running from people trying to kill Lois that made the job fun. That was easily managed. And it wasn't his churned-up feelings about Mayson. He knew now that he had to break things off with her, as gently as he could, as soon as he delivered Lois to the feds in Denver. Nor was it the thrill of escaping the bad guys and their unwitting accomplices.

It was hearing her laugh.

It was bantering back and forth with her.

It was seeing her learn to trust him without reservation.

It was touching her hand or elbow when she seemed close to tears, when the pressure threatened to crush her, and his presence seemed to lift her.

It was feeling her smile directed at him.

It was just being with her.

He'd done the very thing Mayson had so often warned him against, the thing that his instructors and supervisors had always cautioned him about, the thing no cop should ever do. He'd opened his heart to someone he couldn't have, someone who wasn't just part of the job.

She was the job.

And he was an idiot.

The sound of the shower being turned on pulled his attention away from his own moronic self. She'd decided to clean up. Good. He could use the time to regain control of his emotions.

As if it were mocking him for his pain, the headline crawl under the picture mentioned Mayson. He watched for more information and was quickly rewarded when the talking head came on screen.

"And now the latest on the trial of Lex Luthor. The judge in New Troy has denied several defense motions to delay the start date or change the venue of the prosecution, and the only question now seems to be whether Mr. Luthor will face justice in state court or a federal courtroom. Our legal insider, Christine Polanski, tells us that Mr. Luthor will probably face the federal charges first, since federal rules of evidence and the limits on prosecutorial conduct are somewhat looser than in New Troy state court. The other important factor is that if Mr. Luthor is convicted of conspiring to murder or solicit murder across state lines, Mr. Luthor might face the death penalty in federal court. New Troy does not currently have the death penalty, since the state's appeals court struck down that statute last year and the legislature has yet to replace it.

"The whereabouts of Lois Lane-Luthor, the defendant's wife, are still unknown. Mrs. Luthor may or may not testify in open court concerning her knowledge of her husband's illegal activities. The judge has yet to rule on the defense motion to exclude her testimony.

"According to Metro General Hospital spokeswoman Dean Ashley, Assistant District Attorney Mayson Drake has been transferred from intensive care and her condition has been upgraded to serious but recovering. The other wounded survivor of the shooting where Drake was wounded, Detective Willard Burke, has also been upgraded from critical to serious. Both are expected to recover from their wounds, although both will also require extensive physical therapy before returning to active duty. Back to you, Phil."

The TV was off. The only light came through the worn curtain from the security lights in the motel parking lot. The skinny twin beds were silent, and Clark's breathing was even and regular.

But she could tell that he wasn't asleep.

Neither was Lois.

She couldn't stop thinking about how Clark had gotten them this far. Not only was he a good man and a very good cop, he seemed to live on the edge of knowing what was about to happen before it happened. Did he have some kind of ESP? Was he just that observant and did he just react that quickly? Lois had seen professional athletes – middleweight boxers with blurry hand speed, martial artist masters who couldn't be touched if they didn't allow it – who weren't as quick as Clark was.

She thought back on the officer they'd disarmed in Kansas, Sue Riordan. Lois hadn't really noticed at the time, but as she reconsidered how it had happened, she realized that Clark was never nervous about the outcome of that confrontation. He'd been calm, cool, collected, and relaxed.

Too relaxed. He should have tensed up, at the very least, when Riordan had told him that she knew the car was stolen.

But he hadn't flinched, not one little bit. Add that to the other things she'd seen and remembered, and it made the total package of Clark Kent an enigma wrapped in a mystery inside a puzzle.

She had to know.

“Clark? You awake?”

“Yep.”

“Can’t sleep?”

“Not yet. Thinking about finishing the trip, I guess.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

After a long moment, he said, “It sounds like there’s something else on your mind.”

She took a big breath and let it out. “There is.”

His bed squeaked as he shifted position. “Want to tell me about it? Maybe you can drop off if you share it, whatever it is.”

Her fingers drummed on the top of the comforter and found a worn spot she started worrying with her nails. “I’m not sure you can help.”

“Won’t know unless you try.”

She nodded despite knowing that he couldn’t see her. “Okay.” She rolled on her side and braced herself on her elbow. “You’re too good at what you do.”

She heard him shift back. “I’m what?”

“You’re too good at this.”

“At what, escorting people to court?”

“Yes! Exactly! You’re too good at what you do.”

“You say that as if it were a bad thing.”

“It’s not! You just – you’re too good to be real.”

“Maybe I’m just overqualified.”

“That’s not what I meant. I mean that you made sure I was safe back in the garage shootout. And you – oh!”

“What? What ‘oh’?”

“You were too upset about not anticipating that ambush. Nobody could have seen it coming.”

“You did. You warned Mayson that the plan had too many moving parts, remember?”

“That’s only because I know Lex and Nigel and Asabi better than you guys do. I was sure they’d try something, but I didn’t know what it would be. You, on the other hand, almost stopped it from going down. If you hadn’t hesitated to make sure I was safe, I don’t think there would have been time for the bad guys to get off more than one shot.”

His voice was flat and hard, and Lois missed the lilt in it. “That one shot was enough.”

“I know, and I’m sorry that Mayson got hurt. But my statement stands. You would’ve stopped it if you’d been free to act on your own.”

“You don’t know that.”

“From what I’ve seen you do since then, I’m certain of it. The way you caught Billy was great, but it wasn’t like he was waving a sign or calling you by name. You still caught him.”

Clark sighed. “Look, Lois, I’ve always been able to do things other people couldn’t do. Even the other football players in high school used to ride me about it. ‘Just give the ball to Kent and get out of his way so he can score.’ And I work hard to maintain that edge, I promise.”

“You could have been an All-American in college, maybe a Heisman winner, and an All-Pro in the NFL. Coaches all across America would have been drooling at the thought of you playing for them. Your mom would’ve helped you fill in any money gaps, too. I bet she all but begged you to continue your education.”

He shifted to a sitting position. “She did. She even offered to sell the farm and move into Smallville so I could go.”

“But you didn’t let her do that.”

The silhouette of his face turned away from her and he whispered, “No. I didn’t.”

“And I’m sure you had the best of reasons and the purest of motives.”

He turned to face her in the dark. “That sounds almost sarcastic.”

“It’s not meant to be, I promise. I mean every syllable of it.

You proved yourself to be loyal and self-sacrificing and you stayed with her because you love her.” She sat up and put her feet on the floor. “But we’re getting off topic. You’re the most capable man I’ve ever met, Clark. And you care more deeply about right and wrong than anyone else I’ve ever known. I can see what Mayson sees in you. And I’m sure that she thinks she’s the best woman in the world for you.”

“But you don’t agree.”

“That’s your call, not mine. But I can tell you for an absolute certainty that if Lex had your physical talents, he’d want to rule the country. Maybe even the entire world – or at least all of North America.”

A grace note of humor crept into his voice. “Then I guess it’s a good thing he doesn’t have them.”

“That’s probably the understatement of the decade. God certainly knew what He was doing when you got those gifts instead of Lex.”

He tensed a little and she didn’t understand why. If she could have used Lex’ money to rebuild the Planet, to update it and save everyone’s jobs, she would have done it in a heartbeat. But she didn’t control that much of her – of Lex’ wealth. If she had—

Blast it! Life wasn’t fair.

If she’d met Clark six years ago, she’d never have married that sentient slimeball. Lucy would still be alive. And she wouldn’t be trudging toward a court date that would shatter her world, assuming she survived the experience.

But then, if life were fair, you could shoot teenagers if they got too snotty.

The car was what bad novelists would call “too quiet.” Neither of them spoke after Lois verified the route she’d take toward Denver. Clark wanted to reach out and hold her hand, to caress her cheek, to stroke her hair, anything for the physical contact with her.

But he didn’t do any of those things.

Lois sat tensed up behind the wheel, driving the car with uncharacteristic abruptness at every turn, every lane change, every stop and start. The previous day, her shifting had been race-car smooth. Now it was sharp and jangly, and twice she clashed the gears as she accelerated.

He wanted to comfort her, to ease her pain, to release her tension, but he didn’t know how he could without revealing too much of his heart to her. Not only that, but she’d made him nervous the night before as she’d talked about how well he’d done getting them this far. He knew he’d put her off by shutting down and not discussing her thoughts with her, but he had no idea how to have that discussion without admitting that she was more right than she knew.

A sign flew by, telling them that Denver was only forty-two miles away.

About an hour, maybe a little more with downtown traffic.

And she’d be gone from his life.

They’d been so quiet for so long that one word from her startled him. “Clark?”

His head spun around and his eyes sought out the threat – but there wasn’t one.

She frowned at him. “Clark, are you okay?”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Yes, I’m fine. I was in my own little world and you startled me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No problem. What is it?”

“Um – I think we should make a pit stop pretty soon. And I think you should drive the rest of the way. I don’t want to get shot because some overly excited rookie marshal gets suspicious because the witness is driving the detective instead of the other way around.”

He nodded. “Sure. First place we see?”

"First one that looks like it has indoor plumbing."
He smiled. "That's right, you're not exactly an outhouse kind of girl."

She seemed to relax a bit. "No. That's for girls who hunt deer with their men and can pack them overland to the pickup truck with one arm."

"Okay. Castle Rock is just ahead. I'm sure they have real pipes with water in them."

"Just as long as it goes 'whoosh' when you press the right lever."

Francisco Ybarra frowned at the man across the outside table from him. Francisco didn't like sitting and waiting, especially with one Matt Durham, a small man with a pockmarked face and a foul mouth. Durham cursed at his food, at the chair he sat in, at the small diner where they were watching, at the waitress who only wanted to refill his coffee cup, at life in general and anything specific in it. His only redeeming qualities were that he followed orders to the letter and wouldn't back down from anyone.

Francisco still didn't like him.

But he was given no choice in the matter.

They were supposed to look for a Plymouth PT Cruiser, a car Francisco didn't know but which Durham did. And they were also to be on the lookout for Lois Lane-Luthor, who Durham couldn't have picked out of a lineup with a cheat sheet but who Francisco would recognize no matter how she'd changed her appearance. He'd worked for her husband for a year before being sent west to keep him out of the Lucy Lane murder investigation. A witness Francisco hadn't noticed in the back of the store had given the police a good description of him, so after meeting with Mrs. Luthor the next day, he'd boarded a Greylines bus to Denver.

He didn't like Denver at all. And he hated Castle Rock.

There was the snow. There was the cold. There was the wind. There was the smog. Metropolis had all of those qualities, but not in the abundance that Denver did. There were no decent diversions for a man of his East Coast tastes. And he'd yet to find a decent burrito anywhere in the city.

A man could eat only so much pizza and venison before his stomach rebelled.

A car crunched the gravel near the gas pumps and stopped. A tall, dark-haired young man with wide shoulders got out of the passenger seat and began filling the tank. At the same time, a dark-haired young woman stepped out of the driver's seat and tossed the keys over the car's roof to the man. He heard her say, "Be back in a minute," and the man nodded to her.

As she came around the back of the car, he felt his eyes pop open. He quickly turned away from her and tried to push his jacket up around his ears.

Durham saw his reaction and frowned. "What are you doing?"

Francisco waited until the woman entered the store proper before answering. "That's our target," he muttered.

The other man glanced toward the gas pumps and scowled. "Wrong car. That's a classic Mustang. They wouldn't be dumb enough to drive that around."

"I'm telling you the woman who just went inside is Mrs. Luthor!"

Durham rolled his eyes. "Fine. You call it in. I'm getting another beer. You want one?"

"Stay here!" he hissed. "I'm calling in now."

The man's frown deepened. "You phone it in if you want to. I'm getting a =bleep= beer. =Bleep-bleep= this =bleep= baby-sitting detail."

Durham rose and stalked to the store's door. Francisco thought about calling to him, but decided not to risk alerting the targets. He lifted his burner phone and pushed the button for the single programmed call number.

"Hello? Yeah, this is Ybarra. Yes, Castle Rock just south of

Denver! The targets are here! I said the targets – no I'm not drunk! I just saw Mrs. Luthor! Looks like they're headed to Denver. What? Engage? Just the two of us? Look, I heard about this guy. He – Fine! I'll be as quiet as I can be! Just get someone here fast! Right, right. I will."

Francisco put the phone away and took a deep breath. He quickly decided the best way to take them was to get up and walk behind Mrs. Luthor when she left the store. The cop with her wouldn't risk her getting hurt, and they could wait for the backup he'd called for—

Then he heard a woman's voice scream "Kent!"

And everything came apart at the seams.

Chapter Twelve

Lex Luthor was not having a good day.

The guard he'd been paying to carry unedited correspondence out of the prison had been abruptly transferred two days before, and until he was able to develop another back channel he was mostly cut off from the outside. He'd assumed that the woman who'd replaced his personal mail carrier would be easy to recruit, but she'd turned out to be immune both to his charms and to his attempts at bribery. The first time he'd placed a hand on her shoulder, she'd twisted his wrist to the snapping point and promised to thrash him with her extendable baton the next time he so much as smiled at her.

Her slender strength was considerable and her threat was quite believable.

Sheldon Bender had visited that morning, and he'd managed to pass along the status of the search for Lois Luthor. Sadly, it was not going well. Not only had she not been recaptured, a number of his assets, including a number of members of his organization and those of the "thug-for-hire" variety, had been arrested by either local or federal officers. Together with the disappearances and defections of his lower- and mid-level operatives in and around Metropolis, the Boss' organization was in danger of being scattered like dandelion seeds in a strong wind.

Bender had also let it slip that both Nigel and Asabi were becoming increasingly desperate. Nigel had gone so far off the rails that he was investigating the complimentary tattoos Lex and Lois had received before the first of the year. Apparently he'd gotten a bee in his bonnet that the tattoos contained information about the Luthor criminal organization.

Fools. The great Lex Luthor was surrounded by utter fools.

To top it all off, Bender also informed him that Judge Wenzel had denied the final motion to push back the start of the trial and had ordered Bender to be ready to begin his defense in three weeks. The witnesses who planned to testify were listed in the discovery documents, but Bender had also learned that they were hidden away in the federal Witness Protection program. The few people Lex might trust with the task of preventing them from testifying were either caught up in the search for Lois or already committed to other tasks. And three weeks was not enough time to ferret out the witnesses and convince them to recant their testimony. Bender would have to discredit their words in court – a task in which neither Lex nor Bender had much confidence of success.

The only good news was that Bender believed that the federal case would not begin before the state case. Balancing that, though, was Bender's opinion that if the state case did not go well, the feds would step in and take over before a state verdict could be rendered. In that event, there would be far fewer chances to affect the outcome.

The only hope was to find Lois and bring her back into the fold. Together they could face this tribulation and fight through to victory. And Bender was now on the way to meet with Nigel and Asabi to ensure that Lois survived her rescue.

Francisco Ybarra had a job to do. He didn't like extra noise, public shootings, or stupid co-workers. All he wanted was to capture and control the couple from the classic car. He didn't want a scene. But he also didn't want to fail.

So when a woman shouted "Kent!" from inside the store and the dark-haired man putting fuel in the Mustang turned to run to the door, Francisco yanked out his pistol and pulled the trigger.

Incredibly, he missed his first shot – and from no more than twelve feet. He was sure he'd hit the running man in the left shoulder, but he didn't fall or stagger or grab his wound or bleed or anything.

And Francisco didn't get the chance to fire a second time. The man went down feet forward, sliding like a baseball player stealing second base, and fired back once.

The bullet hit Francisco's right shin about halfway between the knee and ankle. His leg felt as if it had been struck by a sledgehammer. The broken bone collapsed, Francisco dropped his .357 Magnum Colt Python revolver, and he fell heavily to the ground, concerned only with the blistering electric pain below his knee. He sensed rather than saw the man sprint to his side, toss the Colt into a nearby trash can, then race to the door.

Francisco didn't care what happened inside the store. He just hoped an ambulance would come before his leg fell off. The agony pierced every thought and he almost forgot to breathe.

He lost consciousness and missed the rest of the action. When he next awoke, he was handcuffed to a hospital bed with a uniformed officer standing five feet away. The man did not appear to be happy.

Matt Durham wouldn't have cared how his partner felt about Denver had he known the little creep's opinion. Matt liked the area, the mix of big city hustle and bustle with rural tastes and diversions. He really liked going out into the woods and shooting squirrels out of the trees with his .45 caliber Glock 21. It didn't leave much of the squirrel behind, but he didn't eat them anyway and he really liked seeing them burst apart when he hit them.

And he didn't like sharing credit. He would recapture Lois Luthor by himself and tell his boss how Ybarra had chickened out and left him to save the day all alone. It would put him in solid with the organization.

Matt walked up behind the Luthor woman and reached past her to grab a can of something from the shelf and said, "Oh, excuse me, Mrs. Luthor."

He had to admit, the woman was good. She didn't flinch or gasp or snap her head around. The only tell she showed was a slight nostril flare as she said, "Sorry, my name's not Luthor. You're thinking of someone else."

He held the can of beans in his right hand and opened his coat with his left to show his weapon. "I don't think so. You need to come with me right now."

She leaned back and took a breath. Matt assumed she was going to run, but instead she screamed "Kent!" and punched him in the jaw with her left hand.

The blow wasn't hard enough to stun him, but he did take a quick moment to shift mental gears. He dropped the beans, then snatched his Glock out of his shoulder holster and brought it up. "That's enou—" he began.

She brought her left hand back from the follow-through of her punch and shoved his pistol to the side and away from between them. Then she surprised him again by stepping in closer and pushing something hard into his abdomen.

A pair of closely spaced shots from outside that sounded like two different weapons firing distracted him for a moment. It was too long a moment.

She turned her left hand, grabbed his gun wrist, and held it up and away from her. An ominous series of clicks came from the vicinity of his belt buckle. "Thirty-eight special in your belly,

mister. Think I could hit your spine with at least one shot from this close?"

He felt his eyes get big. His mouth went dry and his hands started sweating. "D-don't shoot!"

Her eyes narrowed and she leaned closer. "Point your weapon at the ceiling. Now."

As Matt turned the Glock upward, he heard the door jingle. The woman at the counter squealed, "No shoot! No shoot! Cops are coming! No shoot!"

"Kent!" called the woman in front of Matt.

"Lane!" came the response.

The Luthor woman exhaled and relaxed slightly. "Come and get this guy's gun. I'd rather not shoot him and get blood on my clothes."

He heard rapid Spanish, then broken English, as the clerk placed a frantic phone call to 911. Matt felt a man's hand on his gun hand, then the hand took his Glock. "Got it. What are you holding on him, another truck bolt?"

"Sue Riordan's revolver."

The man chuckled. "I wondered what happened to it. I rather hoped that you'd dropped it into a river or the pieces into a couple of trash cans."

"I'm glad now that I didn't. What should we do with this guy?"

"Take him outside and cuff him to his buddy. After we do that, I need to call the marshal service in Denver."

"Yeah." Matt felt the woman tense up again. "I don't want to surrender to any local yokels." She poked him hard in the belly with her revolver. "And when they get here, you don't say anything to them except your name, rank, and serial number."

"Huh?"

The man behind him chuckled again. "That's for wartime prisoners, Lois. Geneva Convention."

Her gaze bored into his eyes and his mouth went dry again. "Whatever. I don't want Hopalong Cassidy here muddying up the waters and getting Sheriff Whatzit all excited."

"Understandable. Let me go calm down the lady behind the counter. She's still on the phone with the local LEOs." Matt felt a tap on his shoulder. He was too scared to turn around and face the man. "Hey, buddy, this is a nice piece. I'll make sure to use it on you if I need to shoot you."

Between the intense woman in front of him and the casual lethality behind him, Matt's stress level peaked and his vision greyed out. His voice came from far away. "Can – can I sit down somewhere?"

"After we cuff you," the man replied.

"Hey, man," Matt croaked, "I don't wanna get cuffed to no =bleep= stiff!"

"He's not dead, just wounded. And I think the local police will want to talk to both of you. I'd advise you to get a lawyer."

Great, thought Matt, I blew the job and now I'm getting busted. Maybe Colorado likes plea bargains as much as Florida does.

Using the store's phone, Clark called the US Marshals, who – after learning that he was with Lois Lane-Luthor – promised to send a vehicle immediately. He also called the local police dispatcher, who eventually connected him to the police lieutenant en route to the store and to whom he insisted that he and Lois would go with the marshals and not any local cops.

The lieutenant obviously didn't like it, but agreed that he and his people would stay outside until the marshals arrived. He also insisted on taking the two gunmen into custody, which more than satisfied Clark.

Lois decocked her small revolver and handed it to Clark, who slipped it into his pants pocket. As they waited for the ambulance for the Hispanic thug and for the marshals, the two of them leaned

back against a shelf displaying all kinds of junk food. Clark chuckled and picked up a package.

"Vanilla moon pie. Do you know how hard it is to find these things in Metropolis?"

"I don't recall ever looking for them. They're too sweet for my palate."

He put it back. "I'd eat one except I don't want to be accused of theft."

"You're a real — a real Boy Scout, Clark."

He started to answer, then noticed that Lois was staring at his shoulder. "What's wrong? Did I get something on my jacket?"

She reached up and pushed her index finger against the fabric. "You have a bullet hole in your sleeve."

"What? No, that's — has to be a tear or something."

"Tan jacket, round black hole. Just one — no exit hole. And you're not bleeding."

"Maybe it was already there."

"I've been sitting next to you in a car for almost a week. This sleeve would be next to me if I were driving, and I've driven a lot. I would have noticed."

"Lois, I—"

"Shh." Her fingers moved down his sleeve, worrying the fabric until they stopped near his elbow. Her eyes flicked up at him. "Found it."

"Look, I can explain—"

"I don't doubt it. I'm sure you've had lots of practice. But unless you want to 'explain' this to the local cops and the marshals and the press out there, you need to get rid of that flattened bullet."

Clark locked eyes with her for a moment, then sighed and straightened his arm. The spent round fell into his open hand and he held it up for Lois to see.

"Big bullet," she said.

"Yeah."

"What caliber?"

"My guess is either a .38 special, like the one we got from Sue Riordan, or a .357 Magnum. It was a pretty loud bang, so it's probably a Magnum round."

She nodded, then turned away and pointed. "I bet if you put it down there under those tomatoes, no one will ever find it. And if anyone does, it'll never be connected with this incident."

"You sure? It is a bullet, after all."

"It's a flat chunk of lead that doesn't look anything like a bullet. I guarantee you there's no ballistic markings on that thing. Who's going to figure out what it is?"

He gave her an almost-grin as he crossed the aisle. "You're pretty good at this."

She crossed her arms and tightened her lips. "I used to be an investigative reporter and I'm married to a major criminal, remember? I couldn't help soaking up some of it."

"Guess not." He stepped back to her side and was pleased when she didn't react to his proximity. "So what do we talk about while we wait?"

She glanced at her watch. "How much time do you think we have?"

"Oh, at least fifteen minutes, maybe as long as half an hour. Depends on where the marshals started out and what the traffic is like."

"Good."

His eyebrows rose. "Good? I'm surprised. I would've thought you'd want to get this over with as soon as possible."

"I do, but I have some questions for you."

"Thought you might. Go ahead."

Here it comes, he thought. She'll ask if I'm human and I'll tell her I'm an ET and she'll be scared. Or she'll ask what else I can do and I'll tell her and she'll be mad. I can't win.

She took a breath and let it out slowly, then looked deep into his eyes and asked, "What's a LEO?"

"W-what?"

"You said something about the local LEOs earlier and I don't know what they are. I know from the context you had to be talking about cops, but I don't know what the term means."

He was too stunned to answer for a moment, then he was laughing quietly and unable to answer. After a long moment, he looked at her and saw a tiny hint of amusement in her eyes, as if she'd almost expected this reaction.

He finally wound down enough to talk. "You're a freaky woman, you know that? You knew I was expecting questions about me and then you hit me with 'what's a LEO?'" He chuckled and shook his head. "That was a great curveball, Lois."

She chuckled with him, then took his hand in hers. "Clark?"

"Yes, Lois?"

Her eyes captured his again and she leaned closer, her voice just above a whisper. "What's a LEO?"

"Okay, I give up. It stands for Law Enforcement Officer. It's pretty much anyone who can make an arrest, but city detectives usually use the term to refer to uniformed officers working a beat."

Her eyes twinkled again and she turned to gently lean her shoulder into his. "Now that we have that out of the way, let me tell you what I've deduced about you. And you can tell me if I'm wrong."

"It's a deal."

"Okay. You're fast, Clark, faster than anyone else on Earth. You're also the strongest man I've ever heard of, even if you aren't the most muscular. You can hear things no one else can hear, and I'm guessing you can see things no one else can see, too. I think you really were checking out the inside of every building we stopped at on the road before we got out of the van or the car we were driving. You take in sunlight for part of your nourishment like other people take in orange juice. And judging by the bullet hole in your jacket, you can't be physically injured easily, if at all."

She turned to face him directly and took his hand again. "But none of that would matter if it wasn't for your heart. You're not just honest as the sunrise and true as the North Star, you're totally committed to truth and justice. That's one of the reasons — maybe the main reason — you became a cop. You'd rather be hurt yourself than allow someone else to be hurt, and that's also why you've let this thing with Mayson go on so long. You're not playing with her heart, you're trying to protect her. You're with her more out of compassion than from affection for her. And I think you'd kill yourself before you allowed yourself to be a tyrant over anyone else." She cocked her head to one side and looked deep into his eyes. "How'd I do?"

He swallowed. "Pretty good, actually. There are a few things that you left out, but that's because I didn't give you any clues about them. You're still quite the investigative reporter, you know."

She grinned and almost curtsied. "Thank you, kind sir. I assume that Mayson knows about the things I left out?"

He tilted his head at her. "Are you upset that I didn't tell you about what I can do?"

She huffed a jaded laugh. "No. You couldn't have known what I might have done with that information, and I'm not sure I would have believed you. But Mayson knows everything, doesn't she?"

"Ah — yeah, she does. She told me she wanted me on this trip because of what she calls my 'special skills.'" He grimaced. "I wish I knew how she really felt about them."

Lois frowned. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I, actually. She doesn't want me to be a vigilante with them, but sometimes she likes to have them available. In fact, one of the reasons I've come so far in the department so fast is because when I'm on a case, things go smoother and faster and more evidence gets gathered."

"Huh. That's funny."

"Funny ha-ha or funny strange?"

"Funny like odd. Lex has files on most of the cops in Metropolis, but almost nothing on you. His file on Mayson says to stay away from her because she can't be turned, but there's very little about you. And if you're that influential and good at your job, I'd expect more attention from Lex directed toward you. Unless – you pass the credit around, don't you? You're on a stakeout and you see something, you don't act on it but you mention something to one of the others who does, and he or she gets the accolades. That about it?"

"Pretty much, I guess. I don't need to draw extra attention to myself, and piling up collars like squirrels gather nuts would make me too visible to both the media and my bosses. I get enough promotions and commendations thrown at me as it is."

"I understand." She looked at her watch. "The marshals should be here soon."

Clark tilted his head to listen. "The ambulance will be here in a couple of minutes. They can take care of the guy I – I shot."

She put one hand on his chest. "Where did you shoot him?"

He frowned. "Right outside the store beside the – oh, you mean where's the wound, don't you? Sorry. The bullet hit him in the right shin and broke the bone. He'll need surgery to fix the compound fracture, but he's not in danger of bleeding to death. One of the officers put an air cast on his leg to stabilize it. He'll need physical therapy to walk normally again, but he can get that in prison."

"I knew you hadn't killed him. It isn't in you to take a life."

He dropped his gaze to the floor. "Sometimes it's the only solution. A man puts a knife to a woman's neck or a gun barrel to a nine-year-old girl's temple and threatens to kill the hostage right then and there unless the cops let him go – it's a choice as to which life to save. It's not easy."

"Have you had to make that choice?"

He shook his head. "No, not yet. But if I stay where I am, I probably will, that one or one like it." He took a shuddering breath. "Police work is dangerous and terrifying. Eventually every officer runs into that no-win situation."

"The *Kobayashi Maru*?"

He looked at her, surprised that she knew the reference. "The no-win command scenario from one of the Star Trek movies, yes. The one where no matter what you do, everyone dies. Nobody succeeds."

"One guy did."

"Yeah, but—"

"How did Cadet Kirk beat it?"

"What? He didn't beat it, he cheated."

Lois shook her head. "No. He didn't cheat, he changed the rules of the scenario."

For a moment he puzzled over how they'd gotten from police work to science fiction. "Okay, he changed the rules. How does that – wait, you're saying that – that I should change the rules?"

"Yes."

"How am I supposed to do that? I can't use my special abilities openly."

She smiled, then stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. "Clark Kent can't do that. But someone else could."

He turned her words over in his head as the ambulance crunched into the gravel parking area. He heard the EMTs order the police away from the fallen gunman, heard them demand that the unhurt man have his cuffs removed from the victim, and listened to their crosstalk as they treated the victim and prepped him for transport. He even heard the second gunman – the one Lois had actually captured – get his wrists cuffed together and be roughly guided to the back of a squad car, complaining all the way about his treatment.

Clark remembered how surprised he'd been when the man

outside had shot at him. The guy hadn't looked like a thug, hadn't looked dangerous, hadn't appeared to be a threat. He'd looked like any normal guy taking a short break from driving along the highway.

Then it hit him.

The man was able to hide in plain sight because he didn't look like a gunman.

Lois was telling him that he could hide in plain sight if he didn't look like Clark Kent.

He could use his abilities openly for the first time in his life.

He could save lives, prevent or at least reduce property damage, all while being out in the open.

The next earthquake, the next disastrous flood, the next wildfire – he could really help.

He couldn't just wear a suit, or even jeans and a Polo shirt.

Maybe his mother would help him. In fact, he wouldn't do it unless she did help. He didn't want to damage their relationship with some goofy stunt.

Maybe it was a completely brilliant idea.

Without thinking, he grabbed Lois around the waist and kissed her square on the mouth. "You're a genius!" he blurted. "You're an absolute genius! You should get a medal!"

"My dad always told me I was pretty smart. And my very wise grandmother once told me that we need to bloom wherever we're planted."

"What?" He stopped, then realized what he was doing. "Oh – I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I should never have – Lois, I'm so sorry!"

He opened his arms and she stepped back, though not as far as he would have expected. "Thank you."

Maybe the bullet had really hit him in the head and he was hallucinating. "Thank me? For what?"

"For the hug." She sniffed. "For the kiss." Her eyes glistened. "It's something I'll remember for the rest of my life."

She leaned her forehead into his broad chest. "Mostly – for telling me I had a good idea for you. For letting me know that maybe – just maybe – I can make up for some of the horrible things I allowed Lex to do for so many years."

"Hey! You're not responsible for what he did. That's all on him."

"I know. But I am responsible for not stopping him way back when. I'm responsible for – for letting him murder my sister." She grabbed his jacket in her hands and pulled his lapels together.

"And if you can do some real good with your life, maybe – maybe I can too." She looked up at him. "I'm going to try. Starting with Lex' trial."

He brushed her cheeks dry with his thumb. "I'll be around. I promise."

"You'd better be." She smiled through a snuffle. "Those marshals are amateurs next to Clark Kent." She brushed the end of her nose with her sleeve. "I'd really like for you to be there to protect me. Would that be okay with your boss?"

"I'll convince him."

"You're sure? I don't want to get you in trouble."

He smiled softly. "And I don't want anyone to hurt you before you testify." He chuckled. "Actually, I don't want anyone to hurt you at all."

Her own smile widened. "Done and done. Hey, where are those US marshals, anyway? Seems like you can't find a cop when you really need one."

He chortled deep in his chest. "I can hear them about three miles out, sirens blaring and tires squealing. Won't be long now."

Nigel kept trying, but while the website he'd found contained multiple files which he was certain held information on his employer's business affairs, he'd not yet succeeded in penetrating all of the multiple levels of security. Just as he'd needed help decoding the fractals, he would need help hacking into this site

and destroying the information in it.

He reached out and touched his phone. At the same time someone knocked on his door. He decided to postpone the call until after his visitor completed his or her errand.

"Come in."

The door swung open and Asabi ghosted in. The turbaned man stopped about four feet from Nigel's desk and bowed slightly, then stood with his hands crossed in front of him.

"I assume you have news for me, Asabi."

"I fear so, sir."

"That sounds as if you bear ill tidings."

The Indian man's expression never changed. "That is, unfortunately, true. Lois Lane-Luthor has been located, but she and her Metropolis escort are about to be taken into custody by the United States Marshal Service. This service will then deliver the two of them to the federal courthouse in Denver within the hour. At that point, Mrs. Luthor will be deposed before a judge, who will then issue warrants for the arrest and confinement of a number of Mr. Luthor's closest associates, including the two of us."

Nigel didn't respond for a long moment, then said, "I assume you wish to discuss an exit strategy?"

"No, sir. I have delivered my final message to you, save that I am about to disappear from this vicinity. I have no wish to reside within a prison for the rest of my natural life."

"I see. And if, despite any and all precautions you plan to take, you are captured?"

"I will do what I must to mitigate my own discomfort and disadvantages. I will not return to India to face a death sentence, so I will not allow myself to be deported."

Nigel nodded. "And I will not allow you to betray either Mr. Luthor or myself."

"I expected no less."

Before Nigel could snatch the pistol from his belt holster – a task made more difficult by his seated position in the desk chair – Asabi's right hand flicked out in his direction. Nigel heard nothing, saw nothing, only felt an abrupt impact to the left of his breastbone.

He looked down to see the intricately carved hilt of a throwing dagger protruding from his chest. His eyes blurred and his breath stopped in his throat.

Asabi had killed him.

"I apologize for the abruptness of my resignation," the younger man said from far away, "but there simply is not sufficient time for a standard exit interview. Suffice it for me to say that I have enriched myself over the years and will live in comparative luxury for the rest of my life." The first truly predatory smile Nigel had ever seen from Asabi spread over his Indian face. "Good-bye, Mr. St. John."

Asabi turned to the office door as Nigel fought to lift his right hand to the bottom of the desk where the small utility drawer would normally reside. As Asabi grasped the door handle, Nigel flipped two micro-switches and felt a warning vibration on a small button pad. As Asabi pulled the door open, Nigel pressed the button.

The C4 embedded around the door frame exploded inward and crushed Asabi's body with the overpressure from the blast. The force of the explosion filled the room and knocked Nigel's chair over backward. As Nigel's vision faded for the last time, he doubted that the other man had even known that he'd died.

The afterlife he'd been warned about as a youth did not welcome him with open arms. Nor did he experience any satisfaction from bringing Asabi with him.

Chapter Thirteen

Clark landed in the Kent farm's back yard an hour before sunrise. As he looked around for a good place to wait, the kitchen

light came on. He glanced through the wall to make sure his mother was decently attired, and since she was, he climbed the steps to the back door and knocked.

"Who is it?"

"It's the plumber," he answered.

She chuckled at the tattered old joke as she unlocked the door. "Sorry, no parrots here. Come on in and have a seat, honey."

"I'm surprised you still get up this early."

"I still have a few chores, like checking for eggs and feeding the chickens. I was a farm wife too many years to sleep to noon like some lazy city dweller."

"Thanks a lot for that, Mom. Can I help with breakfast?"

She shook her head. "I'm just having coffee and toast this morning. I have an early lunch meeting in Wichita with a man who wants to sell my sculptures in California and Arizona, maybe Oregon. Nothing's been signed yet, but it looks very promising." She put her hands on her stomach and lifted one eyebrow. "I can't fill up first thing today. The last time I met with Bart Winslow over lunch, I ate a big breakfast first, and after that huge meal he insisted I finish, I waddled around like a pregnant hippo for the rest of the day."

"Hey, that's great! Not the hippo part, but the potential sale part. If he's half as smart as he thinks he is, he'll trip himself getting the sales agreement in front of you."

She smiled. "Thank you, Clark, but we'll have to wait and see. Now, what's bothering you?"

"Bothering me? Why does anything have to be bothering me?"

"Because you don't show up unannounced before sunup unless there's something you need to talk about. Now spill it, ya filthy animal!"

He laughed. "You've been watching too many Home Alone reruns, Mom."

"But I'm still right, aren't I?"

He nodded, still smiling. "You are and you know it." He leaned back in his chair. "Do you remember the no-win training scenario in the Star Trek movies?"

"I was never the Trekkie you were, Clark—"

"Trekker, Mom, not Trekkie."

"Whatever. Anyway, I think I know what you mean."

"Good. Just to make sure we're both on the same page, Cadet James T. Kirk was the only one who ever defeated the no-win scenario."

"I do remember that part. Didn't he cheat, though?"

Clark's smile grew. "As someone recently pointed out to me, he didn't really cheat. He just altered the conditions of the test."

Martha looked at him for several moments without reacting. "It's early in the morning and I haven't had my coffee yet. I'm going to need you to fill it in around the edges a little more so I can see the whole puzzle."

"Okay. You know how Dad always told me to be careful not to let anyone know what I could do or I might end up dissected like a frog in a laboratory, right?"

"Uh-huh. Still not finding the point, though."

"I want to alter the conditions of the test."

She leaned back and rubbed her temples. "Honey, you're going to have to tell me directly how Star Trek links up with what your father used to say because I'm still not getting it."

He leaned forward and grinned. "Clark Kent can't be seen doing all the special things I can do. But someone else can. Someone wearing a costume or a disguise of some kind, something that grabs people's attention and makes them look. Something that will stand for what's good and right and safe."

Martha tilted her head. "But no one can do what you can do but you, and if – oh – a disguise – but – wait just a – you mean – that's – and—"

He grinned wider and watched her process the concept. "I haven't done anything with this idea yet. I wanted to get your

input first.”

She nodded slowly. “Ah – yeah. Thank you. Um – I think – at first blush – well, Clark, it’s either the most brilliant idea you’ve ever had or the absolute worst. I can’t tell which yet.”

He reached out and took her hands in his. “Mom, I want you to spend a couple of days thinking over this. I’m going to do the same thing, and if we agree, I want you to help me design my good guy outfit. Will you do this for me? I really value your input, and this is extremely important to me. I want to get this right as to whether I do it or not.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“Do you? I don’t know if I see it all yet.” He stood and paced around the kitchen. “But if I do this, I can help people in car wrecks, help out at natural disasters, stop violent crime in the streets – I don’t even know all of it!” He stopped and spun to face her. “If I do this, I’ll have a way to help people I couldn’t help before. Just think of the lives I could save, the injuries I could prevent! Who knows, maybe I could be a spokesperson for orphanages and adoption agencies and help rural hospitals raise money and build better facilities and buy newer equipment! Mom, I could make a huge difference in people’s lives! A real difference everyone could see and touch and talk about and help with!”

Clark saw his face reflected in his mother’s glasses. He assumed it was a trick of the light, something about the curve of her lenses that made his face seem to glow, but he didn’t care. Just talking about it made the whole concept seem more real to him.

After a long moment, Martha stood and embraced her son. “I love you, Clark. And I think you may have a bigger heart than anyone else in the state of Kansas.” She patted him on the back and smiled up at him. “Come back in three days and we’ll talk some more.”

“Three days? You need that much time?”

She gave him a sideways grin. “I do if I’m going to come up with some truly heroic designs for your new costume. I’ll stop at Monica’s fabric store on the way back from my meeting today and get started right away.” Her hands found his chest and she pushed him away. “Now you go to work and do your usual wonderful job. Go bust some perps or something.”

“Yes, Mom. See you Saturday morning!”

“That’s fine as long as I have my coffee before we start.”

He laughed again. “I’ll bring you a latte from Starways, okay?”

By the time Saturday afternoon rolled around, he knew he was as ready as he’d ever been in his entire life.

Tuesday morning was neither just a day of the week nor a retail store for Clark. By the time he got home, he’d been in several Midwest states cleaning up after tornados, in Canada to repair an oil pipeline damaged by environmental terrorists, in the Philippines to partially deflect a tsunami – he hadn’t been totally successful, but he had saved many lives and mitigated the property damage – and in Metropolis where he’d turned eleven criminals caught in the act in to various police stations, complete with witness statements and physical evidence.

He hadn’t slept since Friday night and he was tired. He’d planned to nap in the sun on his patio for most of the day and put in a patrol that evening. Bill Henderson had generously allowed him to take time away from the office while he was on administrative leave for shooting someone, especially since the shooting had taken place out of state. Bill was still working with the commissioner to smooth the ruffled feathers of the Castle Rock city fathers and police officials for that incident.

So he didn’t need an angry blonde ADA beating on his door at eight-twelve in the morning, but he had one anyway. There was no other choice than to open up and let her in, and despite having her right arm in a sling, Mayson burst through the door like an out-of-control bulldozer and stomped down the short flight of steps to the

lower level as soon as Clark released the latch.

She stopped in the middle of the room, then spun on her heel and glared at him. “This apartment still sound-proof?” she demanded.

Clark sighed and closed the front door. “As long as you don’t use a bullhorn or your witness-is-lying courtroom voice, no one should hear us.”

“Good. Because I have something to say to you.”

Maybe it was because he was tired, but she looked like she wanted to cross her arms but couldn’t. She also looked to be exhausted and running on pure adrenalin. He managed to suppress the chuckle that wanted to bubble out of his throat.

He tried to defuse Mayson’s pending explosion with humor. “Would you care to sit down before you fall down? Or should I prop you up against the wall?”

Her mouth fell open and she shook her head as if to clear it. He’d normally be far more patient with her, but he had a strong hunch about why she was here and he was determined to stand his ground.

She shook her head and tried to regain her momentum. “Do you know what they’re calling you now?”

Obviously humor wasn’t what was needed. “No, I don’t know what they’re calling me, unless ‘they’ are the two robbery suspects I brought in before the Denver trip, and I can’t believe anything they’d call me would be repeatable in polite company.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it!” She lifted her free hand to the side and gave him her witness-is-lying-like-a-cheap-rug look. “Are you too busy to read the papers? Or turn on the TV? Listen to the radio?”

He sighed, his chuckle crushed beneath the treads of her intensity. “Yes, I have been too busy to read a newspaper or watch TV or turn on a radio. What are they calling me?”

She turned and addressed the air near his kitchen. “He doesn’t know. Seventy-two hours of flying around the world like a maniac and he doesn’t know! Fifty-six arrests – illegal arrests, mind you – and he has no idea what he’s stirred up!”

Clark took three steps toward the kitchen and spoke to the air over her head. “Maybe if she told me what they’re calling me we could move forward with this conversation. What do you think?”

She spun and stared at him. “If you think you can – never mind.” She walked into his personal space and glared up at him. “They’re calling you Superman!”

He felt his eyebrows elevate. “Superman?”

“Yes! Superman!”

“You mean like Nietzsche and his ubermensch?”

“I don’t know! Some reporter in Gotham City, I think, saw a picture of you lifting a railroad car with that big ‘S’ on your chest and decided ‘Hey, I think this guy could be a Superman!’ And now that’s who you are!”

“Mayson, look, I—”

“You have no privacy now, you idiot! You’ve thrown your personal life down the sewer! You’re so blasted eager to help people that you forgot about the people already in your life! And all because you wanted to look like a circus clown on steroids!”

“My mother made me that outfit!”

“So she’s on board with it? Great! Now there are two idiots instead of just one! You can’t just—”

“That’s enough!” he barked. “I haven’t arrested anyone! I just took them to the precincts with enough evidence for the officers there to arrest them! I haven’t done anything illegal!”

“You’re acting like a vigilante! Your ‘Superman’ identity doesn’t have any legal—”

“I didn’t pick the name! Maybe people need someone powerful and good to root for! And you leave my family out of this!”

Mayson stopped and stared at him, then exhaled slowly. “Okay.” She took two steps back and pushed the air between them

with her free hand. “Okay, fine. I’m sorry. I crossed the line with the crack about your mother. I never should have said that.”

“No,” he growled. “You shouldn’t have.”

Her eyes closed for a moment and she seemed to deflate. “I just wish you had talked to me about this decision.”

“Why, Mayson? Why should I include you in my life’s choices?”

Her eyes widened and her mouth went slack. “Wh-what are you – what do you mean? I love you, Clark! What affects you affects me!”

“I don’t think we should be that close.”

Her voice caught and she almost whimpered, “You mean – right now? While you figure out the – the Superman thing?”

“No. I’m talking about a permanent change in the status of our relationship.”

In a thin, almost wispy little-girl voice, she asked, “You – you’re breaking up with me?”

The tears balanced on her lower eyelids and he almost softened his stance, then remembered what Lois had told him – that he was with Mayson more out of compassion for her than out of affection for her. “Yes, I am,” he confirmed, but with less force than before. “You may love me, Mayson, but it’s for the wrong reasons. You wanted my powers along on this witness transfer because you wanted to be ready for anything. And you knew that I’d get Lois to Denver no matter what we came up against.”

He crossed his arms and sighed. “But you don’t want to accept them as part and parcel of me. You want the ‘normal human’ Clark most of the time, except when I can add something to the situation that no one else can. I’m very uncomfortable with that state of affairs, and I feel like you’re using me to instead of relating to me. I think we should stop being a couple.”

A tear flowed down her cheek and fell on her sling. “That’s not true. I just want you to be happy. And you can’t do that if people are hounding you all the time.”

“Not as long as they believe Clark Kent and Superman are different people.”

“And how long do you think it’ll be before someone makes that connection?”

“I don’t know. How loud can you yell that? I don’t think they’ve heard you in Gotham City yet.”

“Clark, please! I – I just want you to be happy.”

He crossed his arms and took time for a deep breath. “If you really want me to be happy, Mayson, let me do this, okay? If it turns out that – sorry, what was that name again?”

It was harsh, making her say the name when they both knew he couldn’t have forgotten, but he’d been pushed too far this morning. She blinked and more tears fell. “Superman.”

“Right. If Superman becomes more of a problem than a solution, I’ll just announce that I’m going into hibernation, give the costumes back to my mother, and apologize profusely to you. Until then, though, I’d appreciate it if you kept my secret.”

A hint of the old fire shone in her eyes. “I know how to keep a secret, remember?”

“Being able to keep a secret has never been an issue for you. The issue is whether or not you choose to keep it.”

Her mouth hardened into a flat line in her face. “I suppose I deserve that. Yes, Clark, I will keep your secret, until you tell me directly that it isn’t necessary for me to do so any longer.”

He nodded and put his hands in his pockets. “Thank you, Mayson. I know this whole thing is difficult for you.”

“You just think you know.” She moved past him to the door and he opened it for her. “When will I see you again?”

“Assuming my resourceful and charming boss fixes everything with the LEOs in Castle Rock, I think I’ll be back in the office Monday of next week. If I don’t go to Colorado for a few days, that is.”

“Colorado? Why?”

“I think you know why.”

She hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah, I think I do. But if I’m right, you should go to West Virginia instead.”

“What? Why?”

She stopped in the doorway and spoke without looking at him. “Because that’s where the federal trial for Lex Luthor will be held. With so many of his people vanished or in jail and his two top goons dead, the US Attorney wants to be as close to Metropolis as possible. He’ll have better access to witnesses, physical evidence, the local investigators, yadda yadda.” She strode through the open doorway and down the hall without another word to him.

So. Luthor would be tried in Wheeling after all. The week on the run, the stress of protecting Lois, the threat of discovery and ambush, the palpable fear that she’d be killed at any moment – it was all for nothing.

Wait, Mayson said the federal trial?

That meant the city and state had ceded jurisdiction and custody. It had to be yet another blow to Mayson’s hopes for putting Luthor in jail. Of course, it really didn’t matter who put him there, just as long as he was convicted of at least some of the crimes he’d committed. And if the Feds ever let him go, the state of New Troy would snap him up in a heartbeat. The man would never inflict his particular brand of evil on the public again.

And if he somehow escaped the legal system, Superman would track him down and capture him.

He closed the front door and thought about his new identity. Superman, yeah. He was starting to like that name. It suited him.

And then he mentally slapped himself for making such an atrocious and labored pun.

Clark knocked on Bill Henderson’s office door and waited for a response. “Just a moment,” Bill called through the door.

Clark refused to listen in on the conversation, but for a moment it got loud enough for anyone to hear Bill say, “No! You started this, you can finish it!” Then there was silence for a long moment before a woman’s familiar voice murmured something Clark chose not to hear.

The door swung open and Clark stepped in as Bill stepped back. “You wanted to see me, boss?”

“Yes. Come on in and close the door.”

Bill moved to his desk and sat. Mayson already occupied the chair in front of the desk farthest from the door. Bill waved him all the way in. “Have a seat, Clark. Mayson has something to tell you.”

“Okay. What is it, Mayson?”

She kept her gaze locked on the far wall behind Bill, who finally said, “Oh, let me start. I know you two are having personal problems, but I expect you both to behave as professionals. Mayson, if you insist on acting like a junior-high diva, I’ll get Jim Dixon on the line and you can explain to your boss why your attitude is so crappy lately. Clark, you haven’t done anything worth me getting mad at you yet, but if you start acting like a kid who needs a timeout I’ll have you on patrol report review duty at a desk on Highland Avenue before you can turn around. You two got it?”

Mayson huffed and almost barked “Yes!”

Clark frowned. “You mean the precinct where the worst crime they have is the occasional trash can tipper?”

“That’s the one.”

Clark nodded in agreement. “I promise I’ll play nice.”

“Fine. Mayson, I want you to tell Clark what you told me about the Lois Luthor assignment.”

Clark almost corrected his boss on Lois’ form of address but changed his mind at the last moment.

Mayson adjusted her sling and turned slightly in Clark’s general direction. “That trip to Denver was both a smokescreen and a trap. When she volunteered to testify and provide

documentary evidence against her husband, Jim and I decided to let the federal courts have first crack at Luthor. I came up with the plan to go cross-country to lure out Luthor's lieutenants and soldiers. We even smoked out a leak we didn't know we had." She stopped and sighed. "It worked better than I hoped it would."

Clark stared at her ear for a about ten seconds, trying to control his sudden anger, then bit out, "Yeah, it worked great except for all the people trying to kill us."

Mayson had the grace – or maybe the shame – to look down at her feet. "I'm truly sorry, Clark, but I knew you'd protect us once we got on the road. My getting shot put a monkey wrench in the plans but you did great. You couldn't have done better."

Clark lifted one clenched fist. "So we were just bait? You put us out there to chum up the water and see who came up to take a bite?"

Bill lifted one index finger. "I wasn't kidding about Highland Avenue, Clark. Keep a lid on it."

Mayson's eyes began leaking again. "No, Bill, he's right. I did a stupid thing and put a witness in jeopardy so I could score some points in the DA's office. Jim didn't like the idea at first, but I sold him on it when he found out you were going. You have a really good reputation over there, Clark."

"Which apparently doesn't include reading me in on dangerous operations even when I'm part of them!"

"And that was wrong, Clark. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry." She finally turned to look at him and her bleak expression almost broke his heart. "I'm deeply sorry on every level I can think of."

Once again Lois' analysis came to his mind, and this time he also compared her attitude toward his powers to Mayson's. Lois seemed to accept him for who he was. Mayson used his special abilities to further her own interests. He believed her when she said that she regretted her actions, but there was no way to know whether or not she'd do the same thing again given similar circumstances.

He turned back to his boss. "Inspector, the reason Mayson is so touchy and the reason I'm kinda prickly is because we're no longer a couple. We officially called it quits between us—"

"You called it quits," muttered Mayson.

"Fine. I called it off this past Tuesday because I don't feel respected. The relationship was unequal and she had a bad habit of using me for her own gain." He shot an angry glare in her direction. "And it seems that I was right. I respectfully request that you not assign us to work together on any special projects in the future."

Bill nodded slowly. "You know, Mayson, this young man could make a lot of trouble for you if he wanted to. Sounds to me like he's trying to be reasonable."

Mayson blew out a breath and turned away from Clark to stare at the back wall again. "I really can't argue with that."

"Then let's leave it like this. Clark, if you investigate a case and Mayson gets assigned to it by her boss, you treat her like you would anyone else. Got it?"

He nodded. "I think I can do that."

"Good. Mayson, if you two do end up working together on a case, you leave any private stuff off to one side. And you don't pressure Clark to do something he doesn't want to do unless it involves some point of law."

"Fine. I can work with that."

"Then it's all settled. I'm happy, Jim Dixon is happy – or will be – and you two aren't happy but you aren't fighting, either. Everybody wins."

Mayson stood and waited for Clark to move so she could get to the door, but instead he said, "Inspector, did you receive my vacation request?"

Bill nodded. "I did. I approved it and forwarded it up the food chain."

"Thanks." Clark finally stood and moved to the door. "I

assume you also received my report of lost equipment?"

"For your LexTel phone?"

"That's the one."

"Got that too. Go see Marcy Quarles on the fourth floor for a replacement unit."

"Will do, boss. Uh, it won't be a LexTel, will it?"

Bill grinned and waved his hand once from left to right. "No. But it is the droid you've been looking for."

Chapter Fourteen

It was Tuesday morning of the second week of Lex Luthor's trial, and Lois sat in what she'd mentally termed the "penalty box" until her name was called. Each of the four witnesses in the room with her was guarded by at least one armed bailiff, and there were two more, all carrying pistols on their hips and semi-automatic shotguns with high-capacity drum magazines in their hands, stationed at each of the three entrances to the room. As long as the federal bailiffs were honest, they were as safe as the court system could make them.

She'd been briefed by the prosecutor over most of two days the previous week. He'd ask her about the documents she would give to the judge as evidence, talk about how she learned about each incident listed, and anything else she'd learned that hadn't made it into the spreadsheets. Then they'd reviewed the questions the defense might present to discredit her.

Atop that list sat the big one – why she was voluntarily testifying against her husband. The judge had already ruled that the prosecution couldn't introduce Detective Lucy Lane's murder as evidence while Lois was on the stand because Lois hadn't witnessed it, but if the defense attorney pressed her hard enough during his cross-examination, Lois could make it part of her answer. And the defense had just learned – through the legally required discovery process – about the plea deal that Francisco Ybarra, the man who'd been paid to kill Lucy and had helped ambush Lois and Clark in Colorado, would testify that Nigel St. John had given him the assignment. He'd also tell the jury that he'd been called to the Luthor penthouse the next day to tell Lois – under direct orders from Lex Luthor – that he'd murdered Metro police detective Lucy Lane and had been paid handsomely for his act.

Ybarra would avoid the death penalty and have a chance at parole after twenty-five years if he testified. It was his only chance to avoid dying as a guest of the federal government and he knew it.

She went over her answers in her head once more, not knowing when she'd be called to the witness stand, and hoped against hope that she'd see a friendly face in the courtroom when she went in. Maybe one – or even both – of her parents would come, although Lois knew that wasn't likely to happen. Maybe her maid Consuela would be there, assuming she wasn't already caught up by Immigration or back home in Costa Rica. Maybe Clark—

No. There was no real reason for him to show up. He'd been her escort, her protector, and her bodyguard on the trip to Denver, but neither of them had made any promises to the other. He'd said he'd be there for her, but he had other responsibilities in New Troy and Kansas to keep him away. There were no real expectations between them, no vows of eternal loyalty, no handcuffs keeping them connected, nothing. She'd be alone, just as she had been for years.

And she'd face Lex with the truth.

The bench was uncomfortable. Fortunately she wasn't in need of a bathroom break. There were no newspapers or current magazines or live TV broadcasts in the penalty box, so she had no idea what was happening in the outside world. The policewomen who watched over her at the safe house at night wouldn't turn on the television or radio, so Lois was stuck with watching classic

films on the VCR or reading old novels to pass the time. She counted herself fortunate that the younger woman had persuaded the older one to let Lois exercise every night. It passed the time and helped tire her out, but nothing put her in the mindset to sleep without worry that Clark had let her achieve after only a couple of nights.

It was hard not to think of him. She remembered his eyes, his smile that lit up the room, the muscles that strained against his T-shirt—

“Lois Lane-Luthor? You here?”

She jumped to her feet. “Yes! Yes, I’m here.”

The bailiff looked at her as if she were a gallon of spoiled milk. “They’ve called you to the stand. This way, please.”

“Already?”

“Yes, ma’am. You’re the first witness for the prosecution.”

Lois nodded, then followed him out of the door.

Once inside, she looked around for any familiar faces. She didn’t see either of her parents, which didn’t surprise her. She also didn’t see Consuela, which also didn’t surprise her. None of her alleged friends from Lex’ circle were in the spectator’s benches, nor any of the people she’d known while working at the Daily Planet. The faces which stared back at her were either media or thrill-seeking gawkers.

Then she saw Clark.

Her feet tried to guide her toward him, but the bailiff put his hand on her elbow and straightened her path. The witness stand, she reminded herself, was her destination right now. And even though the moment was charged with tension, she felt her lips pulling up just a tad at the corners and her eyes crinkling just a little bit.

As she turned to stand beside the chair, she found Clark again. He looked to be glad to see her, too. It felt nice.

Then she was asked to put her left hand on the Bible in the clerk’s hand, raise her right hand, and take an oath to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth

She intended no less.

The clerk asked her to state her name for the record as she sat. “Lois Joanne Lane-Luthor, the last two names hyphenated.”

The defense attorney leaped to his feet. “Your honor, I renew my objection to this witness. She is the legal spouse of the defendant and cannot be compelled to testify in the matter before the court.”

The judge turned to her. “Ms. Lane-Luthor, are you being compelled to testify against the defendant?”

Lois shook her head. “No, your honor. I’m testifying of my own free will.”

“Very well,” the judge said. “Objection overruled. The prosecution may proceed.”

The prosecutor said, “Ms. Lane-Luthor, is your husband in this court today?”

“My husband for the time being, yes, he’s here.”

The judge frowned and tilted his head. “Please explain your answer.”

“Of course. I’ve instituted divorce proceedings against my husband. And it’s totally my idea. The prosecutor had no influence on that decision.”

The prosecuting attorney put his hands in his pockets and stepped away from the witness box. “Very well, Ms. Lane-Luthor. Let me repeat my question. Is your husband in this court today?”

For the first time, Lois looked directly at the man she’d married. “Yes, he is.”

“Please point him out.”

She did. “That’s him sitting between two of his lawyers.”

“Thank you. Please let the record indicate that the witness has identified the defendant.”

The court reporter nodded to the judge and returned to his machine.

The prosecutor stepped forward. “How long have you been married to your husband, Ms. Lane-Luthor?”

“Far too long.”

The spectators chuckled or laughed softly, except for one man in the back who let out a loud “Ha!”

Clark gave her a half-smile, then winked so fast she almost missed it.

The judge whacked her gavel twice. “Quiet down, people. The witness will answer the questions put to her without any attempts to be facetious. Understand?”

Lois nodded. “Yes, ma’am. I’m sorry.” She turned to face the prosecutor again. “I have been married to the defendant for five years, two months, and about three weeks.”

“Has your marriage been a happy one?”

“No, it has not.”

“Can you tell us why?”

“Because my husband is a criminal and leader of a large criminal organization. And any time I attempted to thwart him in any way, or tried to leave him, he beat me and imprisoned me in his home.”

The defense attorney jumped up again. “Objection! This allegation of violence belongs in family court, your honor, not in a criminal trial! And it’s uncorroborated hearsay!”

The prosecutor shook his head. “This goes to Ms. Lane-Luthor’s degree of involvement in the charges being brought against her husband. And some of the prosecution’s exhibits will support this witness’ testimony.”

The judge nodded. “I’ll allow it, pending corroboration. Proceed, Mr. Lee.”

“Thank you, your honor. Ms. Lane-Luthor, were you involved in the planning or execution of any of your husband’s criminal schemes?”

“Objection, your honor! Assumes facts not in evidence.”

Lois almost smiled at the thought that defense attorneys had to have strong legs to keep leaping up to object like that. The man’s reaction time was worthy of a major-league shortstop jumping for a line drive over his head.

Lee almost bowed. “I will rephrase the question. Was the witness involved in the planning or execution of any of the schemes your husband is alleged to have committed?”

Lois waited a moment for the defense to leap up again, but when he didn’t, she replied, “No, I was not.”

“Yet there are several charges pending against you for criminal activity.”

“That’s true.”

“Can you tell us why?”

Lois sighed. “I was indirectly involved with covering them up. I’m facing several counts of accessory after the fact.”

“I see. Have you been promised anything in return for your testimony in this trial concerning these charges?”

“Only that my cooperation would be taken into account. I was not promised a plea deal or reduced sentence.”

“Thank you.” Lee turned to the prosecution’s table and picked up a thick binder. “Do you recognize this document, Ms. Lane-Luthor?”

Lois took it from him and leafed through the first few pages. “Yes. It’s the documentation I assembled to give to whoever prosecuted Lex Luthor for his crimes.”

The man had to be getting tired of jumping up. “Objection, your honor! The defendant has not been convicted of anything! This testimony is harming his right to a presumption of innocence!”

The judge nodded. “The objection is sustained as far as the allegation of criminal behavior is concerned. But please remember that those words did not come from the prosecution, but from a witness.”

“Then your honor should instruct the jury that the defendant is

innocent until proven guilty!”

“You covered that point quite thoroughly during *voir dire* at jury selection, Mr. Abernathy. The members of the jury already understand that point, and if they’ve forgotten it you’ve just reminded them.”

Abernathy didn’t look happy, but he did sit down with no further objection. Lee faced Lois once again and said, “Is there supporting documentation or corroborating testimony for the items in this document?”

“Yes, there is.”

“Good. Your honor, may I have some latitude in questioning this witness?”

“What kind of latitude, Mr. Lee?”

“In order to go through the items in this document, we need to present them without support for the moment. To prevent delays caused by repeated objections from the defense, could the prosecution stipulate that the incidents related to the court are allegations, for which we will present corroboration at a later time?”

“Your honor!” growled Abernathy. “This is most unusual and would be prejudicial against my client!”

The judge picked up her gavel but didn’t strike it. “You may take notes, Mr. Abernathy – copious ones, judging by the thickness of that binder – and present your objections when the prosecution rests.”

“What? Your honor—?”

“Wait. Any item listed which is not sufficiently supported by other testimony or documentation will not be considered by the jury.”

“Your honor, that’s hardly fair to the defense!”

“If life were fair, Mr. Abernathy, horses would ride half the time. It’s my decision and you’ll have to deal with it. Mr. Lee, please begin.”

Lee waited until Abernathy had stalked back to his chair and plunked himself down, then said, “Thank you, your honor. Now, Ms. Lane-Luthor, let’s take these in chronological order. The first item you have listed is some three months after your wedding, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Please give us some detail on this entry.”

Lois paused and took a deep breath, then glanced at Lex. His smile never dimmed, but his eyes flashed with a warning meant only for her. She’d seen it often enough that the fear in her heart spiked, even though there was no way for him to get to her in the crowded courtroom. She almost – almost – lost her nerve at that moment.

Then she looked at Clark, saw his soft smile, his powerful shoulders, his gentle eyes, and knew that she could do this with him there to protect her heart.

“Ms. Lane-Luthor? Are you ready to continue?”

She looked at the prosecutor and nodded. “Yes. I had gathered some information about a high-stakes gambling parlor – one that was rigged to cheat the players – that I thought was being operated by one of my husband’s associates without his knowledge. I was wrong. Not only did Lex authorize the operation, he was personally profiting from it. And when I threatened to go to the police about it, he – he beat me up.”

“What, if anything, happened next?”

Her answers were clear and concise, and the questions kept coming. By the time Lois finished destroying Lex from the stand, it was time to recess until the next morning.

Abernathy’s cross-examination, beginning on Wednesday morning, had been exhausting, but Lois hadn’t faltered. Clark had watched with pride as she calmly and coolly defended every assault the attorney made on her testimony. She’d fielded every veiled hint, every salacious wink or nudge, every outright

accusation he’d made against her, and she hadn’t budged an inch. The closest she’d come to losing her cool was when she’d revealed, under Abernathy’s sarcastic and acidic attack, that Lex had ordered his own sister-in-law’s murder. Even then, though, she’d remained under control, and Clark could see the jury was totally on her side.

Whether or not they remained there would be revealed later. But for now, Lois had carried the day.

Her testimony for the prosecution had lasted one day. Abernathy’s cross had lasted two. She’d been called back to the stand on Friday morning to clarify two or three relatively minor points in the evidence she’d presented, but had been dismissed shortly before the judge called for a lunch recess.

Clark hadn’t wasted his time, either. He’d struck up a tentative friendship with one of Lois’ police guards and wangled a promise of five minutes with her after she finished testifying. So he slipped out of the courtroom and into the hall as soon as Lois was dismissed from the stand.

His new friend Megan hadn’t led him astray. The three women were in the hall, waiting for him, when he stepped through the door.

The other woman, whom Clark hadn’t met, held up her hand when he was about five feet away. With her other hand on her weapon, she said, “You’re Kent?”

“Yes.”

She looked at Lois. “That’s him?”

Lois – who was not expecting this meeting – nodded once.

“Show me your badge, mister.”

Clark slowly pulled back his suit coat and revealed it clipped to his belt. “Now your weapon.”

He shook his head. “I’m unarmed and on administrative leave. I had to shoot a guy in the leg.”

“I hope it was a bad guy.”

He was startled by the gruff comment, then saw the woman’s eyes glisten. “It was. He’s wrapped up in this trial too. If he’s lucky, he’ll only get thirty without parole.”

“Sounds like you did us all a public service.” She glanced at her comrade, who took a few steps down the hall behind Clark. “We can give you five minutes without getting our butts in a sling. That enough time?”

He lifted his eyebrows. “I guess it’ll have to be.”

“Good. We’ll be watching over you.”

“Thanks.”

He waited until the woman stepped in the opposite direction from Megan, then he smiled at Lois. “You did great.”

“Thank you.”

“You don’t look like you’re happy to see me.”

Her eyes misted over. “Oh, I’m happy. But this is wrong, Clark. It would never work between us.”

His smile faded. “Not even as friends?”

She shook her head. “If you’re going to be an honest cop – and that’s the only kind you could ever be – you can’t be hanging around with a convicted felon.”

“You haven’t been convicted—”

“Or the ex-wife of a crime boss,” she broke in. “I’m so very glad to see you, but you have to go back to your life. And I can’t be a part of it.”

“You could be. I don’t have to be a cop.”

“But you have to help people. You have to fight for truth and justice. It’s in your nature, in your blood. You can’t deny that.”

He lowered his voice. “Have you heard about that new hero in Metropolis?”

She frowned. “No. I haven’t seen a newspaper or heard a news report since the marshals took custody of me.”

“Ah. I see.” He took a breath, then let it out. “First of all, Mayson is doing very well with her recovery. She should be back to work full-time in another week or so.”

“That’s good that—”

“Hang on, let me finish. She also set us up as bait to draw out Luthor’s men all over the country, which I didn’t know about until just last week. She was counting on me to keep the two of you safe on the trip to Denver, except we got ambushed before she expected any danger. They plugged the leak in the DA’s office – it was Dennis Franklin’s girlfriend. She’s been arrested and is facing some serious time unless she cooperates. Dennis is on probationary status with the office and is working traffic court for now.” He leaned closer and lowered his voice even more. “And that hero I mentioned – well, he’s me.”

She nodded. “I see. And how are you and Mayson getting along now?”

“We’re not. We broke up permanently.”

“I’m sorry, Clark. I know that was hard for you.”

He glanced over Lois’ shoulder and saw the officer fidgeting. “Look, we’re almost out of time. If you do end up in prison, I promise to come visit you as often—”

“No.”

The flat statement startled him. “Lois, I care about you. And you’ll need a friend on the outside who—”

“No. And I mean it!” She lifted her index finger and pointed up at his face. “Do not come to see me in prison! Not once! I refuse to be an albatross around your neck and I won’t have you jeopardize your career for me! I’m not worth it!”

He gently captured her hand in his. “Yes, you are worth it. You’ve proven that this week by testifying, by telling the truth, no matter how difficult it was. I want to see you, Lois. I want to be part of your life.”

Her voice faltered and she shook her head. “No! I want your word that you won’t come to visit me!”

“But—”

“If you do I won’t see you! I’ll send you away and tell them not to let you in again!”

“Lois, please—”

“No! No visits, no phone calls, no letters, no contact at all! Don’t come to the prison to see me!” His lips parted but he didn’t speak. “Now!” she barked. “Your word, Kent!”

He closed his eyes and shook his head.

“I won’t have you giving me false hope! And you know I can’t promise you anything! Now give me your word you won’t try to contact me!”

Of all the scenarios he’d imagined for this moment, he’d never envisioned this. She really didn’t want him to be there for her. She didn’t want him around. She couldn’t take the thought of seeing him and not being able to be with him.

Yet he knew she was saying all this to protect not just herself but to protect him, to shield him from danger, to keep his reputation squeaky clean with both the Metro police department and the criminals he’d vowed to bring to justice. Her unselfishness warred with his deep desire to be with her, to support her, to watch over her in any and every way. But there was only one answer she’d accept – so there was only one answer he could give.

“All right, Lois. I promise that I won’t come visit you as long as you’re behind bars.”

“Good!” She put her hands on his chest as if she was about to kiss him, then roughly thrust him away. “Have a good life, Clark.”

Clark stepped back and sighed. The lead officer assigned to protect Lois chose that moment to reappear. “Sorry, but time’s up. We need to get going.”

Lois lifted her head and didn’t touch her damp cheeks. “Good timing. We’re done here.”

Megan tapped Clark on the elbow and said, “I’m sorry it worked out this way. I was rooting for you.” Then she fell into the trail position behind Lois and the lead officer.

Clark knew that Lois was protecting him. He also knew that she was protecting herself just as intensely. All he could do was

accede to her wishes and let her go.

It was by far the hardest thing he’d ever done.

Epilogue

Lois didn’t know why she’d been called to the warden’s office, but she wasn’t about to mess up her record by being stupid this close to her release date. She walked through the open door with only a few shreds of concern tickling her mind and stood before the warden’s desk. The woman behind the desk stood and smiled. “I’m glad you decided to come by, Ms. Lane.

“I’m still an inmate of the federal corrections system, Mrs. Leeds. I go wherever you want me to go.”

“Not for long, though. Please, sit down. I want to have a chat with you before you leave us.”

Not for long! Soon she’d be out of this prison! It wasn’t the same hard time Lex was serving in Leavenworth, waiting for the appeals to stop his execution to run out, but it was prison just the same. Despite two years of iron-fisted self-control, two years of not allowing her emotions to show, two years of not letting anyone know what was in her heart and mind, she nearly cried out with anticipation.

Lois settled into the armchair as soon as the warden sat. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Leeds opened a file in front of her. “Ms. Lane, you have assembled one of the finest records I’ve ever seen in the system. In only two years with us, you’ve been credited with revitalizing our adult education process and taught a number of very productive classes for our unfortunate ladies. Since you arrived, we’ve had sixty-three graduates receive their high school equivalency diplomas, nine who have completed bachelor’s degrees in various majors, and two who have earned master’s degrees. You’ve also enlisted the aid of over a dozen inmates in your endeavor, almost all of whom have improved their own records in remarkable fashion. I almost hate for you to leave us.” She shut the folder and smiled at Lois again. “And while it’s not in your official record, I know that you talked at least three different women who planned to take their own lives down from that decision. I cannot commend you enough for the grit and resiliency you’ve shown all of us. Your example will shine on in this institution for years, and the women you’ve helped during your stay will benefit the most when they gain their respective releases.”

Lois was uncomfortable with the praise. No volume of good works she could perform would ever balance the scales for her ex-husband, the crap-eating rat snake, and all the evil he’d visited on the world.

But, as her grandmother had told her long ago, you got to bloom where you’re planted.

“Thank you, Mrs. Leeds. I hope someone can continue the classes here.”

“Oh, I can promise you that they’ll continue. I’ve just received word that the Bryan State Community College will take over the administration of the classes you’ve set up, and they plan to add more as soon as there’s enough interest. I’ve always believed that we need to show these women how to live outside the corrections system, not just tell them to obey the law when they get out. With your fine example before them, I think we’re going to have a model system that other wardens will want to copy. You’ll end up helping more than just the women in Bryan.”

Lois drew her body inward and shifted uncomfortably in the chair. “Again, thank you. May I ask when my release will be complete?”

“I have the paperwork right here.” Mrs. Leeds opened a second folder and frowned at it. “No, that’s not right,” she murmured.

Lois froze and panicked at the same instant. She wasn’t getting out! They were just playing with her! They were going to keep her locked up like a performing seal and bring her out to

show her off when—

“That’s next week’s grocery requisitions. Ah, here we are.”

Mrs. Leeds opened a third folder and turned it around to show Lois, who finally remembered to inhale. “If you’ll just sign at the bottom where it says ‘Inmate Signature,’ you’ll be ready to walk out as soon as your suitcase is packed and you change out of your prison gray into your street clothes. Here’s a pen.”

Lois closed her eyes for a moment and got her breathing under control. She was getting out! They were really going to let her leave! She could go—

Where?

Wherever she wanted, as long as she obeyed the law. This was a release, not a parole. Her sentence was complete and she’d served the minimum with the rest discounted for good behavior. There would be no restrictions on her actions beyond those attached to any convicted felon. She’d paid her debt to society and was free to do as she wished.

Once again she questioned the wisdom of taking the plea deal the prosecutor had dangled before her. Two to five years in minimum security, he’d told her, or take your chances with a jury right after her ex-husband had been sentenced to death. It was a slam dunk for the government, he’d said. Juries are unpredictable, he’d told her. Take the deal or risk hard time until she was nearly eligible for retirement, he’d threatened. Her attorney, a green public defender on his second case, had reluctantly advised her to accept.

She’d taken the deal. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. Now? Not so much.

In theory, she could go anywhere she wanted as soon as she walked outside the prison walls. In practice, her choices were limited. She had no transportation, no money other than the maximum federal release stipend of five hundred dollars, no job prospects, no resume, and no one waiting for her. She could apply to a halfway house or for other post-release assistance, but she didn’t want to unless she had no other choices.

And maybe she didn’t have any other choices. She was alone with a cheap dress, a small suitcase, a few basic makeup items, a hairbrush, a travel bottle of shampoo, a toothbrush and small tube of toothpaste, and two changes of underwear. Not much to show for doing the right thing.

She mentally shook herself. So you’re alone! What else did you expect? You can’t be surprised by all this!

The pen didn’t wobble as she signed the last of the paperwork.

“Thank you, Ms. Lane. And even though you didn’t ask, I can tell you that your application to have your criminal record expunged is being processed by the US Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals.” Mrs. Leeds lifted a thin binder. “And I’m going to personally submit this addendum to your application detailing your good works and even better results to the court. I can’t promise you what they’ll decide, of course, but my affidavit does carry a bit of weight, and your prospects look very good.”

Lois smiled thinly. “Thank you. If that’s all, I’d like to see the outside of these walls as soon as I’m allowed.”

Mrs. Leeds stood and shook Lois’ hand again. “Of course. If you want to wait for the bus, we’ll give you a ride into town. Bryan, Texas may not be Metropolis, but I’m reliably informed that it beats a cot in this institution all to pieces, whatever that means.”

Lois had hoped that Corrections Officer Janice would not be the one to open the prison door for her. Officer Janice was one of the guards who, despite working at a minimum security facility, liked to rule the inmates under her “care” with an iron fist. She was quick to use her baton and slow to listen. Lois had earned a modicum of trust from some of the other tough guards there, but according to the wardroom buzz, Janice hadn’t so much as smiled around any of the inmates since she’d joined the staff five years

earlier.

Lois had never heard if Janice was the woman’s first name or last. And she refused to risk putting the question to her.

And, of course, Corrections Officer Janice’s was the last face Lois saw as she trudged out of the main gate to board the bus to town. The guard sneered at her and muttered, “We won’t see you here again, honey. Next time you screw up it’ll be Leavenworth or something worse.”

Lois avoided Janice’s gaze and nodded. “Yes, ma’am,” she muttered. “I understand.”

She refused to give the sadistic harpy any excuse to delay those final few steps to freedom.

Officer Janice glared at the top of Lois’ bent head, then pulled the door open and stood close by. She didn’t speak as Lois passed her, but she did growl low in her throat, much like a leopard guarding a fresh kill.

Not until the door clanged shut behind her did Lois release the breath she’d been holding.

The bus looked empty as she walked toward it. Bryan, and the prison near it, were in south Texas, and the early summer temperature was already past eighty despite the late morning hour.

She stopped at the door, hoping the driver would show up soon. The bus was uncomfortable at any time, and the longer it sat in the sun the higher the internal temperature would climb. The only relief was what the inmates called “twenty by fifty cooling,” meaning all twenty of the windows open as the bus raced down the highway at its maximum speed of fifty miles per hour. She’d get to town with her hair windblown and—

“Hey! Need a ride?”

The voice came from the behind her, near the back of the bus. She turned her head and glimpsed a tall man leaning against the rear fender. “I have a ride, thanks.”

The man chuckled and the sound tickled her memory. “Yeah, but I doubt they plan to stop at Arby’s for you. I hear the jamocha milk shakes there are terrific.”

Jamocha shakes?

She looked closer. It – it couldn’t be!

Maybe – maybe it could—

Her feet took a shaky step on their own. “Clark? Is – is that you?”

“None other than Clark Kent himself, the man, the myth, the legend.”

“But – but you’re not supposed to be here! You gave me your word!”

He tilted his head to one side. “I gave you my word that I wouldn’t come to see you in prison. I didn’t. You’re no longer in prison, so here I am.”

“But – you – I – how did you know—”

He laughed. “I did some checking on your release date, and I just happened to be in the area today, so I decided to drop in.”

Lois didn’t know whether to laugh with him or snarl at him. “You – you just happened to be in the area?”

“Yep. Hey, the offer of a ride is still open.”

She gestured vaguely at the bus. “I – as soon as the driver shows up, I’ll have a ride.”

“Ah, but not like this.” He waved at her to follow him and walked behind the bus.

Lois hesitated. If he were an illusion, an hallucination, she didn’t want to know, didn’t want him to disappear before her eyes. But – he sounded so real! If he were really there she wanted to see him, to touch him, to lean against his firm frame—

His head appeared around the rear of the bus. “You coming or staying?”

Okay, maybe he was real. And she had to see what was over there. A limo, maybe? Or just a luxury car?

She all but raced around the corner and saw it.

The blue-trimmed Mustang II. The Farrah Special.

The car glistened in the sunlight, as sleek and spotless as the day Lois had first seen it. "Oh!" she cried. "She's still so beautiful!"

Clark stepped to the passenger door and opened it with a flourish. "Your chariot awaits, Madame. As does your midday repast at the restaurant of your choice."

She tottered toward the car, then changed direction and grabbed Clark in a bear hug. She laughed through sobs as he returned her embrace and patted her on the back. "It's okay, Lois. I'm here. I'll stay here until you tell me to go away."

Without looking at him, she said, "Please don't go! Please stay!"

He spoke as if his voice were velvet. "I'll stay. I promise." His hesitant hand stroked her hair twice as if he were afraid she'd get spooked and run. "Are you hungry?"

She nodded without letting go of him.

He stood, holding her steady, anchoring her in reality and fantasy all at once, until he chuckled and said, "I can't drive with you latched on to me like a lamprey."

She laughed, then stepped back and slapped his massive chest once. He offered her a handkerchief and she blew her nose with it. "I want to drive! I want to see if she'll hit warp ten and hold it on the highway!"

He smiled. "Sorry, but no. Your driver's license is no longer valid, so I will have to chauffeur you around until you get legal."

"Don't tempt me, flatfoot. You might end up with a long-term assignment." She slid into the bucket seat and adjusted it as Clark all but skipped to the other side. She buckled her seat belt and leaned back against the leather headrest. "Ohh, I could really get used to this."

His eyes felt good on her. She could get used to that, too, she mused.

As Clark turned the key and the engine purred to life, she said, "You know, we heard some stuff about Superman on the inside. Seems like he's a real goody-two-shoes kind of guy."

He shifted into first and accelerated smoothly. "Boots."

"Huh?"

"Superman wears these calf-high red boots. And a bright blue body suit, red cape, and a stylized capital 'S' in a yellow and red emblem on his chest." He shook his head and shifted gears. "His mother made it for him."

"His mother – you're kidding – wait, no you're not, of course you're not kidding."

"Nope."

"Wow. She must be a really wonderful lady." Lois let out a long sigh and stretched out her legs. "I'd like to meet her someday."

"She'd like to meet you, too."

He hit third gear. If she hadn't seen him shift, she might not have felt it. Her voice squeaked a little. "Really? She wants to – to meet me?"

He grinned and glanced over at her. "She said she wants to meet the woman I've been talking about for two years, because anyone I fixate on for that long has to be a good person."

Her eyes shifted to the brush beside the road. "I don't know about that."

She barely felt him shift to the top gear as he answered. "You'll have to let her be the judge of that. Assuming, of course, that you want to meet her."

Lois watched the ground roll past for a few moments, then said, "Does she still live in Smallville?"

"Yep. I don't know that I could move her out of that house if I tried. She loves it there. Says there are too many good memories for her to leave now."

Good memories, she thought. I could use some. "Any good job prospects up there for a former jailbird?"

He grinned without looking at her. "A few. I can check around

if you'd like. I'm pretty sure the local community college has a few openings on their faculty."

She cut her eyes at him. "Sounds like you've been checking up on me."

He lifted one hand in a "not-me" gesture. "Hey, I'm just trying to let you know what your options are. The teaching thing assumes, of course, that you don't decide to get a jump on all those literary vultures and write your own story for publication. And, I have been assured, for a very nice profit." He chuckled and eased into a curve. "That would teach those fumble-fingered loose-with-the-facts clowns not to mess with Lois Lane."

Of course. She could write her own story, tell the truth her way, let people know that despite being a fool and an idiot and a blind squirrel that couldn't find an acorn, she'd managed to help bring down the biggest criminal enterprise of the last half-century. They'd learn about Lex, how he'd threatened everyone around her, how he'd had Lucy murdered, how he'd beaten her and cowed her and—

Enough of that! she told herself. You can check into a Motel 6 until your money runs out or you can meet Clark's mom and get a job there and write in your spare time. Maybe you could get a big enough advance to pay rent to Mrs. Kent, assuming they could get along together.

The decision all but made itself. "All right, Clark, Smallville it is."

The car jiggled on the road for an instant, then straightened. "Sorry. You surprised me a little by agreeing so quickly." Then his brow drew down and he sounded worried. "You mean that? You're not just agreeing because you think I want you to?"

"No, I want to meet her. She sounds really nice. And I think it would be good for me to spend some time around as few people as possible for a while."

He blew out a long breath. "I'm glad to hear you say that. And I need to confess that I did have another motive for picking you up at the front gate."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Seems that I'm not the only one who heard about your release. The feds wouldn't let the press come to the prison to talk to you, so there are a dozen or more reporters and authors and TV news anchors waiting to ambush you in town as soon as you step off the bus. I plan to take you around the town on some back roads to the north side for lunch."

She looked at him and smiled. "Once again, you've saved me from a terrible fate. That's getting to be a habit with you."

"Not a bad habit, I hope."

She took his hand from the shifter and squeezed it gently. "Not bad at all. Hey, what about all the time you're missing from your job?"

He smiled. "It's so like you to be concerned about me. I'm really deeply affected."

"Ha-ha and hardy-har-har. Wait, I think I broke a rib laughing. No, really what about it? You're still a Metro detective, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I'm on a leave of absence for the next seven weeks. I went undercover for almost a year after we last saw each other – it was an investigation into Intergang, one you actually pointed us to with your testimony – and they weren't too happy when I took the witness stand in open court. There were some threats made, one guy tried to ambush me with a knife about a month ago, and I took a bomb out of Farrah last week. So my boss sent me out of town to keep me out of Intergang's crosshairs."

Lois took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm glad you found that bomb. I wouldn't have liked it if they'd wrecked Farrah."

He gave her a mock-angry glare. "As I said, your concern for me is most touching."

"Like you were in any danger." She sat up and looked around.

“So where is this fabled Arby’s you mentioned? And it better have Jamocha shakes!”

“I checked yesterday. They have them. Curly fries, too.”

“Good. I’m getting hungry. You’d better find it quick or you might lose a couple of fingers.”

He laughed. “Give me fifteen minutes and you shall feast, milady.”

She released his hand and leaned back again. The prison where she’d spent the last two years was a minimum security facility, one with no solitary confinement and no real punishments. Four women had misbehaved badly enough to be transferred to other facilities while Lois had served her sentence. Those who remained and followed the rules were given privileges not available at other prisons.

But it was still a prison. The inmates still had few real liberties. She had still been confined against her will.

No longer.

She was riding with a police detective from Metropolis, but not because she was under arrest or because he was protecting her life. It was her choice. He made it an easy choice, sure, but he hadn’t tried to force her or coerce her or even convince her to make it. He’d simply presented himself and his beautiful car to her and allowed her to make her own call.

Compared to the last seven years of her life, with her marriage to Lex, her prison time, and not counting the previous trip with Clark, this was truly paradise.

“How long before we get to your mom’s place?”

“Hmm. I think we’d better plan on one overnight stop. Oklahoma City is about halfway there by time and distance, so that would be a good place. Plus there are some nice hotels there.”

“Great.” She thought for a moment, then hesitantly asked, “Uh – would you mind – would it be a problem if – if we had separate rooms?”

“No, not at all. I thought you’d want that anyway.”

“It’s not because I don’t trust you, Clark, or anything like – I just – I need to be alone tonight.”

“Not a problem. You can even pick the floor this time, assuming they have an empty room there.”

She smiled, then laughed with him. He was as wonderful as her memories had insisted he was. It was going to be a good trip.

Maybe – just maybe – she still had a chance at a good life. And maybe – just maybe – that life would include Clark Kent in some way.

She smiled to herself as she suddenly remembered the story of Jacob and Rachel from the Old Testament. Because of the deal he’d made with her dad to marry her, Jacob had spent fourteen years as Rachel’s father’s partner in a sheep ranch, and because he loved her so much the time had just flown by. If she’d known that the past two years would end with her riding beside Clark in his car again, those years would have seemed like just a few days.

She found herself thinking about the seven weeks Clark had said were left in his leave time. And that he’d planned to spend it in Smallville.

Where she would be.

A tear of joy slid down her cheek. She captured it with her fingertip and looked at it as if it were the first one of her life.

No. It was the first one of her new life. She hoped it would be the first of many, many more.

THE END