

The End of the Road

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Rated PG-13 (violence)

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Summary: Clark and Lois continue to develop their friendship while each of them denies any romantic attachment to the other, all while Lois' relationship with Lex Luthor and Clark's relationship with Rebecca Connors continue to develop unevenly. The third story in the author's *Road* trilogy.

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.

The End Of The Road is the third story in the author's *Road* trilogy, including the stories *The Road Taken* (first volume) and *Further Down The Road* (second volume). This trilogy is not to be confused with several other excellent long-form multi-part stories featuring the word or the concept of "Road" in either the title or the narrative.

I want to give a shout-out to my three hard-working betas. In no particular order, they are shallowford, Iolanthealias, and Darth Michael. The good things in the story are partly their doing, and if it's a bad thing, I probably ignored their wise counsel. And I must also recognize my excellent and highly skilled GE, Marcelle. If you are fortunate enough to have a story assigned to her, listen to what she says because she's brilliant! Thanks, all of you!

Chapter One

Lex pulled the throttle back and slipped into the tiny island's harbor. "The shore drops off fairly quickly here, and it can be difficult to climb up from the water when the tide is this low. How close do we need to get to the island for you to stay dry?"

Clark leaned over the side railing and eyeballed the distance. "Six feet closer would be better."

"Done," Lex replied. He slowly turned the boat so that the stern pointed at land. He backed the boat up several feet, then shut down the motor. "Any closer and we risk damaging the screws against the rocks. Can you make that jump?"

"I think so. Hand me a rope in case I fall in."

"Sailors refer to 'ropes' as 'lines.'"

Clark tilted his head and grimaced. "Then hand me a 'line,' please."

Lex gave him one end of a line, the other end of which was secured to a cleat in the stern. Clark climbed up to the stern railing on the launch and got his balance, then leaned forward and pushed towards the land. He jumped the twelve-foot distance with four feet to spare.

Lex nodded as Clark secured the launch to a rock. "Impressive leap, Clark. I believe your powers are coming back."

"Not as quickly as I'd like."

Lex shrugged. "One cannot disregard either the laws of physics or our own physical limits with impunity."

"Superman does it all the time."

"Superman is a very special case. You should endeavor to emulate him."

Clark almost grinned. "Toss me Lois' swimsuit, please. I'm sure she's ready for it by now."

Lex turned and grabbed the suit from the seat cushion in the stern. "Please don't peek while she's changing."

Clark caught the wad of fabric and turned to climb the slope to the island's peak. "As if I'd survive a stunt like that. Be right back."

Lex watched Clark scramble up the rocky incline and marveled at his agility. He was close to death not two hours ago, thought Lex, and now he's fitter than I ever was.

Lex shook his head and turned away. There was something he needed to do, something that at the moment even Superman couldn't do. Something that his guilt in allowing Nigel St. John so much access to, influence over, and control of LexCorp's executive suites all but demanded that he do.

He had to take care of Arianna Carlin Luthor.

And he had just the tools to perform that job.

Clark stopped just below the lip of the small depression which topped the island. "Lois? Are you up there?"

"Yeah," she called out. "Don't come up just yet."

"Okay. I have your swimsuit with me. Are you coming to get it or should I toss it up to you?"

"Just toss it over the edge. I'll come get it."

"Okay." His hook shot would have been true from mid-court, he mused. "Hey, why can't I come up there?"

"Because I'm sunning myself. I really need the energy."

"So? You're sitting in the sun?"

"Maximum solar exposure, Clark."

"What?"

He could tell from the tone of her voice that she was embarrassed. "The more skin I can expose to the sun, the faster I can recharge."

He grinned. "I see. Or, rather, I don't see, but I understand."

Her embarrassment segued into exasperation. "Yes, Clark, I was sunbathing naked. Are you happy now?"

He shook his head. "Only if you are, Lois."

He listened as she grunted and skidded and wrestled her way into her swimsuit. Finally, her head appeared over the lip of the island's top. "My powers aren't recharged yet. I used up just about everything I had to get this far. Can you give me a hand getting down?"

"No problem." He looked to his left and pointed. "I think the footing is better over here. It's not as steep a drop."

"Thanks." She scrambled down the grade with little trouble and grabbed his hand to steady herself. Then she looked directly into his face. "I'm sorry about Rebecca, Clark. I really hope she'll be okay."

He felt his face darken despite his attempt to control himself. "So do I."

Clark got to the bottom of the incline just in time to catch Lois and keep her from falling into the water. "Thanks," she muttered.

"You're welcome." He reached down to release the line from its impromptu mooring and stopped to listen as Lex spoke over the radio.

"That is an affirmative. Operation Omega Alpha Gamma Lambda. Execute. I say again, execute. No delay. Over."

The speaker crackled to life. "Confirm operation Omega Alpha Gamma Lambda. Over."

"Confirmed. Authorization two-gamma-eight-one-zero-echo."

"Two-gamma-eight-one-zero-echo confirmed. Hermes base out."

"Zeus is ten-four and ten-ten. Out."

Clark glanced at Lois and sent, -* Did you hear that? *-

-* Yes. *-

-* Know what it means? *-

-* No idea. Why? What's the problem? *-

Instead of sending a response, Clark jumped into the boat and turned to lend a hand to Lois, who leaped aboard nimbly. When she was safely aboard, he coiled the line and stowed it below the cleat at the stern. "We're clear of the shore, Lex."

"Good. I estimate that we should reach the harbor in fifty minutes, plus ten to fifteen more to maneuver to the LexCorp docks." Lex looked back and asked, "Are you both ready to go?"

"More than ready," sighed Lois. "Get us out of here."

Lex turned over the engine and started it, then guided the boat out of the rocky harbor and pushed the throttles all the way up. The resulting roar made Lois flinch and cover her ears. "Ow!" she yelled. "Why didn't you warn me?"

Clark looked at her and shook his head.

"Why didn't you tell me that my powers would come back before my control did?"

Clark shook his head and touched his ear. -* Can't hear you, Lois, *- he sent. -* The motor's too loud. *-

-* The stupid motor's so loud that I — Oh. Ha and ha. Not to mention chuckle, guffaw, and chortle. You need a new joke writer. The one you've got is terrible. *-

-* Sorry. To tell you the truth, I didn't warn you because I don't have to re-learn my control. I guess your powers work a little different than mine do. *-

-* Yeah, flaunt your heritage at me! Make fun of the mere human girl! *-

He grinned at her. -* Why don't you try to get some rest, lay back in the sun? *-

-* That's my plan, farm boy. Don't disturb me until we get close to land. *-

Clark nodded and stood, then made his way to the cockpit of the small boat where Lex was holding the wheel as they cut through the slight chop. He looked at Clark and smiled. "The surface is flat enough to run the craft at full throttle, but she'll have to be serviced when we get back. There may be some dents in the hull and the engines will probably have to be rebuilt."

"If you say so. Remember, Kansas doesn't have very many large bodies of water. I don't have much experience on deep-water boats."

"I understand. May I ask you a personal question?"

Clark hesitated a moment, then nodded again. "Sure."

"Do you plan to retrieve that sample of green crystal from the ocean?"

Clark blinked. That question hadn't even been on his radar, much less on the list of things Lex might ask him. "No. Besides the danger of drowning I'd be in if I did find it underwater, I don't know exactly where it is, and it's extremely unlikely that anyone could find it out there. I'm pretty sure Arianna Carlin won't think to go get it, even if she knew where it—"

Suddenly it hit him. Alpha Gamma Lambda, the letters of the Greek alphabet corresponding to the English letters A, C, and L — there is no Greek letter C and Gamma was the third letter. ACL was Arianna Carlin Luthor.

He suddenly realized that Lex was staring at him. "What's wrong?" Lex asked. "Did you forget something?"

"No, I haven't forgotten anything. But I just realized something." He leaned closer to Lex and spoke with more force. "You've done something, started something with Arianna Carlin, haven't you? Who were you talking to when we got here? What did you tell them to do?"

Lex checked the boat's heading and made a slight correction. "That conversation was not for your ears."

"Really? Remember that I've got great hearing! If the boat weren't roaring so loudly, I'd hear your heart beating faster, wouldn't I? You've done something. What is it?"

Lex sighed. "I don't want to involve either of you."

Clark goggled at him. "It's a little late for that, don't you

think? We were involved when Nigel came aboard your boat to kill us! Now tell me what you've done!"

Lex' head snapped around and his eyes flashed. "I am no criminal to be harassed by an out-of-uniform superhero! I will not be commanded while on my own property!"

"You don't own the ocean!"

"I own this boat and I am captain, by both statute and precedent! You cannot order me to do anything!"

Lois' hand snaked between them and pulled the throttles back. "You boys are interrupting my beauty nap. Either of you want to tell me what the problem is?"

Clark glared at Lex for a moment as if challenging him to speak, but Lex only set his lips in a firm line and returned the glare. Finally, Clark crossed his arms and said, "He's started something with Arianna Carlin, some kind of operation. Someone from LexCorp is going after her."

Lois' eyes widened and her jaw dropped. "What? Lex, are you nuts? That's a job for the police, not your security people!"

Without looking away from Clark, Lex replied, "My people are all former military, former law enforcement, or former mercenaries, and they are quite well-trained in all aspects of small-arms operations. They can handle whatever security Arianna might have around her."

"It doesn't matter! You're not the cops and your people have no authority to make arrests! What do you—"

She stopped talking and her eyes widened. Clark frowned as he tried to follow her reasoning, then the same conclusion came to him. "Your people are going in with guns blazing, aren't they?" he demanded. "They have orders to kill her, not capture her!"

Lex huffed. "Of course they have no such orders! I doubt that they would obey orders such as those even if I were foolish enough to issue them. They are to capture and hold Arianna and anyone else found with her for the police, preferably without any injuries and definitely without anyone dying." He turned to Lois and glared at her. "I would have believed that you, of all people, would not think me so petty and vindictive. My only goal is to put a stop to her depredations, not to become an armed vigilante."

Lois put her hands on her hips and took a breath to respond, but Clark lifted one hand. "Wait a minute. You already had this plan in place, didn't you? All you had to do was tell your people to execute it." Clark shook his head. "I suppose you have contingency plans in place for any number of situations, don't you?"

Lex froze to the deck with his mouth partly open. Before he could respond, Lois asked, "Do you have any plans for Ultra Woman or Superman?"

Lex' mouth snapped shut and he took a deep breath. He let it out slowly and inhaled again, then said, "Yes. I do."

"What are they?" Lois demanded.

"Lois, my dear, I'm not certain that this is the right place or time to—"

"I'm making it the right place and the right time. Tell me what you had in store for us."

Lex sighed and looked over the prow of the boat. "At first, the plan was to discover some weakness of Superman's and hold it at the ready in case he — you, Clark — turned out to be less than you were advertised. Later, the plan was revised to present you with a refuge if you were somehow injured. That plan was later expanded to offer the same refuge to Ultra Woman should she become incapacitated."

Lois nodded, apparently mollified. Clark leaned forward. "What caused you to change your mind about me?"

Lex still didn't look at Clark as he answered. "The growing body of evidence that your self-ordained purpose was to help people in trouble. I had my staff compile dossiers on both Superman and Ultra Woman, and we were unable to discover a

single instance where either of you had acted in obvious self-interest or against the public safety.”

Lois crossed her arms. “How about that, Clark? We don’t act in obvious self-interest.”

Clark caught a twinkle in the other man’s eye as he responded. “That is true. But, after reviewing the logs of each of your public appearances, we also decided that Ultra Woman either had anger issues or suffered from periodic bouts of something akin to PMS.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth hung open. “You — you what?”

Clark chuckled. “Lois, you do tend to handle the bad guys a little roughly sometimes.”

Her jaws snapped shut and her eyes narrowed. “Oh, really? Well, I think you two can just swim back!”

She spun and marched to the stern of the boat with a huff. Clark lifted one eyebrow at Lex and said, “Well played, sir.”

Lex’ eyes twinkled again and he let out a long breath, then pushed the throttles forward to their stops. “Thank you. I wasn’t sure that I would not be swimming in fact as well as in her wishes.”

“Yeah, right after you accused her of being hormonal? That was either dumb or very cagey, and I’m inclined to think the latter.”

Lex’ smile dimmed. “It was for the sake of my own ego, I admit. Nigel’s perfidy will have far-reaching consequences.”

“Like that operation you kicked off a few minutes ago?”

Lex turned to face Clark’s bland expression. “I hoped you had been deflected from that little detail.”

“Not likely. You want to tell me what’s going on?”

Lex took a deep breath and said, “I would rather not. The less you and Lois know about what is going to happen in regards to Arianna, the safer you will be. Should something go amiss, there will be legal and business repercussions, and I would prefer not to drag either of you down with me.”

“You’re going to have legal problems whatever happens, don’t you think? You’re a civilian, not a law enforcement agency.”

“Do you recall Ross Perot of EDS sending his security people into a hostile foreign nation some years ago and effecting a hostage rescue? Should my operation succeed, that is how it will be spun in the media and to the police. My people really are trying to capture Arianna, not execute her.”

Clark shrugged. “Okay, I give. But I want an interview with you about this operation, no matter which way it goes.”

Lex appeared to consider Clark’s proposal, then nodded. “Very well. My only condition is that you take whatever time you require to see to Rebecca. If she — when she awakens after her surgery, she will need to see a sympathetic face.”

“That goes without saying.” Clark looked out over the water. “How much longer before we make port?”

Lex checked the instrument panel. “I estimate arrival in port in approximately forty minutes, depending on the traffic on the harbor at the time.”

“So we should get there before dark?”

“Easily.”

“Good. Thanks.”

Clark sat back and studied the waves they were currently skipping across. He’d been unable to prevent Nigel from shooting Rebecca. He’d been helpless when it became obvious that she wouldn’t survive the boat trip back to shore. And he’d had to allow Lois, in her depleted state, to carry her to Metropolis Hospital.

Would Rebecca survive? If she did, would she blame him for her injuries? Would she renew her declaration of love or would she fear the thought of him for the rest of her life?

The biggest question — to him, at least — was how he felt

about her. He did care for her. He liked her a lot. She was brilliant, hard-working, stunningly attractive, quick-minded, and utterly fearless. On top of all that, she claimed to love him without reservation. He hadn’t needed her last-minute avowal of love to know that. No, she loved him.

But he didn’t know if he loved her, nor did he know if her love was like Lana’s had been, unreserved and pure and complete. He wondered if his life would be better with her or without her in it.

Then he mentally berated himself. Lana had loved him, that was undeniable, but they’d had some serious issues in their time together, both before and after they’d married. Her almost pathological need for financial security had caused friction between them, and her tendency to grab control of whatever situation she was in caused more. It would take some time to list all of her virtues, but it would take a similar amount of time to list her faults. Of course, he could say that about anyone, including himself.

One thing at a time, he told himself. First we get to shore. After that, he’d visit the hospital and find out if there was still a choice for him to make. Then he’d find out how Lex’ little operation was going.

As highly as he thought of her, he was beginning to believe that, while Rebecca was a wonderful person who loved him very much, she might not be someone he should consider marrying. What kind of life might they have together? She was as committed to her career as he was to his, and she hadn’t given him any indication that she might moderate her commitment in any way. And she hadn’t had time to factor his secret identity into her view of their relationship. That might change things completely for both of them.

No, he thought, it definitely will change things.

He felt a nudge in his mind. -* Clark? Be strong, okay? Be strong for her. For all of us. We need you. And I’ll be here for you no matter what *-

A smile grew on his face. Lois was very good at reassuring him. He sent a wave of gratitude to her, then sent, -* Thanks, Lois. You’re a good friend. *-

He felt a soft flow of warmth from her, then she gently closed the link. Probably giving me some privacy, he thought.

He was going to need it. His thoughts at that moment weren’t for public consumption.

Chapter Two

Randy Lefleur, LexCorp’s director of security, was worried. The operation his boss had ordered was well-planned, but three of the ten people on the assault team had not participated in the most recent live exercise with the rest of the team. They were good, he knew, but it didn’t matter how good an officer was if he stepped unaware into his buddy’s line of fire. And the last live exercise had been five months before, which was plenty of time to forget any little details. Not to mention that the original plan called for an early morning jump-off, not a start time in the middle of the afternoon.

The briefing had been almost too quick and too easy. His people hadn’t asked many questions about the mission, which either meant that they were ready or that they didn’t know enough to ask good questions. It wasn’t apparent which was the case. Randy hoped it was the former but feared that it was the latter.

And Randy didn’t know if the target had upgraded her security in the upstate New Troy complex since the most recent report was filed, nor did he know if more people than the three bodyguards armed only with pistols were protecting the target. All in all, it made for a dangerous mission and a recipe for complete disaster if he wasn’t extremely careful.

Randy took center point and waved a two-person team around to the left side of the house, away from the four-car

garage. He motioned for the four-person fire cover team to take up positions overlooking the right and back sides of the house. The other three spread out to cover the front of the building and the front of the garage.

Now the only ways for Arianna Carlin to leave the house were to surrender to them or to die in a shoot-out. And Randy desperately wanted to avoid a firefight. He'd seen too many operations just like this one during his FBI days which had gone south in a hurry, and every time that had happened someone had gotten hurt.

Sometimes some of the good guys died, too.

He looked at his watch and spoke into the microphone beside his mouth. "This is Team Leader. Communications check. Sound off in order."

"Team one, check."

"Team two, check."

"Team three, check."

"I copy all teams. Team one, any movement?"

"Negative. No action."

"Team two, anything to report?"

"There's a gardener in the back yard raking leaves. Older man, dressed in worn overalls and floppy hat, does not appear to be armed. Nothing else that I can see."

"Team three?"

"Far garage door is open. I can see a late-model dark blue Corvette Stingray facing outward but no movement."

"Roger, three. Anything upstairs?"

"Negative — wait. Movement at one of — correction, two adjoining windows on the top floor. Looks like curtains being pulled back."

That wasn't a good sign, thought Randy. "Hold positions, repeat, hold positions. Watch those windows. Everybody look for any movement or anything out of the ordinary."

Beth-Ann was irritated. The movement sensors on the estate grounds had been triggered again. She hadn't liked this new addition to the security net, since they could be set off by deer coming to feed or even large birds flying low over the grounds. And if she was on duty, it was her job to check the outdoor cameras to determine what was moving.

Nighttime was the worst. She hated getting up in the middle of the night because Bambi wanted a late-night snack. And she hated having to go outside and shoo them away because it messed up her sleep cycle. Dr. Carlin was jealous of her privacy, even from the local wildlife. Even though this was late afternoon and Beth-Ann hadn't been awakened from a deep sleep, she still didn't like it.

Beth-Ann checked the sensor grid. Funny, she thought, it looks like the deer have us surrounded today. Maybe they're just —

No. The sensors had all been tripped at about the same time. Deer didn't move in formation like that. She flicked on the video monitors and looked for wildlife.

No deer. No foxes sneaking around the grounds, no birds diving on snakes in the grass, no nothing.

Her attention snapped to a dark outline which looked like a pile of leaves with a stick poking out of it. The stick didn't quite look natural — it was too straight and even. She dialed the lens in for a closer look.

The stick was not a stick. It was the barrel of an assault rifle.

She reached down and pressed the silent alert. She knew that two other women and two men in the house, all with good marksmanship skills and the willingness to use them, would take up positions in the house within moments. They'd check in over the intercom as soon as they were ready.

Beth-Ann began going through the camera feeds in order. She counted five — no, six bundles of fake leaves with rifles ringing

the house. And surely that wasn't all of them. Someone had them surrounded, and whoever was out there hadn't come to sell them Girl Scout cookies. They were outnumbered and maybe outgunned. It was time for her to earn her generous salary.

She pressed another button. "Dr. Carlin? We have a serious problem."

Randy keyed his microphone again. "This is Team Leader. Anybody see any more movement?"

"Team two. The gardener just dropped his rake and hustled to the back door. I think they know we're here, boss."

Great. Just great. That was all they needed. Almost any position could be defended against an attacking force at least twice the size of the defending force if the defenders knew the attackers were coming, and this house was designed and built to be defended. He didn't know how many armed defenders were in the house, he didn't know how they were armed, and worst of all he didn't know how they'd been spotted. Now they'd lost the element of surprise, and alert defenders were three times more dangerous than if they hadn't been alerted to the assault.

He switched frequencies and keyed the mic once more. "Base, this is Assault Team Leader. We have lost the element of surprise. Repeat, the target is awake and ready. Request permission to withdraw."

He waited ten seconds, then called again. "Base, this is Assault Team Leader. Do you copy this transmission?"

"Roger, Team Leader, we copy. Stand by."

Stand by? He needed to get his people out of danger right now, not wait for some desk jockey to decide what he should do. This operation had all the makings of something going bad very quickly, and he didn't want the responsibility for any more serious injuries or deaths on his conscience.

He made a decision. "Base! This is Team Leader! I am aborting this mission and withdrawing all personnel. Repeat, I am aborting this mission and—"

"Ah, negative, Team Leader, negative. Zeus Leader is out of contact. Hold your position and stand by."

"No, you idiot! They know we're here and they're ready! I don't want—"

A single rifle shot rang out from one of the windows in the upper story of the house. Randy looked up but couldn't see where it had come from or where it had been aimed, and before he could switch frequencies to call to his team leaders, at least four of his people opened up on the house.

Each of the shooters aimed his or her military-grade M16 and sent two three-round bursts of fire on the target, just as they'd been trained. When the bullets stopped flying, the second front window from the garage side of the house on the upper level had been reduced to glass fragments and shredded wood chips.

He finally got the frequency switch set correctly. "Cease fire! Repeat, cease fire! Move back and take cover!"

"Boss!" called a frantic voice. "Denise is hit! They shot Denise!"

"Get a hold of yourself! Team leaders, check your people now and report in! Everybody else get off the comm net! And stay off!"

He sensed as much as he heard his people shuffling backwards away from the house. Some would shift behind trees, some into natural hollows in the ground, and the team on the side away from the garage would slide behind a low decorative stone wall. Silence descended on the grounds as he waited for a report.

"Team Leader, this is Team One. No casualties."

"Team Leader, this is Team Three. No casualties."

Another long moment, then a third voice said, "Team Leader, this is Team Two. One casualty."

Randy keyed his mic. "Status?"

The silence stretched out again. "Officer is — is dead."

No.

He keyed the mic again. "Confirm last message, Team Two."

There was a pause, then, "Message confirmed. Bio-sensors read no activity. Officer is dead."

He'd lost another person. Denise something, one of the new people on the team, one who'd asked no questions during the briefing, one who'd exuded a steely confidence and nodded at each of Randy's points. She'd been young and focused, stern and determined, clear-eyed and eager to do her job.

Now she was dead. And he didn't even remember her last name.

He decided he'd weep for her privately.

Beth-Ann Reynolds was furious. She almost ripped the headset off and threw it across the room, but instead shouted into the pickup. "Everybody move back and take cover! Now! And check in when you're secure!"

She waited, fuming. She knew, without being told, who had fired the first shot from the house. It was that slightly crazy guy who Nigel was training to be his personal assassin. Paul Snider was a dead shot with a scoped rifle and murderously effective with a knife in close, but he could barely hit the floor with a pistol in his hand. Beth-Ann thought it had something to do with his eagerness to kill someone, anyone, and because of his attitude she'd objected to placing him at the house. But Nigel had wanted his skill with a rifle available to defend Dr. Carlin should it become necessary.

She'd hoped that the people out there were police officers, because they had rules to obey and procedures to follow. Police officers would have reacted to a single shot by moving backwards and trying to open negotiations. But these guys had started shooting right away and clobbered Snider's position without a word or a phone call. And they hadn't opened up with everything they had, shooting wildly all over the house. They'd targeted the shooter's location and stopped shooting after hitting it.

They were well-trained and disciplined. That meant that they were paramilitary, probably mercenaries hired to assault the house and eliminate its occupants. She didn't know who they were, but it had to be someone or something important. Maybe Intergang had decided to stop waiting for Dr. Carlin to respond to their latest offer. Maybe the local mobsters were trying to eliminate a rival, although this wasn't their usual style.

Maybe it didn't matter who they were. Maybe the attackers were going to bring the whole house down around their heads and burn the rubble. Maybe it was time for Beth-Ann to update her resume and find a less dangerous position, like holding targets for beginning shooters at a firing range, or playing catch at a porcupine toss.

The call in her ear startled her. "Beth-Ann? This is Roger. I'm back in the armored closet in bedroom four."

She took a deep breath before responding. "Good. Anyone else?"

"This is Yvette. I'm safe in the kitchen downstairs. Mr. Carson just ran past me to the escape tunnel."

"Who?"

"The gardener. He was raking leaves before somebody started reenacting the shootout at the O.K. Corral."

Beth-Ann frowned. "That's enough, Yvette. Keep your transmissions short and on topic."

"Roger that."

"This is Karen. I'm looking out of the garage. Don't see anyone."

"Okay, you three, hang on," responded Beth-Ann. "Paul? Are you there?" No answer. "Paul? If you can hear me, respond now."

Silence. "Beth-Ann, this is Roger. Want me to go check on him?"

She considered for a moment, then asked, "Can you get there without exposing yourself to fire?"

"I think so. Hang on, I'm going to go slow."

The intercom went silent. As Beth-Ann waited and fumed, Dr. Carlin opened the door and slipped in. She lifted her eyebrows in query, and Beth-Ann lifted one hand in a 'wait' gesture.

"Beth-Ann? This is Roger. I found Snider."

"How is he?"

"They put at least four rounds in his chest and a couple in his head. Looks to me like multiple shooters got him. He's dead as a hammer. And the window is completely wrecked. We can't use it at all."

"Copy. Get back to your position and stay low." She clicked off her mic and turned to Dr. Carlin. "Nigel's pet psycho fired at our guests — without my authorization — and they killed him for bothering them. I don't know who they are, but we've got some serious trouble on our hands. You might think about using that fancy new escape tunnel."

Arianna nodded slowly. "Where are they now?"

Beth-Ann turned to the monitor and flipped through the camera views again. "They seem to have pulled back a little, but just to better cover. Wait — there's one who hasn't moved." She turned to her boss. "Looks like Snider shot straight to the end."

Arianna frowned. "Can you reach them with the machine gun on the roof?"

"What? You want to turn this into a full-on firefight?"

"They killed one of our people. We should respond with force."

"They shot at us because Paul Snider took a shot at one of them! I think he killed whoever he shot at, too! If we start firing a machine gun at them there's no telling what they'll hit us with!"

"If they had heavier weapons, they would have used them already. Go up to the machine gun cupola and try to take them out. The other three will support your position."

This time Beth-Ann did rip off her headset. "Are you nuts? These guys are pros! That machine gun isn't your salvation, it's your death!"

And mine too, she added mentally.

Carlin leaned closer. "Go up there and drive them away. Kill as many as you can. I will not allow my home to be shot to pieces without any response."

"Dr. Carlin—"

"Now, Beth-Ann. Remember who is paying your salary." She paused before adding, "And who pays the salary for the people watching your brother and his family."

Jack. She'd threatened Jack and Jeannie and their two kids. And Beth-Ann knew it wasn't a hollow threat.

She took a deep breath, then put on the headset again. "Hey, gang, it's me again. Any movement out there?"

"This is Karen. No movement."

"This is Yvette. Not that I can see."

"This is Roger. They're just sitting there — wait, two more are coming across the far side of the front yard."

Great. More of them coming to the party. "Are they carrying anything, Roger?"

"Yes, but I can't tell what it is. Might be just more rifles."

Might be a pool cue or a rocket launcher, too, and she wouldn't bet on them trying a three-cushion bank shot. She almost cursed, then said, "I'm moving to the attic position. When I open fire, all of you aim to the garage side and open up. That's where most of the rest of them are. I'm going after their center."

For a moment, there was no response. Then Yvette asked, "You're going to use the machine gun?"

"Orders. Everyone ready to go?"

She heard someone breathe into the mic, then Karen said, "Ready."

"This is Roger. I'm ready."

"This is Yvette. Are you sure—"

Beth-Ann cut her off. "Get set, all of you! Live fire from the top of the house about two minutes from now."

There was no more chatter. Beth-Ann pulled off the headset and turned to Arianna Carlin. "I hope this works out like you want it to."

Carlin nodded. "It will. Tell everyone to make their way to the secondary base as soon as they can. You'll make the call to withdraw."

"What? Me? Why am I—"

"Because you'll have the best view, and because you'll be able to tell when it will be safe to break away. Now go on and do your job. I'll be listening in but I won't interfere with your instructions."

Beth-Ann nodded and spoke into the headset. "One more item, people. Be ready to bug out to the secondary safe house when I give the word. But not until I give it."

She dropped the headset on the desk before anyone could answer and strode past her employer without looking back. Once more she was putting her life on the line for a greedy, selfish, cruel and calculating inhuman woman who cared for no one other than herself.

Beth-Ann ran up the staircase to the second floor, then pulled down the attic ladder and scrambled up. The machine gun emplacement was set up in the middle of the roof, atop the gables, and disguised to look like a typical old-fashioned rooftop gazebo. But it was well armored and a gunner could cover either the front or the back of the house, along with most of either side, simply by swiveling the gun.

Beth-Ann snarled to herself. Should have taken that job as a bouncer at that night club, she thought. Then all she'd have to deal with would have been drunks and groupies, not armed mercenaries. If not for the threat against her brother, she'd leave right now.

This was no way to make a living. It was just a very colorful and violent way to die.

Two more people ran to the command position. A wide-eyed young man slid down beside Randy, puffing from the adrenalin rush. "Yeah — we got it — right here — Candy!"

For a moment Randy thought he was asking for chocolate, but then he realized that the second figure — a tight-lipped young woman whose face was whiter than any refrigerator — was carrying a long tube. She handed it past the young man and to Randy, then lifted her head to get a better look at the house.

He grabbed her shoulder and yanked her down behind the slight incline. "Keep your head down!" he snarled. "You want to commit suicide, do it on your own time!"

The young man blurted, "They told me — to bring this to you — you'd know how — to use it."

"Easy, kid, take a couple of slow, deep breaths before you hyperventilate on me."

"Yessir." He did so, then he dragged a shoulder bag in front of him. "I brought eight rounds, too. I can go back for more if you need me to."

Randy closed his eyes for a moment and grimaced at the boy's enthusiasm for blowing things up. When he opened his eyes, the young man was frowning at him. "You do know how to use it, don't you, sir?"

Randy nodded his head. Of course he knew how to use the AT-5 shoulder-fired rocket launcher. It was far better than the old American bazooka and a definite improvement to its single-use predecessor, the AT-4. The Swedish-made weapon was easy to load, easy to aim, easy to fire, and the shaped charge in the projectile it fired was effective against armored vehicles smaller than a heavy tank and against gun emplacements.

It was also effective against houses, which was probably the reason someone in the rear had decided to give him the option of having one. With this weapon, he could drop the house almost to its foundations with three or four rounds. "I'd rather not have to fire it at all, kid," he said. "Those rockets can—"

The young man's head all but exploded in a shower of blood and bone. Randy ducked back and felt an anvil hit his right foot. People were yelling at him from around him and on his comm unit, and he realized that someone in the house had decided to raise the bet in this little game of ballistic poker.

Beth-Ann released the trigger on the M60 machine gun and waited for some movement in her target area. She thought she'd hit at least one of the attacking force, maybe two, and as she glanced to either side she saw others trying to burrow into the ground. This was the first time she'd fired this gun at human targets, and it was simultaneously an exhilarating and terrifying experience.

Rifle bullets began pinging off the right side of the cupola, so she swiveled the gun in that direction and raked the base of the trees. The fire from the ground stopped and she turned back to the center. She looked for another target but couldn't spot anyone else exposed.

She tapped her intercom. "Okay, people, everybody get ready to move. I'm going to lay down a long burst at — Ow! Crap!"

More rifle fire, this time from the left side of the front yard, distracted her. One round had found the gun slit and ricocheted around her position at least twice before finding her left calf.

Beth-Ann howled into the intercom and grabbed her leg. "I'm hit! I'm hit!"

"This is Yvette! How bad is it?"

Beth-Ann yanked a compression bandage from the first-aid kit in the floor of the cupola. "Ricochet got me in the left calf." She tightened the bandage on her leg and groaned. "Hurts a lot. But I'm okay." I think, she added mentally.

She wiped bloody fingers on her pants and turned the gun to the left, then ripped off a long burst into the trees. Before she was firing to keep people's heads down. Now she was hunting them.

The ammo belt ran out and she quickly opened and loaded another. "Okay, people, let's try this again. I'm going to let off a long burst in the center. When I do, everyone fire three rounds at whatever targets you have, even if they're not clear, and then head for the hills. Got it?"

"This is Roger. Check."

"This is Yvette. Check."

"This is Karen. Received and understood. Do you want me to wait for you? Those stairs can be tricky, especially if you have a leg wound."

"Thanks, but no. You guys get out through the tunnel and meet at the secondary rendezvous point. Escort Dr. Carlin to the safe house on the coast and make tracks for the beta site in upstate New Troy." She checked the bolt on the gun again and aimed. "Ready? Fire!"

As soon as the machine gun fired again, he opened the rocket launcher and yanked open the ammo bag in front of the dead boy and pulled out a round. He loaded it into the tube and checked the electrical connections from the tube to the propellant charge, then squirmed closer to the top of the rise.

He moved to his left and found a little dip in the small ridge, then looked up and found the machine gun. It was on the top of the roof, and at the moment it was firing into the woods on his right. One of his teams was taking a pounding and he couldn't help them.

Not without using the rocket launcher.

A woman's frantic voice caught his attention. He glanced back at the young man whose brains were splattered on the

ground. The young woman who'd come in with him — Candy — was shaking the dead boy, yelling at him to wake up. She was crying so hard she was nearly incoherent.

Randy ground his teeth. This had to stop. They hadn't come to this house to kill anyone, but they'd been fired on and had already lost at least two people. Two of his people, Denise something and the young man whose name he'd never heard, were dead. He shifted and pain shot up his right leg. A glance at his boot told him that a bullet had hit the side of his foot, which was now slowly dripping red.

No more.

The machine gun began firing at his position again. He turned to aim the launcher, but not before he'd seen Candy take a bullet to the top of her shoulder. She screamed in agony as Randy peered through the sight.

He pressed the launch trigger.

Beth-Ann saw one of the attackers jerk and roll to one side. Another hit. She only hoped it was enough for all of them to get away. She pointed the gun slightly to her left and kept firing.

Movement to the right of her aiming point arrested her attention. Someone was pointing something at the house, so she decided to do something about it. The machine gun spat more lead as it swiveled to attack this new threat.

But before she could walk the bullets to her new target, a puff of white smoke appeared in front of the man on the ground. She wondered what he was shoo—

The rocket hit the base of the machine gun position on the roof exactly where it had been aimed. The shaped charge penetrated the light armor around Beth-Ann's position and the force of the explosion crushed her body as if she were a department store mannequin.

Her death was immediate.

She never felt the structure around her give way and fall all the way to the ground floor. She wasn't aware that the roof behind her position was shattered and blown into the back yard. And she didn't feel the rubble from the roof and the second floor cover her body.

Beth-Ann would never update her resume. She'd never get that chance to turn her life around. And her brother Jack would never know that she'd given her life not in defense of a violent criminal, but to protect his life and those of his family.

Randy grabbed his comm handset and screamed, "Go! Go! Go!"

Two rifle teams charged the house from opposite sides. One team burst through the front door and slid inside. The other cautiously approached the garage, then leapfrogged each other as they sprinted in. His team, the one in the center, watched the house, ready to give supporting fire if needed.

But there was no more shooting, not from anyone inside or outside. Randy kept listening, not willing to distract any of his team leaders with a demand for information.

The waiting was almost worse than the shooting had been.

Finally he heard a call. "Team two reporting. There's no one alive in the house. One body upstairs in the room where we took fire earlier. The machine gunner is dead, too."

"Roger, team two."

"Team three reporting. No one outside, but we captured one woman alive and unhurt. She did not, repeat, she did not fire at us. The captive is under control and isolated."

"She can ride in the back of the withdrawal vehicle with your team, Three."

"Roger. The backyard is empty. Looks like the rest of whoever was here went out an escape tunnel in the kitchen floor. Thing's built like a watertight hatch on a ship, hinges on the

inside where we can't get to them, and it won't open from this side. We'll have to cut through it with a torch."

"Negative, team three. Both teams withdraw to the front yard and link up with team one. We have some casualties to take care of."

"Team three, roger."

"Team two, roger."

As soon as Randy saw his people coming out of the house, he switched frequencies. "Base, this is assault team leader. We have one captive and we need medical help on-site right now. We have several casualties."

"What? Casualties? You weren't supposed to start a war, Randy!"

"You stupid—" Randy controlled himself with an effort. "We didn't start it, you moron, we got shot at first! Now get those med teams here! And send a couple of ambulances right now!"

He pulled the headset off before the controller could respond. Then he lay back and tried not to make his foot hurt any more than it already did.

What a FUBARed operation this was.

Chapter Three

Perry strode into his office nearly two hours early. He was missing the services of his two best young reporters for the next few days while the police and the District Attorney's office got through with them. Most of the rest of his staff was out for the Memorial Day holiday weekend and either weren't answering their phones or were out of town. Alice hadn't liked it, but she'd understood, especially when her boss at the DA's office had called her to come in to her office as Perry was tying his shoes.

He'd wisely refrained from laughing with sardonic pleasure, but he almost regretted his restraint. It would probably be the last laugh he'd get for days. The *Daily Planet* would not fumble this story. It was too big to assign to some thumb-fingered rookie or an incompetent like Ralph, so the job landed on his shoulders.

"Hey, boss man, what's shaking?"

He turned with a start and saw Paula Young at her desk, an unlit cigarette hanging from her lip. "Paula! You're still on medical leave from your heart attack! What are you doing here this early?"

"Same as you, I think. Big story coming down the pike, and you got almost no one here to write it for you." She leaned back and lifted her lighter, then held it close to her cigarette without flicking it. "How's about we work together on it?"

Perry suppressed a smile. "You know Alice won't let me smoke any more. She hates the smell of tobacco on my clothes."

She shrugged. "So I'll irritate your wife a little. But you'll get a good story written."

He let the smile free. "Sounds like a plan to me."

She finally flicked the lighter and lit up. "Good. I already talked to the harbor cops and got their statements for publication. And I have a friend at the hospital where the Connors girl is staying. They think she has a good chance to pull through. Think you can get a statement from the DA's office?"

"If I can't you can buy me one of those Cuban cigars you used to slip me."

She gave out with a hoarse bray that Perry recognized as her laugh. "Done. It'll be just like old times, Perry, you and me against the deadline."

"You think we'll beat it this time?"

"We always have before, boss man. Let's get cracking and find out."

Perry would always appreciate the memory of that day. It was Paula Young's final byline for the *Daily Planet*. He was glad she got to see the story in print.

Paula went to bed two nights later and never woke up, her abused heart having finally given up the fight. Despite her fear that she wouldn't be missed, there were representatives from

every major daily paper within a hundred miles at her funeral. Perry's eulogy brought tears to the eyes of everyone attending, including Alice. And Paula would have laughed at the cloud of cigar smoke and the number of empty liquor bottles left behind at the wake following her cremation.

Rebecca Connors slowly floated back to awareness.

Nothing made sense. She tried to call out, but her voice wouldn't work. It was as if there was something in her mouth keeping her from speaking. She tried to look around her, but even though she managed to flutter her eyelids and change the level of light she could perceive, no details resolved themselves before her eyes.

The effort exhausted her and she slipped back into the blissful darkness.

When she awoke again, she felt pain. Her stomach hurt and her throat was raw. Her eyes were still unable to focus, but at least they didn't seem to be glued shut.

She could hear hissing noises in the background and a voice over a PA speaking softly. Once she heard several people run past her, but not close to her. She tried to call out again, but whatever was in her mouth still kept her from speaking.

Exhausted, she closed her eyes and slept once more.

When she opened her eyes again, there was someone beside her bed. "Oh, good," came a woman's gentle voice. "You're awake, and right on time, too! Let me get the doctor."

Rebecca tried to turn her head to follow the woman's progress, but the tube in her throat shifted slightly and it felt like sandpaper on a sunburn. She tried to speak again, but the tube apparently went all the way down her throat past her vocal cords and she couldn't even moan. She closed her eyes against the pain and tried to remember why she seemed to be in a hospital.

She heard footsteps approaching and she opened her eyes again. A short, thin, young Asian man smiled down at her and said in a surprisingly deep voice, "Welcome back to the land of the living, Miss Connors. Please don't try to talk. You have a breathing tube in your throat, but if you can stay awake for a few minutes, we'll take it out."

She tried to snap her head up and down with enthusiasm, but her head only shifted slightly on the pillow. "Very well," said the doctor. "This will hurt for a minute or so, but you'll be able to talk once you get your mouth and throat hydrated again." He turned to the nurse beside him and said, "Let's get ready to extubate her."

The nurse turned and opened a drawer. She pulled on a pair of latex gloves and helped the doctor don a pair of his own. "You'll need to lie still, Miss Connors. I don't want to hurt you any more than is necessary."

He smiled as Rebecca's eyes widened. "Don't worry, it isn't that bad. I'm told that the actual discomfort is fairly mild."

Oh, good, thought Rebecca, we've already gone from pain to discomfort. Can't wait for it to turn into real fun.

"Your friends will be happy to know you're awake," the nurse said. "That good-looking young man hasn't left the waiting room since he got here. We practically had to tie him up to get him to stay there."

Young man — that had to be Clark.

It was a good thing the doctor chose that moment to slide the tube out of her throat, or she might have blurted out that Clark Kent was Superman's other name. Not a good idea, especially since she'd just confessed her love to him.

Like that was a big secret to anyone, she complained to herself.

For the next few moments, though, she focused on not coughing her lungs out onto the pillow.

She heard the doctor and nurse talking but none of their

words made any sense. There was something about staples and somebody's stomach and blood seeping — who was bleeding? Maybe there was another patient in the room—

No. She was the one who was bleeding.

But why?

Oh, right. She'd been shot.

The shock of returning memory made her inhale deeply and she gagged and coughed again. The nurse held her shoulders and helped her turn to one side. Nothing came up from her stomach, but the effort of coughing made her entire middle hurt. It wasn't a strong hurt, almost as if the invisible pain was over in the near corner of the room and barely reaching out to touch her belly when she moved or tried to breathe too deeply.

"Feeling better, dear?" the nurse crooned. "We just gave you some morphine for the pain. You can't eat or drink anything yet, but I can give you some ice chips if you want them."

Rebecca nodded wearily, determined to stay awake. The nurse turned and picked up a Styrofoam cup from the cabinet and fished out several chips of ice with a spoon from a small cooler beside the cup, then gently laid them on her tongue one at a time. Rebecca sucked at the first one, then opened her mouth for the second as soon as she swallowed the tiny droplets of water it gave. It made her think of a baby bird begging food from its mother.

After the fourth chip, the nurse put the cup back on the cabinet. "Feeling a little better, are we? You just lie still while I check your output."

Nice lady, thought Rebecca, just a little mixed up on who was the patient. It wasn't like they were conjoined twins or anything —

It was the closest thing to a coherent thought she would have for several hours.

Rebecca's eyes fluttered open. The room was darkened and all she could see was the vague outline of someone sitting beside the window. She blinked, and the image resolved itself.

Clark was sitting in the chair, staring out at the night sky. His left arm was folded across his chest and his right arm was braced on it while his right hand cupped his chin. There was a fading bruise on the side of his face and a piece of gauze taped to his forehead just above his eye. He looked smaller and weaker to her than he ever had before.

She tried to speak to him, but no sound escaped her lips beyond a strangled whisper. But he reacted immediately and strode to her bedside.

He smiled down at her and stroked her hair away from her face. "Hey, Becca. How do you feel?"

She tried to smile but shuddered in sudden pain instead. "Hurts," she whispered.

"Your stomach?" She nodded. "I'll call the night nurse."

Her hand fluttered aimlessly as he stepped away, her attempt to touch him thwarted by his quick reaction. "Clark?" she groaned.

He was back in an instant to take her hand. "What is it?"

His touch made the pain easier to bear for the moment. "Don't forget — what I told you. On the boat, I mean."

That warm smile enveloped her again. "I won't. Now let me get the nurse for you, okay?"

She nodded. He eased her hand down to the bed beside her hip and slipped away. The nurse would come and give her something for the pain and she could go back to sleep.

And when she woke up again, Clark would be there with her. It was better than any dream.

Lois sat next to Lex in the hospital's waiting room. She'd been there for six hours, he for almost four, and they had exchanged only fairly impersonal greetings and vacuous

comments about the shows the waiting room TV displayed. They hadn't shared anything serious or personal since he'd arrived. They hadn't even discussed their respective experiences with the police interviews, and Lois was worried, both about their legal situation and about their personal relationship.

The station switched from the network soap opera feed to a local broadcast of Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint in *North By Northwest*, one of Lois' lesser favorites because of the fake romance between Cary and Eva. Cary's character had been caught in a near-fatal case of mistaken identity, and Eva's character had more secrets in her life than a James Bond movie had beautiful and murderous women. The parallels between the movie and Lois' relationship with Lex made her uncomfortable.

Just as Cary was being forced to drink massive amounts of liquor prior to the bad guys' first attempt to kill him, Lex' cell phone rang. He looked at the display and said, "Sorry, this is private," and walked to the window away from the other couple in the waiting room. "Zeus here. Area not secure."

She knew what it was about from the first words. It was the report on the raid on Arianna Carlin's compound. Lois listened with growing horror as the report came in: two dead, three hospitalized, two of Arianna's guardians dead and one captured, her house destroyed, and worst of all, Arianna had escaped.

Her first thought was to let Clark know what had happened. But then concern for Lex overcame that thought. He'd slumped further and further down as the bad news hammered him and his face had grown more ashen with every word until Lois feared he might actually collapse.

She stood and walked to his side. As he shut off the phone and slipped it back into his pocket, Lois took his free hand in hers. He started, then sighed. "You heard, I take it?"

"Yes." She rubbed his hand for a moment, then said, "Come and sit down before you fall down."

He allowed her to guide him to a small couch away from the nurses' desk. He flopped down on it and put his head in his hands. "I am such a fool," he muttered. "An arrogant fool. I never imagined that Arianna would fight back against such a well-armed force."

Lois slipped down beside him. "What are you going to do?"

He leaned back without looking at her. "What can I do? The police department in the town nearest Arianna's estate will surely investigate, and they will call in the state police, who will determine that automatic weapons and explosives were used, which will automatically involve the federal authorities, who will quickly determine who was involved in the incident, and it is probable that I shall spend the rest of my life in court trying to resolve this debacle to no one's satisfaction."

She leaned back beside him and took his hand again. "I'm sorry it happened this way, Lex."

He sighed again and rubbed his face with both hands. "Aren't you going to tell me that you told me it was a bad idea?"

She didn't respond to his feeble attempt at humor. "I've already said it. And you know what I would've said had you asked me before setting this in motion."

He nodded. "And you were correct." He crossed his arms over his chest as if warding off a chill. "My only defense is that I feared Arianna would disappear when she learned that Nigel had failed to kill me."

Lois nodded back. "You're probably right about that, anyway. Any idea where she might be?"

"Not really. My intelligence network has identified two separate properties she has purchased within the past three years, either of which might be her new hideout. Or she might simply choose to disappear overseas. She has sufficient funds to slip away and assume another identity, one which would afford her total anonymity."

"Ick. I don't like that idea one bit."

"Neither do I. But it may be preferable to another choice for her."

Lois' eyes widened. "I haven't heard it yet and I don't like it."

Lex closed his eyes. "She could vanish into New Troy's population and reappear to wreak vengeance upon me at a time of her choosing."

"Yeah." Lois shook her head. "You're assuming that she'll find out you were the one who sicced those gunmen on her."

He waved a hand at the TV on the wall. "I have to assume that such information will become public knowledge before very many days have passed."

Arianna's fury was boundless. It was blatantly obvious to her that Nigel had failed to kill Lex, and that the assault on her home had been Lex' revenge for that affront. That assault had cost her two valuable employees, and the two who had come to the safe house with her wouldn't stay with her. The third one, the woman from the garage, had never arrived, and Arianna was certain that the woman was already headed as far from New Troy as she could get.

The only one who might stay with her was the older man, the gardener, and Arianna couldn't remember his name at the moment. Besides, he couldn't shoot or drive, and without an estate to groom, he was all but useless. No, her best option would be to slip into hiding alone and wait for the proper moment to reappear.

And she still had the two hackers to deal with, the ones who had broken into her offshore accounts and copied her transaction records. She was sure that they had already given the information to whoever — almost certainly Lex — had attacked her refuge. She would keep her ear to the ground and find them also, and anyone else connected to them.

The older man looked frightened. He leaned close to her and said, "Dr. Carlin, what're we gonna do? It ain't safe for you out there."

The man's obvious concern for her touched her for a moment, but then her mind regained control. "There isn't much we can do." She opened the satchel she'd carried from the house and pulled on two latex gloves, then reached deeper and pulled out two wrapped stacks of hundred-dollar bills. "Your best option is to get away from me and stay away. I want you to take this and head to Florida, try to get work there. And use your other name. You can't do anything else for me now."

He glanced at the money in her gloved hand, then looked up at her. "What's with the gloves, Doc?"

"My fingerprints aren't on this money, and I don't want them to be. If the police do stop you, they won't be able to connect this money to me, or you to me, by checking it for prints. It will be one less reason for them to suspect you of any wrongdoing."

His face relaxed into a slight smile. "Okay, Doc, I gotcha. Thanks." He took the bills and peeled off the wrapper. "Just how much is here?"

"Twenty thousand dollars."

His eyes bulged. "Twenty thou— are you kidding?"

"No. You've more than earned it. Now take this and get going. The others can drop you at a bus station, if that's where you want to go."

He looked at her with sadness and compassion. "Yes, ma'am. I'll just get my bag and head on out."

Arianna watched him trudge away, then turned to the other two. "Roger, Yvette, we've got to split up." She reached into the satchel again and brought out four bundles of cash. "Here's twenty-five thousand each. The two of you need to disappear."

Roger took two of the stacks of bills and slid them into his pants pocket without a second look. Yvette, though, frowned at the money offered her. Unobtrusively, she slid a small pistol into

her hand and hung it down beside her leg. “You’re not usually this generous with your operating capital, Dr. Carlin. You want to level with us?”

Arianna ignored the pistol and exhaled sharply. “I want the two of you away from me, that’s all. If I give you enough money to get started again somewhere else, you’re a lot less likely to go to the police because you’re broke and hungry.”

Yvette licked her lips, then twisted her mouth, and finally nodded. “Makes sense.” She reached out to take the other two stacks of bills from Arianna. “I take it you want us to be invisible for a while?”

“I don’t care if you put your faces on billboards and advertise your services so long as you don’t do it around here.”

Yvette nodded again and slipped the little pistol into her pants pocket. “That makes sense to me too. You ready to head out, Roger?”

The gardener’s name finally popped into Arianna’s mind. “If you’ll drop Mr. Carson off at the bus station or train station or wherever he wants to go, I’ll give you the keys to the old Buick. It’s the car the police are least likely to be looking for, and since it’s registered to Janet Smith they won’t be looking for it.”

Roger nodded. “Good idea. Sure, we’ll drop him off. Bye, Doc.”

Arianna hated the diminutive of her title. She’d earned her doctorate, and even though it had been a means to an end and not an end in itself, she was proud of it. Lex had insisted on calling her ‘Doc Ari’ when she’d first been admitted into the PhD program at Yale, and she’d always hated it when he’d called her that.

Receiving her degree the same month as her divorce was finalized had been most gratifying.

She forced herself not to snap at the man. “You two get moving. I don’t want to be caught, and I doubt that either of you want it. Good luck.”

Roger gave her a jaunty two-finger salute. Yvette backed away holding her cash, then picked up a purse she’d found at the safe house and slid the money in it. Carson smiled wearily at her. “Good luck to you too, Dr. Carlin. It’s been interesting workin’ for you.”

“Thank you. It has been an interesting experience for me also.”

Carson turned and followed the other two. Arianna heard the old Buick start up, cough a couple of times, then catch and run smoothly. As the car slipped away, she closed the satchel and carefully stripped off the gloves.

The neurotoxins embedded in the fibers of the counterfeit bills wouldn’t take full effect for three to six hours, depending on how much the bills were handled. She figured that Carson would be the first to succumb, since he probably wouldn’t be able to stop playing with the money. She wondered if either Roger or Yvette would realize what was happening to them before it was too late, but she doubted it. The symptoms were hardly noticeable prior to lethal exposure, and with any luck they’d lose consciousness while on the road and destroy the car in the ensuing wreck. Unless a very curious and highly skilled coroner examined the bodies, their deaths would then be discounted as exposure to carbon monoxide or injuries sustained in the crash. All she needed to do now was to locate Karen and neutralize her as well.

Arianna hated loose ends.

After that, she had to find out what had happened to Nigel. If Lex had killed him, she’d kill Lex.

Actually, she planned to kill Lex no matter what had happened. The only questions were how and when.

Rebecca sighed to herself.

Clark was gone for the morning, talking to the police or some

of Mr. Luthor’s lawyers or something. Lois had come by for a short visit and left with a promise to come back later that evening. The nurses kept dropping by to take her vitals or check her IV to make sure it was running properly or ask about her pain level and if she needed more drugs, but there was no one to talk to. She’d told the doctor that she was getting bored. He’d grinned — the meanie — and told her that it was a good sign and that she was feeling better. And daytime television was worse than bad. She had no idea that people treated each other that way in public on those awful talk shows. At least her parents, as bad as they’d been, had kept it in the family and away from the public.

So she was bored out of her skull and planning a breakout when a familiar face leaned into the room. “Hey, Lady Galadriel! How do you feel?”

Rebecca smiled. “Come on in, Morgana. It’s good to see you.”

“Good to see you too, girlfriend. Harry and Gandalf send their best wishes. We drew straws to see which one of us would come to see you and I won.”

“I’m glad you’re here. Actually I’m just glad anyone’s here. I’m getting bored like you wouldn’t believe.”

Morgana pulled a chair close to the bed and flopped down in it. “Jimmy told me he’d be here sometime tonight for a little while. He’s doing some kind of in-depth research for the paper on Dr. Carlin.”

Rebecca sighed. “That’s not surprising. He’s a hard worker, and he’s pretty smart, too.”

Morgana smiled and tilted her head. “You playing matchmaker or something, Becca?”

“What?”

“Come on! ‘He’s a hard worker and he’s pretty smart.’ You gonna add ‘shadchen’ to your list of titles?”

“What’s a shadchen?”

The tall woman laughed. “It’s a Yiddish term for a paid matchmaker. She arranges meetings that are supposed to turn into marriages.”

“I thought that was a yenta.”

“Nah. Yenta’s just a gossipy old biddy. Speaking of gossip, I got a piece of news for you.”

“Please, yes! Tell me something that Maury and Oprah don’t know!”

Morgana laughed, then dropped her eyes for a moment before looking at Rebecca again. “The Dangerous Boys are breaking up.”

Rebecca’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Yeah. See, that thing last year with us helping the FBI catch those dudes who were robbing the Russian bankers didn’t scare anyone, even when they almost tracked us down and we had to go dark for almost a month. This time, though”—she gestured at the bed—“I’m really scared. Raoul and Philip both graduate at the end of the semester, and they’re already looking for permanent jobs. Jimmy’s the only one willing to go on, but he’s got some protection from the *Daily Planet*. We don’t.”

Rebecca nodded slowly and thought hard. They’d dodged several bullets in the past three years and had lots of fun. They’d also helped each other and pushed each other in their school careers, and she knew that the doctorate she was working toward would be much farther away if not for the help the group had given her.

At the same time, it wasn’t fair to ask them to continue to put themselves in danger. Dr. Carlin surely had enough resources to find them if they started hunting for her, and none of them wanted to end up in a hospital bed recovering from a near-fatal bullet wound — or buried because of a fatal one. So she was surprised to find that she wasn’t surprised that the members of the group were headed in different directions.

“So what are your plans now?” Rebecca asked.

Morgana bit her lip, then said, “I have a good offer from the Chicago Symphony. I start rehearsals in four weeks.”

“Hey, that’s great! You’re a terrific musician. I know you’ll do a great job.”

“Don’t get too excited. It’s only third chair and I’ll be on six months probation. They want to be certain that I ‘maintain the traditions of the orchestra’ while sawing away on an oversized violin stuck between my legs.”

Rebecca laughed and tried not to let Morgana see the pain, but it didn’t work.

“Hey, Becca, I’m sorry! You need me to call a nurse for you?”

“No, that’s — okay. Just let me relax — there. All better now.”

“Good. I’m glad you’re doing as well as you are. Um, you gonna have any, um, problems in the future?”

Rebecca narrowed her eyes. “What kind of problems are you talking about?”

“Oh, like, you won’t be able to eat certain foods, or you’ll have a no-bikini scar, or you won’t be able to dance the horizontal mambo with Clark, or you—”

“Morg!” she squealed. “That was nasty, girl!”

“Hey, us civilians gotta get our jollies out somehow.”

Rebecca knew it would hurt, but she let the laughter ring anyway.

“Recorder on. This is Homicide Detective William Henderson, in the 33rd Precinct of the Metropolis Police Department, conducting an interview with Karen Vollmer, who was taken into custody this morning at a shoot-out in the Metropolis suburb of East Brinkers. Are you ready to begin, Ms. Vollmer?”

“Sure. Let’s get this dog and pony show off the ground.”

“We’re recording this interview for this investigation. Do you understand?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you been read your rights and have they been explained to you?”

“Yes to both questions.”

“Do you want to call your attorney?”

“I just want this to end so I can get some sleep.”

“Please say directly whether you do or do not want your lawyer.”

“Fine! I don’t want a lawyer! Happy now?”

“Thank you. Please state your full name for the record.”

“My name is Karen Denise Vollmer.”

“Where do you live?”

“Metropolis, New Troy.”

“Address?”

“I get my mail at Riverside Hotel, Ninth and Bermuda. Up until today, though, I was spending my nights at Dr. Arianna Carlin’s estate in East Brinkers.”

“What is that address?”

“I never knew the address. But you can’t miss it. The house has a shell crater in the middle of the roof and for all I know it’s still burning.”

“Actually, it isn’t. The automatic sprinkler system put out the fire before we got there. You didn’t know that?”

“No. Those wannabe Green Berets cuffed me, blindfolded me, and hustled me into a windowless van before you could say Bob’s your uncle.”

“‘Bob’s your uncle?’ Are you English, Ms. Vollmer?”

“No, I was born in Florida, but I spent a lot of my teen years across the pond. Nice people over there. I should have stayed.”

“Is that where you met Nigel St. John?”

“Yes. He recruited me my final year in university. Sold me a bill of goods, he did.”

“I suppose he must have. Can you tell us what happened today?”

“All I know is I got an alert call from Beth-Ann to—”

“I’m sorry, who is Beth-Ann?”

“Beth-Ann Reynolds. She’s our team leader. She was in the machine gun nest on the roof. Hey, where is she, anyway? You got her locked up somewhere else?”

“Let’s stay on track, Ms. Vollmer. Please continue.”

“Lemme see — right, we all got into position to watch the front for intruders. I thought I saw some people sneaking backwards when Paul — that’s Paul Snider — fired from upstairs. A bunch of people from the outside shot at the window he was shooting from, and Roger whose-last-name-I-don’t-know went up to check on him and found him dead. Then Dr. Carlin ordered Beth-Ann to get to the machine gun and cover our escape. A ricochet got her in the leg and she said she was okay and I waited for her in the kitchen but she never came. I guess the mercenaries caught her too. By the time I broke for the escape hatch it was closed and locked and a whole lot of people were pointing rifles at me so I gave up.”

“Let me check something. You’ve mentioned Dr. Carlin, Beth-Ann, Roger, and Paul. Was there anyone else in the house?”

“Just Yvette Jones. I assume she got out but I don’t know for sure. Oh, and there was the groundskeeper. I don’t think I ever heard anybody call him by his name.”

“Thank you, Ms. Vollmer. That’s all for now.”

“Great. Can I get a sandwich or something and then get some sleep? I’m wiped out.”

“Of course. I hope you like turkey and cheese on rye.”

“Right now I’d take sawdust and shoe leather and sleep on concrete.”

“We’ll see if we can do a little better than that.”

“Quicker would be better if you can do it.”

“Of course. You’ll have your meal faster than you can say Jack’s a doughnut.”

Chapter Four

Lois sat back on her couch and turned up the volume on her TV. It was Wednesday, nine forty in the morning, and it was time for Lex’ press conference.

She hated that she couldn’t stand beside him for support, but he’d insisted — and his attorneys had agreed — that she couldn’t appear to favor him publicly. Perry had given both Lois and Clark the week off to recover, and he’d informed each of them separately that they were too close to this story to write any of it. The bylines would have to go to others at the *Planet*.

Clark had accepted that decision with a bit more grace than Lois had.

The camera panned back and Lois saw Deputy Chief Roberta Jean Thompson, head of the new Major Crimes Unit of the MPD, standing in the background. She wore a gray business suit which set off her long wavy auburn hair well. Her badge hung around her neck on a classy silver chain, and she wore a glued-on puckish smile. Lois assumed that she was there to present Lex with either a subpoena or a warrant as soon as the press conference was over.

Flanked by his faithful friend Asabi and two of his staff lawyers, Lex walked to the makeshift podium outside LexCorp and began his statement.

“Thank you all for coming. If you will allow me to read my statement in its entirety, I will answer any and all questions you might have.” As several of the reporters shouted unintelligible questions despite Lex’ plea, he smiled and said, “If you insist on interrupting me, I will simply have to begin my statement again.” He paused, then added, “That makes it your choice as to whether or not you make your own deadlines.”

Lois smiled despite the circumstances. The man was nothing if not charming under pressure, she thought.

Lex began reading from the clipboard in his hand. “This past weekend, beginning on Friday, I was accompanied by three friends on a long weekend sailing trip, the purpose of which was simple pleasure. On Saturday morning, we received a radio communication from Nigel St. John, who was employed as my personal assistant. He informed me that a vital document required my signature, and because the remote fax machine on board the boat was not functioning, he needed to meet with us so that I could examine the document and sign it.

“He did meet with us, but instead of bringing a document, he gathered us all in the boat’s lounge and informed us that he planned to shoot us and sink the boat with our bodies. When asked why he would do such a thing, he replied that he was working for someone else in a criminal capacity and was operating under that person’s orders.”

“Who was it?” shouted someone from the crowd.

Lex lifted his eyes from the paper. “Shall I begin again, ladies and gentlemen?”

The reporters’ collective groan made Lois giggle. It was funny as long as she wasn’t out herself there trying to get the story.

“Very well. At any rate, the identity of the person for whom Mr. St. John was working is the next morsel of information in my statement. Oh, by the way, copies of this statement will be released to all interested media as soon as this conference is completed.”

“So keep going already!” another person called out.

Lex allowed a small smile, then lifted the clipboard again. “The person Mr. St. John claimed to be working for is Dr. Arianna Carlin.” He paused as a gasp came from the crowd, then continued. “For those few of you who do not already know, Dr. Carlin is my former wife. She had a lucrative practice as a psychologist at her office in upstate New Troy, a practice which was apparently a front for her criminal activity. Her patient list included a number of felons involved in an early release program operated by the state of New Troy, from which she may have recruited some of her associates.”

He lifted his free hand to forestall any questions. “Once Mr. St. John had gathered the four of us below the main deck, he assaulted one of my guests and shot another. Because of my own incipient paranoia, I had secreted a pistol in my pocket, and I shot Mr. St. John to death before he could slay all four of us.

“The guest who was shot might well have died had Ultra Woman not happened along. Apparently the sight of a cruiser with a runabout tied to it, sitting idly on the ocean with no one topside, piqued her curiosity sufficiently to cause her to investigate. She transported the wounded person to a hospital in Metropolis, where that person’s condition has been upgraded from critical to serious. The attending physicians believe that the person will make a full recovery.

“I must pause here to verbalize my great appreciation to Ultra Woman. Had she not appeared when she did, that person might not have survived. I thank you, Ultra Woman.”

He paused again as a murmur ran through the crowd, then he took a deep breath and continued. “My security division has, at my direction, mapped out a number of paramilitary operations to rescue those who are either close to me or are vital to the ongoing success of Lex Industries. Under my orders — and I wish to make clear that they were my orders alone, that no one else advised me on this decision — my security team attempted to isolate and capture Dr. Carlin from her home.”

He stopped and rubbed his face with his free hand. “This operation did not proceed as planned. Dr. Carlin’s own bodyguards initiated a firefight in which two of them died and two of LexCorp’s security team lost their lives. Their names are being withheld pending notification of the next of kin. Several members of LexCorp’s security team were also wounded, but

these injuries are not life-threatening.”

He stopped and lowered the clipboard. “I take full responsibility for this incident. I admit publicly to sending those people in harm’s way, and I alone am responsible for the injuries they sustained and for — for the lives which were lost. I will submit myself to the authority of our legal system and will abide by the decisions rendered therein.” His mouth twitched as if he wanted to smile but couldn’t because of the circumstances. “And yes, I’m driving my attorneys insane at the moment, so you need not ask that question.”

He lowered the clipboard and sighed deeply. “I will now take questions from — wait a moment, please.”

Lois frowned as Chief Thompson tugged on Lex’ sleeve, then whispered to him. He looked puzzled for a moment, then nodded and stepped back.

The woman pushed her glasses up on her nose and smiled sweetly at the assembled media representatives. “Hi there, y’all,” she drawled in her honeyed Alabama accent. “For those of you who haven’t met me yet, I’m Deputy Chief Roberta Jean Thompson, head of Major Crimes division of the Metropolis Police Department. My friends call me Bobbie or Bobbie Jean. We’re kind of a new division, y’see, and we’re still findin’ our way a bit, but I do have some news which Mr. Luthor hasn’t had the opportunity to learn. And I assure you that it is very pertinent to this case.”

She pulled a sheaf of papers out of her blazer and began to read. “Early this morning, a man who had died in the Metropolis interstate bus terminal early Monday morning was identified as Bradley Carson. Mr. Carson was most recently employed as the groundskeeper at the estate of Dr. Arianna Carlin. The— y’all hold on and I’ll try to answer your questions, okay?” She smiled sweetly until the crowd calmed down. “Mr. Carson’s death was, at first, assumed to be due to a heart attack, but one of the transportation officers who responded to the report of his death fell ill the next day and nearly died himself. That’s kinda coincidental, ain’t it? We thought so too. As it turns out, Mr. Carson was carrying a large sum of counterfeit money, and when we sent a sample of the bills to S.T.A.R. Labs for analysis, we discovered that the money contained a poison which was absorbed through Mr. Carson’s skin. That’s what killed him, and in fact nearly killed the transportation officer.” She paused and adjusted her glasses. “We do anticipate a complete recovery for that officer.”

She looked at her notes again. “Let’s see — ah, yes. A 1983 Buick sedan ran off the interstate and crashed in southern Virginia late Monday afternoon. Both occupants of the car were dead when Virginia state troopers arrived on the scene. There were no indications of the causes of death for these occupants, and when the Virginia troopers discovered a large amount of cash among the victims’ belongings, they immediately took precautions and contacted the Metropolis police department. They also sent a sample of the money, which turned out to be counterfeit. It also had the same nori — I mean, neurotoxin embedded in the fibers.” She turned to Lex and grinned for a moment. “Them three-dollar words throw me sometimes, y’know?”

She lowered the paper and swept off her glasses. “We have identified these people as Yvette Jones and Roger Pulaski, known associates of Nigel St. John and Dr. Arianna Carlin. They had among their belongings several unlicensed firearms and alternate forms of identification, along with a cell phone with several numbers which have drawn the interest of federal authorities. Now y’all please don’t ask me any more about those numbers because I can’t tell you anything about them. That aspect of the investigation is a matter for the FBI.”

A man in the crowd burst out, “You mean this is a federal case now?”

“No,” answered the chief. “The FBI and the state of Virginia and the Metropolis Police Department are all cooperating on this case. We intend to capture Dr. Carlin and subject her to the full extent of federal law, New Troy state law, and Virginia state law.” Thompson grinned lopsidedly. “This lady seems to have been very, very naughty.”

A woman shouted, “So what happens to Lex Luthor?”

Chief Thompson replaced her glasses and lifted the paper again. “At this time, the city of Metropolis is not bringing charges against Mr. Luthor. We believe that he acted rashly but not illegally in attempting to capture Dr. Carlin. His security team trespassed on Dr. Carlin’s property, but they did not initiate hostilities and discharged their firearms — which were legally owned by and registered to LexCorp Security — only in their own defense. Now, that don’t mean that charges might not be filed later on, if we receive information which might justify said charges. The ones what hadn’t been filed yet, I mean.”

Another woman called out, “What about the machine gun and the bazooka and the tank?”

The chief looked startled. “Tank?” She turned to Lex and smiled. “You have a tank, Mr. Luthor? I’d love to see that little toy of yours.”

Lex’ eyes widened for a moment and he shrugged. “Oops. I guess we ought not to be startin’ rumors,” said the chief. Then she turned to the microphones. “As I said, the city of Metropolis is not bringing charges at this time. Now I got no idea about any possible federal legal action. Y’all will have to talk to someone else about that. All I can tell you is that from the testimony we have received from Mr. Luthor — who, I must say, has cooperated fully with this department — and from the security team which approached Dr. Carlin’s house, Mr. Luthor’s team was tasked with capturing Dr. Carlin, not shooting her. Thank you. That’s all I have.”

She smiled widely and turned to step back into the row of spectators. Lois was impressed. The woman looked like a pushover, but she had steel under her sensibly stylish outfit. Lois suspected that even Ultra Woman would have a hard time intimidating her.

For one of the few times since Lois had met Lex, he looked puzzled and uneasy. He leaned over to one of his attorneys and whispered into the man’s ear, then listened to the response.

Lex then straightened his suit jacket and returned to the podium. “Thank you, Chief Thompson. I will now accept questions from the media.”

He pointed to a tall man in the middle. “Bret Summers, WMET news! Mr. Luthor, what will you do with your security service?”

Lex’ eyebrows rose. “What will I do with them? What do you mean?”

“Will you disband your Imperial Storm Trooper security service and allow the police to do their job?”

“Ah. Touché, Mr. Summers. No, I will not disband LexCorp’s security division. The people employed by my companies deserve to be safe while at work or while traveling to and from their jobs. The mission of LexCorp Security is to protect LexCorp’s people and physical assets from harm, and they will continue to perform that function. Next, please?”

“Mr. Luthor! Barbara Watterson, *Metropolis Star*! Do you believe that you would be celebrated as a hero today if your mission to capture Dr. Carlin had succeeded?”

Something changed in Lex’ eyes, something Lois suspected only a few could have picked up. “I suppose we’ll never know that, Ms. Watterson. And I prefer not to speculate. Next?”

“Eduardo Salinas, *Daily Planet*! Do you intend to mount any more paramilitary operations in the future?”

Lex frowned. “No. One of the things the District Attorney has made clear to us is that we are not law enforcement and we are

not to behave as if we were. I completely agree with that sentiment, and I have instructed LexCorp security to remove any such plans from the active files and shred them.”

“Shred them?” shouted Eduardo before anyone else could. “Isn’t that destroying evidence?”

“No, it is not. Those are copies. The originals are held in archive storage and cannot be accessed by any but LexCorp’s legal team. We are merely removing the possibility of another operation like the one to which we are referring here.”

Lois picked up the remote and clicked off the TV. She knew the kinds of things the media would throw at him. Had she not been involved with him, she would have thrown some of them herself.

But she couldn’t get involved in the story. She hated to admit it, but Perry was right. She was too close to it, and too close to Lex, to be an objective and disinterested observer. She cared too much what happened to him, and there was no way for her not to slant what she wrote.

She could, however, do some good as Ultra Woman. She decided to drop in on Deputy Chief Roberta Jean Thompson and offer her official testimony. She hadn’t spoken to anyone in authority except Bill Henderson since the shooting, and she thought it would be a good idea to get her side of the story down on paper.

Then maybe she’d fly some extra patrols. Lex would be busy all day, and Lois hated being inactive. Should something happen with Rebecca, Clark could contact her immediately.

Maybe catching a few criminals would help to settle her mind.

Then she had a thought. Lex had told her that one of Arianna’s guards had been captured, but no one had mentioned it during the press conference. That meant that Arianna probably didn’t know about it yet either.

A sly smile grew on her lips. Maybe Ultra Woman could have a heart-to-heart with that person, just to ask a few innocuous questions. And maybe Bill Henderson could get her in to see that person. As a professional courtesy, of course.

Corrections Officer Jack Wilson was beaten. He knew it, and he knew the scary woman in the starry skintight outfit knew it. The only thing he didn’t know was how to admit it.

The woman crossed her arms over her chest and nearly gave him an aneurysm. “Officer Wilson, I wish to converse with the woman who was captured during the firefight at Dr. Arianna Carlin’s residence. I am Ultra Woman. Surely you cannot believe that she represents a danger to me, or that I would allow her to escape.”

Somehow he ripped his eyes away from her chest and took a breath. “Look, Ultra Woman, I know who you are and I know you keep your word. I just don’t have the authority to let you in to see her.”

“I must speak with her now.”

“She’s not even in the general population yet!”

The eyes behind the cowl narrowed. “You need not raise your voice for me to hear you.”

He sighed. The sense of restrained power coming off her mixed with her apparent total lack of understanding of what she was doing to him by just standing there, all capable and confident and sexier than any of the porn stars in his collection at home. He didn’t know how to deal with her.

The women from the DA’s office were usually plain — at least they dressed plain when they came to visit jail inmates — and he knew to react to them with hands-off respect and eyes at eyebrow level. Some female prisoners were loud, some were flirty, some were violent, and some were like the one Ultra Woman wanted to see, cagey and full of fake smarts. He knew to treat them like a lot of Hollywood people treated extras, the ones

they called “scenery that eats.” And the few female visitors were no mystery to him either. They were real people, but they cared nothing about him except how to get past him to their loved ones. Those he tried to shield from the worst aspects of the jail and its temporary inmates.

But he had no idea how to deal with this woman, who exuded confidence and sex and power and control and rock-solid determination all at once.

He realized that she’d said something he’d completely missed. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

The muscles on one side of her face tightened for a moment, like she was forcing herself not to pull his arms off. “I suggested that you pick up that telephone on your desk and contact your supervisor. If you are unable to grant me access to this prisoner, perhaps he or she is able.”

Jack grasped at the idea like a drowning man would reach for a rope. “Yeah! I’ll do that.”

As he dialed his supervisor’s number, he realized that he’d have to get rid of his porn collection. No two-dimensional bimbo on any video screen or printed page could ever compete with the complete, real-life woman in front of him.

The knowledge that he’d never have any chance with her — not if they were the last two humans alive in the entire universe — made no difference.

Karen Vollmer shuffled into the interview room and plopped down on the chair indicated by the corrections officer. Another conversation with the police, another set of questions, another set of pat answers. She knew that as long as she acted like she was nothing more than a hired gun, they wouldn’t dig any deeper and find out just how much she really knew.

That was her ace in the hole. That was her leverage to use against Dr. Carlin when she got out of this stink hole. And she’d use it for all she was worth.

They’d kept her isolated since her arrest, and she was hoping for a new cell. The one she’d been in smelled like the previous occupant had been incontinent, and the odor was starting to get to her. Just because the bed sheets were freshly laundered didn’t mean the mattress wasn’t soaked with all sorts of bodily fluids.

The door opened behind her and she heard the guard leave. Maybe that meant that the real dealing would start.

But the woman who sat down across from her wasn’t a cop or a lawyer. She wore a skintight deep blue outfit dotted with tiny sparkles that caught the light. Her clothes flowed with the movements of her body as if it were a second skin. Even her cowl fit over her head as if she’d been born with it. The clothes might have belonged to a stripper or a hooker, but no one she’d ever known could have worn that suit without looking the part. This woman’s body language said she was all business.

It was the eyes, though, that scared Karen. They were hard and dark and angry. And they were staring at her. Just staring.

Karen knew she was fidgeting, but she couldn’t sit still. That flat stare seemed to look right through her — no, it seemed to look inside her where she didn’t want anyone to see, where she herself didn’t go, into the depths of her soul and her guilt.

It was too much. She couldn’t keep silent.

“You just gonna sit there and stare at me?”

The stare continued for a long moment, then the woman said, “Do you know who I am?”

“No. Wait, you’re an exotic dancer and you want a job reference. No, you’re the new Princess of Wales and you need my fashion advice. No, you’re—”

The woman leaped to her feet and leaned over the table. “I am Ultra Woman!”

Oh, yeah, that was genius, Karen, smart off at someone who can fry you with her eyes. Real good choice.

Ultra Woman slowly returned to her seat. “Do you have any

more witticisms to offer or are you prepared to answer my questions?”

“Uh — uh — I — uh — I’ll answer. The questions, I mean, I’ll answer your questions.”

Ultra Woman nodded. “Good. According to police records, there were five people at the estate guarding Dr. Carlin, plus one non-combatant. The names of the armed occupants were Karen Vollmer — you — Roger something, you do not recall his last name, Beth-Ann Reynolds, Paul Snider, and Yvette Jones. Is that correct?”

She was going over old ground. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad after all. “Yes.”

“What was your function?”

“Me? I was one of Dr. Carlin’s bodyguards.”

“Dr. Carlin had five bodyguards?”

“Yes.”

“Why so many?”

“Hey, everybody’s got to sleep and pee sometime.”

“So you had rotating duty assignments?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“To keep everyone fresh and alert, yes?”

“Uh-huh.”

Ultra Woman leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs in a figure-four pattern Karen rarely saw in a woman. “Tell me, Ms. Vollmer, are you aware of the disposition of your former colleagues?”

Karen frowned in thought. Why ask that one, and why now? “I know the guys who took down the estate killed Paul Snider when he opened up on them. I don’t know where anyone else is now.”

“I have permission from Inspector William Henderson to enlighten you as to their whereabouts. May I proceed?”

Karen shrugged and the woman kept speaking. “Mr. Bradley Carson — the groundskeeper whose name you did not recall — died at the Metropolis bus terminal. He had in his possession a large amount of cash which was laced with a toxin which he absorbed through skin contact. Yvette Jones and Roger Pulaski were found dead in a wrecked automobile in the state of Virginia. The cause of death was the same as Mr. Carson’s. Beth-Ann Reynolds died at the scene of the battle. Her machine-gun position was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade and destroyed. She died instantly.”

Karen was horrified. And she knew it showed on her face. Carlin had killed them — had killed them all, even Beth-Ann, just to make herself safe. She was the only one left alive. The only one who could name names and give dates.

And Carlin would come after her next.

“Please!” Karen grabbed the table for support. “Please! You have to protect me! You have to keep her away from me! She’s going to kill me if you don’t help me!”

Ultra Woman’s eyebrows furrowed. “Me? Protect you? Ms. Vollmer, I protect the innocent. You do not fall into that category.”

“But I — I have information! I can tell you things! I know things that will hurt her! But you have to help me! You have to protect me!”

“In truth, Ms. Vollmer, I need not do any such thing.”

Before Karen could babble another syllable, the door behind her opened. She stiffened, knowing that Carlin’s killer had found her.

“Unfortunately, Ultra Woman,” said a man’s voice behind her, “I do have to protect her.”

Ultra Woman stood and stepped to one side. “There is a chair here for you, Inspector William Henderson.”

“Thank you, Ultra Woman.”

Karen stared at him. They’d foxed her. They’d scared her so bad that she’d blurted out the truth, that she knew far more than

any mere bodyguard should know. All they'd done was tell her some story about Beth-Ann and the rest and she'd caved.

If she spilled her guts Carlin would find out. If she didn't, Carlin would still come after her to keep her from telling all she knew. If the police tried to protect her, they might keep her alive until Carlin's trial, which might be years from now. But without that protection, her life expectancy in prison was next to zero. Karen might not live to be convicted of the lesser charges they'd already brought against her.

Either way she was screwed.

Henderson set the same small recorder on the table in front of her and switched it on. "Now, Ms. Vollmer, let's you and me have a real talk."

Yep, she was totally screwed, all right.

Chapter Five

Lois stomped down the ramp to the bullpen and threw her purse into her desk drawer just before she slammed it shut. Any residual good feelings she'd retained from interviewing the Vollmer woman two days before had gone up in smoke. She looked around for Clark, but apparently she'd arrived at work before him on this day when she needed a listening ear. So she transferred some of her fury to him, just because she could.

How dare he not be available when she needed someone at whom she could vent!

The only other reporter in the room that early on that morning was Cat Grant, who was sitting at her desk and staring at Lois with mild alarm in her eyes. "Lois?" she ventured. "Are you okay?"

There! A convenient target for her remaining rage. "Oh, yeah," Lois barked, "I'm just peachy!"

Cat seemed to shrink down into her chair. "I'm — I'm sorry."

Lois didn't know if Cat meant that she was sorry that Lois was in a bad mood or if she was sorry she'd asked the question. Or, perhaps, Cat was just sorry to be on the receiving end of Lois' verbal assault. Lois let out a long sigh. "Cat, it's my fault, not yours. I shouldn't have snapped at you like that. I'm the one who should be sorry."

Mollified, Cat sat up again. "That's okay. I'm sorry you're having a bad morning."

Lois stood still, closed her eyes, and counted to ten. Then she opened them and looked into the other woman's face. "Do you have a minute?"

"Um — yeah. In fact, I have a couple of them."

"Good." Lois pulled a chair close to Cat's desk and spoke in low tones. "My parents and my sister are flying into the city tonight."

Cat waited for the next sentence, but Lois said nothing else. "Your parents and your sister are coming to visit you?"

Lois lifted her hands to the heavens for a moment. "Yes!"

Cat frowned. "And — you see this as a bad thing?"

"How could it be anything but a bad thing?"

"Um. I guess I'm missing something here, but I don't understand why this is so bad."

"Oh. I guess your parents are still getting along with each other, then?"

"Sure they do. And I get along just fine with them, too. In fact, I'm planning to go see them at Thanksgiving."

Lois sighed. "You're lucky. Mine fight."

"Oh." Cat hesitated, then asked, "With whom do they fight?"

Lois' mouth tried to grin. "'With whom?' Are you taking a refresher course on grammar?"

Cat returned the slight smile. "I almost said, 'Who do they fight with?' but you should never end a sentence with a preposition. That's something up with which I cannot put." She paused as Lois groaned and shook her head. "Now come on, spill it! With whom do your parents fight?"

Lois' smile melted away. "With each other. With me. With

Lucy. With each other over me or over Lucy. With me or with Lucy over each other." She leaned back and crossed her arms. "Just your normal, screwed-up, dysfunctional nuclear family unit, every day getting one day closer to a critical mass meltdown."

Cat nodded slowly and cautiously. "Right." She leaned forward and put her hand on Lois' arm. "Is there some way for me to help?"

Lois sighed, long and deep. "No, not really. Thanks for letting me vent. You may have saved Clark's life this morning."

"Glad to be of service. Although maybe you should wear a red hat or carry a warning sign when you're really mad. I'll know not to poke sticks through the bars at you."

Lois laughed with Cat. "I'll take it under advisement." She stood and shook her head. "Now that I'm here and feeling better, I really should get to work."

"Okay. You need to visit the ladies' room first? I have this sudden urge to, uh—"

"I'm fine. You go ahead."

"Okay. Hey, maybe we could do lunch today? Take your mind off your family?"

Lois tilted her head and considered the idea, then nodded. "Sure. You have those dual reservations at that fancy place today?"

"Sorry. Day after tomorrow. What if we hit your uncle's diner?"

"Good idea. I'll call him and warn him that you're coming. He can put blinders on his waiters so they won't be staring at you the whole time we're there."

Cat verified that the restroom was empty except for her and went to the last stall. She locked the door behind her and pulled out her cell phone to dial the special number.

"Yes, Ms. Grant?"

The electronically filtered voice always startled her no matter how many times she heard it. "I'm checking in. The only thing I have right now is that Lois' parents and sister are flying in tonight to visit her. She's not happy about them coming."

The voice waited a moment, then grated, "Is that all you have?"

"Yes. Sorry I don't have more, but I wanted to let you know as soon as I could."

"Hmm." The voice was silent for another moment, then resumed. "I don't know if this is useful or not, but I'm glad to have learned it from you and not from someone else. It gives me a bit more confidence in your trustworthiness."

Cat glared at the phone for a moment. Trustworthiness? This from a murderer and blackmailer and who knew what else? She should flush the stinking phone right now! Without breaking the connection!

But she didn't. She couldn't and she knew she couldn't.

"Thank you," Cat forced out. "Is there anything I need to know from your end?"

"No. Just keep watch on Kent and Lane. And let me know if White plans any more investigations."

"Will do. What about my balance?"

The sigh from the other end of the line was distorted into a rapid series of clicks and pops. "Is that all that concerns you, Ms. Grant?"

"I am doing this for the money, remember?"

"Of course you are. Very well. Your total indebtedness has been reduced twenty-three percent from the original total. And before you ask, no, I am no longer charging you interest on it, now that you are actively employed by me."

"Thank you. I'll be in touch as soon as I learn anything else interesting."

"Do that."

The connection broke before Cat could respond. She closed

the phone and nodded to herself. Arianna Carlin must be desperate to reduce her gambling debt by that much in just a few weeks. Luthor's failed capture operation must have driven her deep underground, which meant that she was probably depending on a few spies like Cat to get her all her information.

She nodded to herself and opened the stall door. It was time to let Perry know how desperate Arianna was becoming.

The day was long and uneventful for both Lois and Clark. Neither Superman nor Ultra Woman was called upon to make an appearance, so each of them was able to finish up their outstanding assignments and cultivate new leads from their desks as the job led them. So neither of them noticed the sky darkening until a huge clap of thunder exploded just outside the newsroom.

Cat scurried to the nearest window and peeked around the blinds. "Wow," she said, "I was sure that one hit right beside us."

Jimmy leaned close and peered out beside her. "It's the ones that are the closest to you that either scare you the most or do the most damage. And you rarely see them coming."

Something in the tone of his voice sounded odd to her. She frowned and caught his gaze, but he quickly turned away and turned on the TV in the far corner of the room. The local station was broadcasting a severe thunderstorm warning, specifically for the Metropolis International Airport.

Lois' head jerked up. "Perry!" she called. "My family is coming in on a plane in just a few minutes! Mind if I take off now?"

Perry poked his head out of his office like a Mississippi box turtle. "Go ahead. Will you be okay, driving in the rain?"

Cat watched as some silent communication passed between Perry and Lois. Lois hesitated, then shook her head and said, "No problem, I'll be fine. Don't worry about me."

"You sure, Lois?" queried Clark. "I can come along if you want me to."

There was that non-verbal communication thing again. If Cat had had a tendency towards paranoia, she'd start to feel left out pretty soon.

Lois shook her head again. "No, really, I'll be fine. You go see if Rebecca needs a lift home from the hospital. She's supposed to be released this evening, isn't she?"

Clark nodded. "Tonight or first thing in the morning. But you be careful out there."

Lois nodded. "Don't worry. I don't take chances with airplanes and lightning."

Cat watched Lois close down her computer in record time and scurry to the stairwell. Maybe I should take the stairs more often, Cat thought. Lois runs up and down them all the time and she seems to be in great shape.

Ellen Lane gripped the armrests on either side of her seat and closed her eyes. "I'm going to be sick," she moaned.

"Just hold on, Ellen," her husband said as he patted her hand. "We're approaching the runway now and we'll be down in ten minutes."

"This plane is bouncing all over the sky, Sam! We should have gone around and waited for the storm to pass." Ellen put a hand on her stomach and belched loudly. "I don't know how much more of this I can take."

From her window seat, Lucy sighed and said, "You won't be sick if you decide not to be sick, Mother. Of course, it could be all those vodka and bourbon shots you had over Ohio and Pennsylvania making you nauseous."

"You leave me alone about that, young lady! You know how high-strung I am! You know that sometimes I need help to relax!"

"If you were any more relaxed, Mother, they'd have to mop you up and carry you off the plane in a bucket."

"Now see here, Lucy Lane! Just because you're going to

college in Metropolis doesn't mean you can speak that way to me! Your pilot boyfriend is a bad influence on you!"

Lucy fixed her mother with a laser gaze. "Allen makes a good living, Mother. He's honest and dependable and gainfully employed and he got us this flight at a steep discount. I'd think you'd be at least a little grateful."

"He's just trying to get in good with me! He's just like all your other boyfriends, he just wants to get you in bed with him!"

Lucy sighed as drunken, unreasonable Ellen surged to the forefront. "Fine, Mom, he's just after my body. Never mind that we're talking about getting married next summer. Just pretend he's a loser who's dating another loser whose mother is a total loser."

"What? Why you — you little—"

Sam patted her hand again. "Now, Ellen, let's just calm down and wait until we land before we—"

"Before we what, Sam? Before we start fighting again?"

"I think Dad would prefer that we didn't fight at all, Mom."

"I'm sure he would! But he's talking to the wrong person! I never— Yaaaah!"

The plane lurched to the left and tilted sharply, then dipped back to the right again. Lucy turned quickly to the window and saw what she thought were pieces of metal flying out of the engine on the right wing. One piece of metal seemed to pop off the side of the engine and puncture the rear of the wing. Bird strike, she thought, or maybe just debris kicked up by the storm, and a very expensive jet engine was suddenly scrap metal. What a way to go.

For a few moments, flames popped out of the back of the engine, then a plume of thick dark smoke billowed out. A flight steward pulled his way along the aisle and told everyone to tighten their seat belts and bend over while holding a pillow. Lucy's mind flashed on a scene from the movie *Airplane!* when the stewardess told the passengers to assume crash position and everyone in the passenger compartment jumped into different weird contorted postures.

But this wasn't funny. They were in real danger. Lucy knew, from dating Allen and from her own meager student pilot training, that the two most dangerous parts of any airplane flight were takeoff and landing, largely because the ground was too close for the pilot to recover from an error or compensate for a problem with the plane. Allen had taken her to one of the training films shown to pilot instructors concerning low-level crashes, and she never wanted to see anything so violent again in her entire life. It had frightened her so badly that she'd sworn off watching airplane disaster movies. She'd even considered never flying with Allen again because of them.

She almost stopped breathing when she realized that she was in a real-life crash about to happen.

Her mother wasn't the only one who wasn't happy with the way the aircraft was skidding through the air. Other passengers were calling out in fear or shouting questions at the flight crew as the plane's nose dipped sharply and it banked further to the right. The starboard flaps are jammed partly extended and we're going to spin in, thought Lucy, and I didn't get a chance to apologize to Lois for hiding her teddy bear in the tree when she was eight and calling her a baby when she saw it and cried and—

The plane suddenly stabilized. Lucy looked out the window again and saw a flying person wearing what looked like a black jumpsuit under the wing where the damaged engine was now streaming a thinning plume of white smoke. The person — it looked like a woman — was signaling to the pilot with one hand. Apparently they were going to attempt a landing despite the damage.

The overhead speaker crackled to life. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have declared an in-flight emergency and are landing with the help of one of Metropolis's superheroes. Please

remain in your seats until we come to a complete stop. We will be using the inflatable ramps to disembark from the aircraft. Please follow the instructions given to you by the flight crew. These instructions are for your safety and the safety of your fellow passengers. You must remain calm—”

The pilot, or whoever was talking over the intercom, faded from Lucy’s hearing. She was focused on the woman flying under the wing of the airplane. It had to be Ultra Woman! No one else could do what she was doing, except of course Superman, and this certainly wasn’t Superman. Now that she looked closer, she could even see Ultra Woman’s figure clearly. Her arms and shoulders weren’t huge by any means, but her excellent muscle definition showed through her suit. Her body tapered to a perfect waistline, and her hips were smooth and solid. Her calf muscles were picture perfect. Wonder if she uses a Stairmaster, thought Lucy.

Lucy was mesmerized by the sight of a woman doing something she’d long thought impossible for anyone other than Superman. She watched as Ultra Woman waved one arm and pointed down, then nodded in an exaggerated manner, probably signaling to the pilot again. Lucy gasped as Ultra Woman shifted position, then reached up and bent a piece of metal out of the way to release the wing flaps. We’re in the landing pattern, thought Lucy, and there goes the landing gear, down and locked. There’s Ultra Woman shifting back out to the damaged engine, scissoring her legs as she hand-walked down the wing, her leg muscles bunching and relaxing in turn, the dimple on her left buttock—

Oh, no, thought Lucy. Ultra Woman has a dimple on her rear end just like Lois does. I wonder if she hurt herself like Lois did when—

No.

No way!

But—

They were the same build. They appeared to be about the same height, although estimating Ultra Woman’s height was difficult under these circumstances. But Lucy had stood under a Boeing 747 wing with Allen more than once, so she did have some experience with the size of the engines. They looked to be about the same height—

No! Her sister couldn’t be Ultra Woman! Impossible!

And then the woman flying under the plane lifted her face and appeared to scan along the passenger compartment, and when her eyes found Lucy’s, she stopped for a moment and almost seemed to relax. Then Ultra Woman’s gaze continued along the side of the plane and she nodded to herself.

Those were Lois’ eyes behind that mask.

Lucy turned in her seat and tried to look to the back of the plane, but she was too short to see over the seat back. As she twisted, her mother grabbed her arm in terror and blurted out, “We’re going to die I’m so sorry it’s all your father’s fault take care of my parakeets—”

“Ellen! Calm down! Ultra Woman is helping us land! We’re going to be fine!”

“Oh, yes, it’s just like you to get a woman to help you, isn’t it? Just wait till we get to the hotel! You’ll pay for this, oh yes you will, Doctor Samuel Lane!”

Lucy almost leaned over to say, Don’t worry, Mom, Lois is landing the plane, but at the last second she realized how stupid that sounded. There was no way Lois was flying under the wing and helping them land. It wasn’t possible.

Lucy looked out the window again and was stunned to recognize her sister’s profile under Ultra Woman’s mask as the heroine helped guide the plane to a soft touchdown and smooth landing. She peered closer and saw Lois’ exotic eyes — eyes of which she’d always been jealous — blink twice as they looked into the cockpit once again. Ultra Woman — Lois — even blew on the tires and got them spinning forward to reduce the shock to

that side of the airframe.

As the plane slowed to a stop and the flight crew stood to assist the passengers, Lucy sat back and let out a long breath. Her sister was Ultra Woman! And if she hadn’t made the assumption and then looked for evidence, she never would have realized it.

She glanced out the window once more and saw the heroine staring at the engine as if checking for a fire. She floated down, spoke briefly to two of the emergency workers, then lifted up into the night sky and disappeared from view. Probably headed to the terminal to meet them, thought Lucy.

She wondered if Superman was available and if Lois would be willing to set her up with him. She’d never have to pay airfare again.

Lois’ apartment door closed behind her parents as they left, still arguing about anything that came into Ellen’s inebriated head. The traffic leaving the airport was horrible and Lois had picked the wrong line at the parking lot payment booth and the airline was holding everyone’s luggage overnight for security reasons and Sam had forgotten to pick up Ellen’s overnight bag from the overhead bin and there was no way for them to get it back tonight and now Ellen would have to buy a toothbrush and toothpaste and hairbrush and a shower cap and no she wasn’t going to stay there that night and put Lois to any trouble because they had hotel reservations for the night unless Sam had messed them up too and Metropolis cabs always smelled horrible because of all the drunks getting sick in them and the stairs in Lois’ apartment building were too steep and the steps were too tall—

Lois leaned against the closed door and looked at her sister. Their eyes met and they sighed almost in unison. “How did you survive the flight with all that going on?” Lois asked.

Lucy shrugged and sat down on the couch. “It wasn’t all that bad until the engines started falling off the plane.”

Lois grunted. “I guess that was more fun than you thought you were going to have.”

“It was that. I’m so very glad that Ultra Woman was there tonight. She saved a lot of lives.”

“I’m glad she was there, too. I wouldn’t want to file a story about my little sister getting smushed like a bug in a plane crash.”

“So, you already sent in the story?”

“Yes. I called it in while you and Dad and Mom were being checked out by the airline’s doctor.”

Lucy took a long breath. She wanted to know. She needed to know. She didn’t want to find out. She hoped she was wrong. She hoped she was right.

Lois sat beside her and gently put an arm around her shoulder. “Hey, Punky, it’s okay. You’re safe now.”

Lucy nodded. “I know. Thank you.”

“For what? For telling you that you’re safe?”

“No.” For better or worse, Lucy decided to go for broke. “For propping up the starboard wing and landing the plane.”

Lois’ eyes flickered oddly. “What? For— I did what?”

Lucy turned and faced Lois directly. “You’re Ultra Woman, aren’t you?”

Lois said nothing, but her eyes nearly popped out of her head and her lower jaw all but fell away from her mouth. “It’s true, isn’t it?” insisted Lucy. “I saw your butt.”

Lois snorted and snapped her mouth shut. “What? You saw my butt? What in the world are you talking about?”

Lucy stood and stepped to the middle of the room. “When we were kids, I hid your teddy bear up in the tree in Mr. Wilson’s front yard across the street, remember? You climbed up to get it but you fell and hurt your leg. You have a permanent dimple in your left butt cheek from a root you fell on that dug a little chunk of meat out of the muscle and the doctor said that you’d be okay but that you’d have that dimple for the rest of your life.” Lucy tried to smile. “I saw that same dimple on Ultra Woman just a

little while ago when she was flying under the wing of the plane.”

Lois stared at her. “I’m right, aren’t I?” insisted Lucy. “You are Ultra Woman.”

Lois waved her hands helplessly. “Lucy, I—”

“No, it’s okay, I won’t tell anyone, not ever. Not even Mom and Dad.” Lucy blew air past her lips. “Especially not Dad, and most very especially not Mom. They’d never understand.”

Lois slowly leaned back on the couch and put her hands in her lap. “Do you understand? Why I didn’t tell you before, I mean.”

Lucy found a chair and sat down. “Well — yes, I think so. We haven’t been all that close lately, and this is a humongous secret, and it’s important for you to keep it or you would’ve told everyone by now.”

Lois nodded. “That’s all true. Except that the main reason I didn’t tell you wasn’t because I don’t trust you with it — because I do — but because I wasn’t sure how to tell you.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that now. And unless you’ve been showing everybody your bare butt as yourself, which I seriously doubt you have been, I don’t think anyone else will be able to figure out who you are — I mean, who else you are. At least, not like I did.”

Lois nodded again and smiled ruefully. “He warned me not to get rid of the cape.”

“What? Who told you that?”

“Superman, of course. The cape would have covered—”

“Superman!” Lucy leaped to her feet. “You know him? Duh, of course you know him! Ultra Woman works with Superman! Yikes! My sister knows Superman! Oh, Lois, wow, wow, wow —”

Lucy started bouncing in place and fanning herself with her hands. “Can I meet him? Please, Sis, can I meet him? I mean, he’s so cool and so — so super! And he’s hot! Oh, he’s so hot! Is he dating anyone? Oh, crap, are you dating him? Are you and he — do you — like up in the air and — ew! You don’t do him in the air, do you?”

Lois stood and planted her fists on her hips. “Lucy Lane! No, I’m not dating Superman! I’m not ‘doing’ him, either on the ground or in the air or anywhere else! And I’m certainly not joining the mile-high club with him! I can’t believe you — no, after knowing you for nineteen years I can believe it! Whatever happened to Allen?”

“Allen who?”

“Allen Peterson, your boyfriend! The pilot you wrote about in your last two letters! The guy you flew with from California to Texas and back again!”

“Oh, yeah, that Allen. He’s still my boyfriend, but he wouldn’t mind if I — if Superman and I — oh, nuts. Maybe he would mind after all.”

Lois held her sister’s gaze for a long moment, then snorted out a laugh. “Well, I guess you wouldn’t be Lucy Lane if your mind didn’t swerve into the gutter on a regular basis.”

Lucy ducked her gaze. “I’m sorry, Lois, really. But you have to admit that it’s an interesting thought.”

Lois’ eyebrow rose. “I’m not sure Superman would agree with you.” She took Lucy’s hands and tugged her back down to the couch. “Now, I’m sure you have some questions for me. I’ll answer anything I can.”

“Okay.” Lucy thought for a moment, then asked, “How did you get your powers? I mean, there’s nothing like that in our family.” Suddenly her jaw dropped. “Unless — oh, no, Lois, is Dad — I mean, did Mom — are we — are you really my — my half-sister?”

It was Lois’ turn to drop her jaw. “What? No! How could you — no, wait, I can see exactly how you could come up with that question. No, as far as I know, you and I are twisted branches of the same gnarled family tree.”

“Oh. Then — how did you get your powers?”

Lois sighed. “I don’t know. And I’m not dodging the question, either. I can’t tell you because I really don’t know. It was like — like Superman’s powers were copied to me somehow.”

“Oh.” Lucy nodded slowly. “Um. I don’t know what to ask you now.”

“Then why don’t you get some sleep? You may not feel it now, but you’re going to be exhausted tomorrow. Besides, I do still have to go to work in the morning.”

“But I’m not tired!”

“But I am.”

Lucy frowned. “How can Ultra Woman be tired?”

Lois shook her head and smiled. “Because I’m still human and I need my sleep. I’m going to let you sleep in tomorrow. Call me when you wake up, okay? We’ll have lunch, assuming you get up in time.”

“Oh, I’ll have to. I need to get used to getting up early for class.”

Lois stopped and stared. “Class? What class?”

“College.” Lois didn’t register any recognition. “My college classes?” Still no response. “My college classes that I’m going to be attending while living with you?”

Lois jumped to her feet and leaned over her sister. “You WHAT?”

Okay, thought Lucy, that got a response. She all but whispered, “I guess Mom didn’t tell you why we were coming?”

Lois moved back a step and put her hands against the sides of her head. “No, she didn’t, I thought it was just a family visit, but let me guess. You’re supposed to live with me while you go to school and Mom and Dad pay for it and give you an allowance and I’m just pleased as punch with the whole idea. That about it?”

“Well, yeah, except for the part about you being so happy to have me living with you.” Lois snorted and dropped her hands. “Hey, Sis, it wasn’t my idea! Mom insisted that I live with you. You’re supposed to protect me and keep me out of trouble.” Lucy shook her head. “I guess I’d better be good if I’m going to be reporting to Ultra Woman.”

“Lucy — no.” Lois crossed her arms and took a deep breath. “I don’t want to have this conversation right now. Let’s get some sleep and talk about this in the morning. I assume that Mom and Dad aren’t leaving first thing tomorrow?”

“I don’t think so. But then, I thought they’d already cleared this whole thing with you, too, so maybe I’m not in the loop after all.”

Lois bit her lower lip for a moment, then said, “We’ll all have lunch together tomorrow. And we’ll hammer this out with them then.”

“Okay, Sis.” Lucy sat back and released a jaw-cracking yawn. “Wow, I guess I am tired after all.”

“I’m not a bit surprised. You want to share the bedroom with me or would you rather use the fold-out couch? It’s not all that comfortable, but it’s more private.”

“I think I’ll take the couch if you don’t mind showing me where the linens are.”

Lois grinned. “No problem.”

Lucy stood and followed her sister to a closet. She hesitated for a moment, then said, “Lois? I’m sorry.”

“About what?”

Lucy took the pillows and blanket. “About all this.”

“You’re not a burden, Punky, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“No. I’m sorry that Mom and Dad didn’t include you in their plans.”

Lois hesitated, then picked up a fitted sheet and two pillowcases. “It’s fine. I’m used to it by now.”

“You shouldn’t be. It isn’t right. If you don’t want me to stay

with you, I'll back you up at lunch tomorrow. I don't mind living on campus. Might be fun, actually."

Lois shrugged. "If you want to, that's okay with me. But it's also okay with me if you stay here." She pulled the cushions off the couch and unfolded it into a bed. "As long as we establish some ground rules and stay with them."

Lucy grinned. "No problem. Really. Hey, why don't we use this to press for a bigger allowance for me? I'll split the increase with you."

Lois laughed. "That's my little sister, always with an angle."

"Okay then, we'll leverage an allowance for you, too, just for putting up with me."

They laughed together. "Lucy Lane, you are the most devious, least trustworthy, and by far the sneakiest little sister in the world. You'd make a wonderful reporter."

Chapter Six

Clark opened the door to Rebecca's hospital room and cautiously peeked in. "Is everybody decent this time?"

Both Rebecca and the nurse laughed. "Yes, Mr. Kent," answered the nurse, "we're all decently covered."

"Good," he sighed dramatically. "I wouldn't want to be arrested for being a Peeping Tom."

"Or a Peeping Clark," added Rebecca.

The nurse patted her hand. "You're doing very well, Ms. Connors. I think you'll be able to leave tomorrow or the next day, but of course that's the doctor's decision, not mine. Do you have some place to go where you'll have some in-home care for a few days, or should I make some calls for you?"

Rebecca gestured toward Clark. "He insists he's going to take care of me. And my employer has already arranged for a nurse and therapist."

"Well, that's just fine, Mr. Kent. Do you know what all you'll need to do?"

He smiled and nodded. "I think so, yes. Assuming she's released tomorrow, when will she be able to travel?"

The nurse's smile faded. "Travel? Oh, no, Mr. Kent! She won't be able to sit up long enough for a car trip for some time, and flying is completely out of the question, what with the changes in air pressure and her limited mobility and—"

"Ultra Woman has volunteered to fly her to a place where she can rest and recuperate, assuming the doctor clears her to go. And she'll have twenty-four hour care from the start and a qualified physical therapist, I promise."

"Oh." The nurse apparently didn't know how to process that information. "Well — I'll have to inform Dr. Gaddis. This may change what he plans to prescribe for Ms. Connors."

Clark smiled and nodded again. "I understand. I promise that she won't do anything the doctor tells her not to do."

"Hey!" Rebecca snapped. "I'm right here! Don't talk about me like I'm a piece of meat, okay? Besides, I've been in this bed for five days, and I'm ready to look at some different walls."

Clark tried to muffle a laugh but only snorted. "That reminds me of something. Do you know what Oscar Wilde's last words were?"

Rebecca frowned. "Oscar Wilde, the English Victorian playwright? Got in lots of legal trouble for his dissipated lifestyle?"

"That's the one. He was sick and broke at the end of his life, and he was lying in bed in a cheap apartment in Paris, France, when he sat up and told the landlady, 'Either that wallpaper goes or I do.' He died later that day."

"Last words." Rebecca growled under her breath. "I'm in the hospital recovering from a gunshot wound and he's giving me somebody's last words." She lifted her hands in helpless amazement. "Thank you so much for that encouragement, Clark, my dearest. I hope you don't trip on your own hyper-inflated wit."

The nurse raised her hands, palms out, and stepped away from the bed. "You two can fight as long as Ms. Connors stays in bed. I have other patients to look in on, so if you need someone just buzz the nurses' station."

Clark waited until the nurse left the room before he laughed softly and sat on the edge of the bed. "Come on, Rebecca, I was just making conversation."

She crossed her arms over her chest and frowned at him. "Oh, really? Well, then, I hope I come up with some really pithy, profound, and meaningful last words when I'm on my deathbed. And I hope you're there to record them for posterity."

He ducked his head and looked sheepish for a long moment, then said, "Do you want to know what Pancho Villa, the Mexican bandit leader, said just before he died of an infection?"

"No." She glared at his protruding lower lip and puppy-dog eyes gazing at her over his glasses until she finally dropped her hands to her sides and said, "Oh, for— Fine! Stop pouting and tell me what he said."

"He said, 'Don't let it end like this! Tell them I said something.'"

Her eyes bugged and her jaw dropped. "That's it?" He nodded. "Those really were his last words?"

"Well, I wasn't there, but that's what the history book says about it."

She snorted. Then she chortled. Then she laughed aloud and pressed one hand to the bandage still covering the surgery site on her belly. "Oh, thank you, Clark! That makes up for the first one."

"I'm glad to hear it."

She glanced at the open door and lowered her voice. "Hey, are you, um, all better now?"

"You mean"—he made a wavy motion with one hand—"am I feeling super again?"

"Yes. Are you?"

He smiled. "I'm back to normal. That's why I've been sitting by the window. The sunlight helps me get better."

"Huh. I wish it would help me like that."

"Sorry, can't help you there." He leaned over and kissed the tip of her nose. "But let me tell you the plans for the next few days. Everything's ready to go, pending your approval. I won't do anything unless you tell me it's okay with you."

Her eyes clouded and she looked away. "Are you sure your parents won't mind having me around? I mean, they don't know me from Eve's puppy dog."

He smiled and touched her hand. "They'll love you just like I do, Becca. I promise. Why wouldn't they?"

As Clark began describing his plans for the next three weeks of her life in Smallville, she tried not to think about the fact that Clark's love for her didn't appear to include their future beyond that time. He'd never spoken of them being together a year, five years, twenty years into the future, only the length of time her recovery might take.

She didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. And it frightened her more than anything she'd ever experienced.

But there was no way she'd let Clark know how she felt.

Lois flew slowly over the city and smiled to herself. She was low enough for people to see her — a number of them pointed and more than a few waved — but they couldn't see her expression. There was no reason to let everyone in Metropolis know that Ultra Woman enjoyed flying so much. She'd just pretend that she was flying because it was time for her early evening patrol.

As she passed over the northern quadrant, where the more affluent but not rich citizens tended to live, she heard what sounded like cries of pain. Her hearing focused on the sounds and she flew in a decreasing spiral pattern until she located the

source. Then she heard what sounded like a single gunshot.

As she landed softly on a perfect driveway lined with beautiful roses and an ideally manicured lawn, she heard what sounded like a body crashing into and through a sheetrock wall. She swept the house from the far side to the center until she found two men in the living room brandishing shotguns. A man was lying face-down on the carpet near a smashed-in wall. Blood pooled from his chest on the floor. A woman was struggling in the grip of a third man who was pulling off her shirt and pawing at her breasts.

That was all it took.

Ultra Woman smashed through the front door and sped through the room. The two men who'd been holding the shotguns suddenly found their hands empty. One pulled a revolver from behind his pants and pulled back the hammer, but before he could fire Ultra Woman's heat vision super-heated the grip. The man cried out in pain, dropped the revolver to the floor, and fell back cradling his burned hand. The weapon's rubber grips melted and dripped onto the carpet.

The other man who'd lost a shotgun jumped into a flying side kick but never connected. Ultra Woman stepped to one side and jabbed him in the back with her elbow. The dent he made in the sheetrock across the room was impressive, especially where his upper thighs struck a horizontal wall stud. He fell to the floor, silent and unmoving.

The third man threw the woman in his arms to one side and snarled, "Come and get it, baby! You ain't good enough to take me!"

Instead of answering, Ultra Woman grasped a shotgun in each hand, one by the breech and one by the joint of the stock just behind the trigger. She held them up in front of him, both muzzles pointing at the ceiling.

Then she squeezed.

A shell burst in one of the guns as the barrel slowly fell to one side. The other gun fell to the floor in pieces.

The man paled and held his hands up. "Okay, honey, you win. Let me give you my gun."

As he reached behind his back, she dropped the fragments she still held. "You need not bother."

A 'whoosh' of air and she stood in front of him, holding a huge automatic. "What caliber is this weapon? It is quite large."

The man blinked, then said, "Uh, it's, uh, it's a fifty-caliber semi-auto. Cost me almost a grand."

"Has it seen much use?"

"Yeah. I mean, yeah, at the practice range—"

He spun on his toes and lunged for the front door. Just before he stepped outside, he bounced off Ultra Woman and fell back with a thud.

"Were I in a mood to advise you, I would advise you to be silent and await your attorney."

He put a hand to his chest and groaned. "Ow! Felt like I ran into a wall."

"You might have damaged a wall. You cannot damage me. Now be seated beside your cohorts before I decide to lose my temper."

His eyes widened and he crab-walked backwards to the living room. As she followed him, she grabbed the unconscious would-be Chuck Norris by the collar and dragged him behind her.

"Remain here. And that is not a request."

The two conscious men didn't answer. Ultra Woman turned to the woman on the floor and knelt beside her. "You are safe now," she said softly. "I will not allow them to injure you further."

The woman took Ultra Woman's hand and sat up, holding her torn shirt closed with the other hand. She pointed to the man lying against the wall. "My — my brother," she stuttered. "They — they shot him!"

Ultra Woman turned and scanned the man with her x-ray vision and saw that the shotgun blast had hit him in the center of the chest. His heart and lungs were shredded and his spine was severed.

She doubted that he'd known what had happened to him.

"I — I am sorry," she said to the woman. "There is nothing anyone can do for him."

Tears filled the other woman's eyes and she began sobbing. She leaned into Ultra Woman's arms and dissolved into her shock and grief.

Ultra Woman looked over the victim's shoulder and caught the gaze of the large man who'd bounced off her. It would be so easy to rid the world of three more vermin, she thought. It would save the jail's time and money. Their cases wouldn't tie up the courts for months. And they'd never invade a home and kill innocent people again.

She thought about it for a long moment.

Then she decided that Clark certainly wouldn't do something like that. He might think about it for a microsecond, but he'd never actually do it.

So she wouldn't either. It would be a mistake, not unlike the one Lex had made in trying to apprehend Arianna by himself, and she wouldn't repeat his mistake. She wouldn't take justice into her own hands. She'd help to keep the law, but she refused to be the law.

She lifted her head and saw the wall phone lying shattered and useless on the floor. So she reached into her belly pocket and pulled out a super-slim cell phone, then dialed it.

"Nine-one-one operator. What is your emergency?"

"This is Ultra Woman. I need police and ambulance at — one moment." She turned her head and peeked outside at the street address on the mailbox, then gave it to the operator. "I have just captured three men in a home invasion. One male victim has been shot, and another, a woman, has been assaulted."

"I'm sorry, you said you were Ultra Woman?"

"Yes! Now send someone over here before I remove any need for your services!"

She heard a sharp intake of breath and looked at the invaders. The one whose hand had been burned by the revolver was shaking and crying. "Don't kill me, lady! Please don't kill me!"

Ultra Woman lowered the phone and snapped, "Then be silent and do not disturb me!"

The man sank to a fetal position, still cradling his burned hand. His sobs almost outdid those of the woman Ultra Woman still knelt beside.

She lifted the phone to her ear again. "This is Ultra Woman again. How close are those units?"

"They're less than two minutes away, ma'am. Will you stay there until the officers arrive?"

"Of course I will."

"Thank you. Can you tell me if the person who was shot needs immediate attention?"

Ultra Woman hesitated and glanced at the woman on the floor. "No," she replied.

"Thank you. How about the alleged perpetrators?"

"Alleged!" Ultra Woman barely restrained herself from yelling back. She took a deep breath, then said, "They are all here, all three alive. One of them is unconscious and another has second-degree burns on his right hand. And your officers need to know that the third man is very large and very strong. They will need to take precautions with him."

"I will advise them, ma'am. Thank you for the call and for your help."

"You are welcome. Just tell them to — never mind, I can hear the sirens. Tell them that no one is armed and the scene is secure."

"Yes, ma'am. Please stay on the line until the officers enter

the room.”

Ultra Woman looked at the victim’s sister. The other woman had risen to her knees and had dropped her hands from her torn clothing, exposing both shoulders and one side of her chest. Her head turned slowly until she fixed her gaze on something on the floor behind Ultra Woman.

“Young woman, what is your name? Can you tell me your name?”

The woman’s voice was flat and hard. “Lillian.”

“Very well, Lillian. Hello. I am Ultra Woman.”

Lillian gave her a hard stare. “I kind of figured that out for myself.”

“Of course you did. That was silly of me. The police and the ambulance will be here very soon, so please — wait, where are you going?”

Lillian stood and stepped behind Ultra Woman, then leaned down.

Then Ultra Woman heard a click.

Lillian straightened and pointed the big automatic at the huge man who’d pawed her. “You’re first.”

Ultra Woman stood and moved in front of the muzzle. “No! Lillian, this is not the way to deal with this.”

Lillian’s voice was flat and hard. “Sure it is. I shoot them and the cops just take them to the morgue. It was self-defense, Officer. They got past Ultra Woman and tried to kill me.”

Ultra Woman shook her head. “That is not justice. That is revenge.”

“I deserve it! They deserve it! They killed Mitchell!”

“I know. And I thought about killing them myself. But I did not.”

“Why not?” asked Lillian. “You could fly them out to the middle of the Pacific and let the sharks snack on them. You could snap their necks and drop them in the middle of the desert. You could throw their bodies into the sun. They’d never be seen again. No one would ever know.”

Ultra Woman slowly moved forward and touched the pistol’s muzzle. “I would know.”

“Yeah, well — they’d never hurt anyone again!”

“That is true, they would not. But I am not the one to say what happens to them. I cannot be.”

“You’re strong enough! I saw what you did to them and you weren’t even trying hard!”

Ultra Woman nodded. “What you say is true. But let us say I decide that these men need to die and that I need to make that happen. What next? Whom do I execute next? Another accused murderer? A rapist? A kidnapper? A car thief? A burglar? Perhaps a jaywalker or two? Where would I stop?”

Lillian’s hand began to shake. “I — who cares about the next time? I want these men dead!”

Ultra Woman slid her hand along the action of the pistol and rested it on Lillian’s wrist. “I understand your feelings, Lillian. Believe me, I do. But I am not their judge.” She gently pressed the wrist down. “And neither are you.”

Lillian locked eyes with the heroine for a long moment. Then she let her arm fall to the side. Ultra Woman grasped the pistol as Lillian let her hand melt away from it and fell to her knees again.

Ultra Woman spared a glance over her shoulder at the three men on the floor. The one who’d tried to kick her had finally opened his eyes, but they weren’t focused yet. The man with the burned hand hadn’t moved except to wipe the tears from his eyes. And the big man was pale enough to faint.

Her teeth ground together and her free hand shook. Just being around these vermin was hard, much less having to say the things to Lillian that she’d said. Those things were true. And she believed them.

But she didn’t have to like them.

She heard cars screech to a stop outside and saw the flashing

lights. She lifted the phone to her ear and said, “The officers have arrived.”

“Thank you. We’re in communication with them. You can hang up now.”

Ultra Woman closed the phone, then picked up a small blanket from a nearby chair and draped it around Lillian’s shoulders as the first officer entered with his weapon drawn.

“Hey!” called the cop. “Everybody just be calm and stay still, okay?”

Ultra Woman slowly put the big automatic down on the floor in front of the cop and lifted her hands as she straightened up. “No one here has a weapon in hand, Officer. I am Ultra Woman.”

The officer tilted his head and frowned. “Yeah. I recognize your eyes. But you look different. Did you change your outfit?”

Then she recognized him from the ceremony when she’d announced her affiliation with the Superman Foundation. “You are Officer Michael Torrance, are you not?”

He nodded and holstered his pistol. “That’s me. Want to introduce me around?”

She lowered her hand to Lillian’s hair. “This is Lillian. She needs an EMT, preferably a female one if there is one available.”

Torrance lifted the microphone clipped to his shoulder. “Rhonda, we need you in here right now.” He released the button and softly asked, “Was she assaulted?”

Ultra Woman nodded. “I believe so. And her brother is over there against the wall. His name is — was — Mitchell.”

He turned and signaled to the two officers behind him. The older one moved to check Mitchell’s body while the younger one pointed his weapon at the three men on the floor behind Ultra Woman. A fourth officer entered the room and nodded to Torrance, then moved behind the three suspects and fastened handcuffs on each one. By the grunts they made, he wasn’t very gentle with them.

Ultra Woman knelt beside Lillian again. “These officers will take good care of you, Lillian. I must leave now.” She put her hand on the older woman’s forearm. “I am sorry about your brother.”

Lillian slowly lifted bleary eyes to Ultra Woman’s. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you for my life.”

It was too much. Ultra Woman all but leaped to her feet and strode out the door, then launched herself into the air. She had to get away from the scene of death and of lives ruined.

She didn’t know if Mitchell had a family. She didn’t know if Lillian had a husband or boyfriend who might blame her for being assaulted or children who wouldn’t understand what had happened to Mommy and Uncle Mitch. She didn’t know how many other homes the three criminals had invaded, how many other lives they’d ruined or taken, before she’d happened upon them and stopped them.

And at the moment she couldn’t handle thinking about it. She had to get away.

She needed solitude. And she knew just where to find it.

Clark gently closed the door to Rebecca’s hospital room. She’d fallen asleep without the aid of painkillers or sleeping pills for the first time, and he didn’t want to disturb her should Superman be needed. Besides, he had the feeling that she’d gotten tired of his jokes.

He understood. He’d gotten a little tired of them too.

But the reason he’d kept telling them had been to keep other subjects at bay, such as whether or not he returned her professed love for him. He’d steered the conversation toward her recuperation in Smallville — which he had, of course, cleared with his parents — and toward her vague plan to resign from LexCorp and focus on her studies once she was up and about again, but not about the future beyond that.

She wanted to talk about that future. But he didn’t know if

they had one together. He didn't want to lead her on or fill her with false hopes about their relationship.

Yet he also didn't want to abandon her in her time of need. As uncomfortable as she made him feel at times, he knew he would have felt far worse had he put too much distance between them. Had he told her at this difficult time that he wasn't interested in a life with her, he would have disappointed her and made himself feel like a complete heel.

As he strode out into the early evening sunset, he thought about calling Lois to see if she wanted to grab a bite to eat or—

* < > *

That was Lois.

Lois was in trouble. Or was she?

There were no words coming over the link, just an overflow of deep pain and despair. He tried to call to her over the link, but the strength of the incoming signal blocked his outgoing one. He almost chuckled to himself as he realized that he'd described the situation in the way Jimmy might have described a computer communications problem.

And that thought gave him his next move. The link didn't give him her location, and he couldn't talk to Lois, but like Jimmy tracing a signal source on a computer, he could trace the signal and find her.

She felt like she needed a friend.

Ultra Woman's sleek outfit didn't seem appropriate for Clark's Fortress of Solitude, so she spun into jeans and T-shirt as she landed on the ground beside the tree. She climbed the ladder and nearly fell on the floor, then leaned her elbows on her crossed legs and put her face in her hands. The old wooden platform with its rough bench and low wooden railing seemed to call to her.

But she couldn't hear it. All she could hear was Lillian's wailing for her brother and for the violation the three thugs had visited upon her. All she could feel was the pain the woman had shown on her face and in her posture.

Lois thought about what she'd do if someone killed Lucy, or her parents, or Lex, or somehow succeeded in killing Clark. She sobbed as she visualized herself pulling that person's arms off, or burning that person from the feet up with her heat vision, or slowly putting more and more pressure on that person's skull until the cranium shattered and brain matter oozed out and she could exert the necessary four hundred pounds of force without blinking—

And suddenly there were strong arms around her, arms which held her from behind but didn't confine her, arms which all but begged to take away the pain and make it all better.

Without speaking, without looking, she knew it was Clark.

Not Superman. Clark. Not blue spandex but flannel shirt and jeans.

Not the superhero but the man.

She wriggled in torment for a moment and lurched to one side, but he gently held her upright and pulled her back against his rock-solid chest. She grabbed his hands, intending at first to yank them away, but instead she held on and squeezed with all her might.

His mouth pressed against her ear and he whispered, "I'm here, Lois. Let me help. Please."

The words pushed over the fractured tatters of her emotional dam and she melted against him, weeping almost frantically. All her fear and horror and pain came crashing out all at once. Tears flooded her face and drowned out any words she might have tried to say.

Lex. Lex' broken plan and the deaths it had caused. Nigel. Being shot in the hand. Rebecca bleeding on her as they flew from the boat to Metropolis. Rebecca passing out just before Lois landed with her at the emergency room and the terror that her friend would die in her arms. Arianna Carlin. Nigel having

Kryptonite. Nigel pistol-whipping Clark. Rebecca saying that she loved Clark. Lex hinting that he loved Lois. Wishing for Momma. Missing Lucy. Begging to see Daddy once more, hoping he'd finally tell her he was proud of her. The people who'd died in the lab when she'd somehow received her powers. Desperately hoping that she lived up to Perry's expectations. Lillian. Mitchell. The officers who'd had to deal with the aftermath. The other victims of the three home invaders.

Needing Clark more than she'd ever thought possible.

She almost turned and told him. She almost said the words.

She very nearly unlocked the link and sent her feelings to him in a torrent.

Then she remembered Lana and how much Clark had loved her and how losing her had nearly crushed him. He didn't need some needy twenty-something throwing herself at him. He was already dealing with Rebecca and her statement of love. The last thing he needed was another complication in his life.

So she held on and accepted his deep friendship and started rebuilding the fortress around her heart.

He held on to her for dear life, not letting her break away and not letting her fake being okay. He didn't know exactly what was wrong, but he knew that she'd been pushed beyond her endurance. And as strong as she was, whatever had triggered this storm had to have been a terrible thing.

As she wound down, he shifted her slightly in his arms to what he hoped was a more comfortable position and scooted closer. She didn't seem to mind, so he stayed there.

And then he realized just how well she fit in the circle of his arms.

Lana, for the most part, had fit against him very well. If he made the effort, he could recall how good it had been to hold her close, how nicely she molded herself against his broad chest. There had always been a few irregularities between them, places where they hadn't quite fit completely, but the good places always overcame the shortcomings they'd had together. And they had kept working on smoothing out the irregular places together.

Lois didn't feel like she had any irregular places.

Rebecca fit against him fairly well, but sometimes she seemed to be trying to mold him to fit against her. Even on the boat, the night before Nigel had come, their kisses had been off-center almost as often as they'd made solid contact. Sometimes he felt as if she wanted him to be her ideal version of Clark Kent and not who he really was.

Lois, he already knew, fully accepted him for who and what he was. She knew everything about him and nothing about him put her off.

But she was involved with Lex Luthor, a man he couldn't compete with except on the basis of his powers, and that comparison would be so unfair as to be off the charts. Clark wasn't poor by any means, but he was pretty sure that he'd never be rich like Luthor. And he couldn't come close to the man's charisma and his ability to charm people into doing what he wanted them to do.

And he had to admit, the man was a snappy dancer.

So he drove a stake into the ground in a corner of his mind and tied his nascent feelings for Lois to it. Lois was a good friend, one who needed him as a friend and not as competition for her heart. She didn't need that kind of complication, especially not now with whatever was tearing her up so badly.

Somehow it felt wrong, even though he knew it had to be the right decision.

She chose that moment to lean away and wipe her face with her hands. She sniffed and said, "Yikes. I must look awful."

He almost said, You could never look awful because you're so beautiful. But he pulled it back at the last microsecond and instead told her, "No. You just look like something very bad

happened.”

She glanced at him for a moment, then turned her head away and described the home invasion scene she’d walked in on. By the time she’d finished, he understood why she was where she was and why she’d reacted as she had.

They’d moved apart slightly as she spoke but he still held her hand in his. As she finished, he gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. “You did everything you could have, Lois, and everything you should have. I can’t think of anything you might have done differently.”

“I know. But I can’t help feeling this way. That home invasion was just the — the arsenic icing on the cyanide cake, y’know? It’s like all the nastiness I’ve seen in the past few months just came crashing down on me.”

He nodded. “Yeah, it can get you down. And when it does, you have some choices. You can always come here and let it out. You can talk to my parents. They’re great listeners. Dr. Friskin is still in town and I know she’d be glad to talk with you. And—” he hesitated, then continued. “And you can always talk to me. I’ll always listen.”

She turned to him in the growing moonlight and for a moment he thought he’d never seen any woman as gorgeous as she was at that moment. She sat there glowing with beauty and power and he thought he’d pass out if she didn’t speak.

Then she said, “Thank you, Clark. You’re probably the world’s finest friend.”

It was the perfect thing for her to say. It might have been the only words that she could have spoken to keep him from making a complete jackass of himself. He smiled back and sat there, unable to speak, knowing that he didn’t have the strength to keep from saying the wrong thing.

He hoped she understood somehow.

He was right there. He was close enough to touch. He was close enough to kiss. And he was close enough for her to see just how incredibly handsome he was, how massive his heart was, how much he had to give.

Somehow she grabbed the reins of her heart and hauled back with all her strength, all of her power, all of her determination.

It was barely enough.

And she managed to tell him the best thing she could have said under the circumstances.

“Thank you, Clark. You’re probably the world’s finest friend.”

It was also the hardest thing she could have done at that moment.

Then she marshaled all of her super-strength and stood up. “Guess I’d better get home. Thank you again.”

She saw him nod and heard him say, “See you at the hospital tomorrow morning. Hope you don’t mind carrying the luggage.”

She managed a smile. “Not at all. I’m sure Rebecca would prefer your arms to mine any day.”

She floated up into the air, spun into her new outfit, and stretched toward the stars.

Maybe she could leave her pain and confusion up there.

Chapter Seven

Martha bustled about in the kitchen, wiping down the counter for the fourth time. She forced herself to stop and step back to check the room once again, sure that she’d missed something which would either bother Rebecca or disappoint Clark.

But there was nothing out of place, nothing that marred the usual cheery welcome of her home. She almost wished for something that was out of place so she could pass the time doing something instead of just waiting.

Once again, she reviewed the preparations they’d made to accommodate Rebecca. There was the wooden ramp laid over one side of the steps leading up to the front porch, the telephone

extension they’d installed in the sewing room beside the new hospital bed they’d rented, the metal handrails in the bathroom to assist Rebecca, and the new cell phone they’d bought so Rebecca would always be able to call someone. Again, there was nothing else in the house which would take up the time, the time that Martha wished she could spend doing instead of fretting.

She was so focused on her thoughts that she missed the sound of Superman and Ultra Woman landing in front of the house. The quick knock on the front door startled her into action and she bustled into the front room and readjusted the wheelchair for the fifth time.

She opened the door and smiled at the young woman in Superman’s arms. “Hello,” she said. “I’m Martha Kent, Clark’s mother. Please call me Martha. You must be Rebecca Connors. Please come in. I hope you like the place.”

The diminutive redhead smiled and nodded. “I’m sure I’ll love it, Mrs. Kent. I’m sorry, Martha. And thank you again for letting me crash into your lives. I just hope I don’t get in your way too often.”

Superman gently nestled her into the chair and checked the footrests. “Is that comfortable, Rebecca?” he asked. “Are they too high or too low?”

She reached out and touched his cheek. “They’re made for Baby Bear. They’re just right.”

Ultra Woman had followed Superman into the room, and now she stood behind him holding two medium-sized suitcases and an overnight bag. “Can you show me where this goes, Martha?” she asked. “I’m sure you don’t want me to just dump it all on the floor.”

Martha smiled and turned toward the sewing room, which would be Rebecca’s room for the next few weeks. “Right in here. And I hope all of you are hungry. Jonathan should be in from the barn in a few minutes. He’s rarely late for any meal, and having a guest for late breakfast is right up his alley.”

Martha heard Clark say, “I told you Mom would be thrilled to have you here. Isn’t she great?”

Rebecca’s reply was inaudible, but the fact that Clark had felt it necessary to remind Rebecca at this late date that she’d be welcome worried Martha. She hoped the girl would relax soon. All they needed now was a nervous house guest, especially one with Rebecca’s medical needs.

Lois put the suitcases down, then pulled her mask back from her face. “Phew. That thing gets just a teeny bit confining sometimes.”

Martha smiled at her. “I told you it would.” She opened one of the drawers in the dresser and glanced back at Lois. “Would you start handing me some clothes?”

Lois opened one of the suitcases and took out a stack of Rebecca’s undergarments. “I hope she likes the way you arrange her stuff.”

“If not, she’s more than welcome to rearrange it however it suits her.”

Lois heard a ‘whoosh’ and glanced through the wall to the living room. “Clark just changed into civilian clothes.” Then she chuckled. “And he’s taking Rebecca outside to show her around.”

“Why don’t you change too, Lois?”

“Well, I really wasn’t planning to stay. Unlike Clark, I’ve got some assignments to work on. And I have to go with Lucy this afternoon to help her register for her college classes. I think it’s dumb, but I’ve got to be there to verify that she’s got a real address and the money to pay her tuition. Otherwise she won’t be able to get enrolled as a resident of the state.”

Martha stopped putting clothes away and lifted up a tiny strand of material. “What on earth is this?”

Lois spluttered for a moment, then controlled herself. “That’s — um — a modern example of women’s underwear. A lot of

people think it's very stylish."

"Like you?"

"No." Lois frowned. "Not like me at all. I had to wear something like that last year when I was undercover at a strip club, and I was waiting tables, not dancing. That thing has less coverage than a cheap insurance policy."

Martha glared at Lois for a moment, then shook her head. "It looks more like dental floss to me."

This time Lois laughed aloud. Martha shook her head once more, then tucked the 'floss' into the back of the drawer. "I just hope she doesn't ever let Clark see it."

"Maybe she's saving it for their wedding night."

For a moment Lois wondered who'd said those words. Then she realized that she had.

She felt her face grow pale and she spread her feet for balance. She took a deep breath and slowly let it out, then did it again.

The sudden realization that Rebecca might marry Clark had stunned her more than she would have admitted. It left a hole in the pit of her stomach that threatened to engulf her heart.

She turned and sat on the edge of the bed, then felt Martha sit down next to her. "Lois, maybe you should say something to Clark about how you feel."

Lois closed her eyes and shook her head. "He just brought Rebecca here so she could recover. I can't get between them now." She rubbed her face with one hand. "It wouldn't be fair to either of them."

Martha patted her shoulder. "And it's not fair to you to deny what's in your heart."

Lois turned and looked through the wall, then smiled. "Clark just tried to slide down the ramp in front of the house in his sneakers. He got stuck on the surfacing and fell to the ground, then did a three-turn barrel roll down to the driveway. Rebecca is laughing so hard she's grabbing her stomach. And Jonathan is leaning against the corner of the porch, laughing even harder." She turned and faced her friend. "You really don't expect me to break up something like that, do you?"

"Lois—"

"And you can never tell him! I want your word on this, Martha! You can't tell him!"

"But—"

"No." Lois held her hand up. "I mean it. I want your word on this."

Martha chewed her lips for a moment, then said, "I wonder if Lana would have been this unselfish with Clark."

"I don't know, but that's not the point. I don't want to get between them. And I — I don't want to hurt Clark. Not ever."

Lois felt Martha looking into her eyes, rolling back her defenses and leaving her exposed and vulnerable. "From what little I've seen and from what I've heard from Clark — and from you — I doubt that Rebecca would have said what you did and meant it as much as you do."

"Still so not the point! Please, Martha! This is really important to me."

Martha took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Finally she nodded. "You have my word. I will not reveal your feelings to Clark in any way, shape, form, or fashion. If he finds out, you'll be the one to tell him."

Lois sighed and looked away. "Thank you. I — thank you."

Martha sat still for a moment, then Lois heard a car approaching. "Someone's coming." She looked through the wall again. "It's a sheriff's department car. I think — yes, Rachel Harris is driving. And she's alone."

"My goodness, I wonder what she wants?"

Lois stood and pulled her mask back in place. "Let's go find out."

Rachel watched Clark clowning for the young woman in the wheelchair as she stopped her car. They both seemed to be having fun, and Rachel wondered what was so hilarious.

Jonathan walked slowly in her direction, shaking his head and laughing as he came. It must have been a really good joke, thought Rachel. As she closed the car door, Martha stepped out of the house.

Then a frighteningly stunning young woman wearing a piece of the night sky came outside.

Rachel knew, without thinking about it, that she was not bad-looking, and had been described — on certain special occasions, when the light was low and her companion was being overly solicitous — as quite lovely. But compared to this woman, she was dowdy and frumpy and looked no better than a sow nursing a dozen piglets. She'd never even imagined herself looking as radiant and ravishing and strong as this woman, and she knew she never would.

Rachel hated her. Didn't know her name or why she was there. Didn't know why she was wearing a bodysuit made from a Van Gogh masterpiece. Didn't matter. She hated her.

She managed to look around at the others in her view, and none of them, including Clark, who should have been tripping on his tongue, seemed to think anything was out of the ordinary. The woman had no apparent effect on any of them.

So, Rachel decided that this beautiful exhibitionist wouldn't affect her, either.

She strode forward and smiled. "Howdy. How's everything with y'all this fine day?"

Martha smiled and walked down the steps as Clark picked himself up off the ground. "Hello, Rachel. It's good to see you. Is this a social call or a professional one?"

"A little of both. I heard in town that you folks are gonna have a house guest for a while, and I wanted to meet her and see if my office needed to do anything special for her."

"I don't think so. But let me introduce you to Rebecca Connors. Becca, this is Sheriff Rachel Harris. She's an old friend of ours."

Rachel touched her hat. "Good to meet you, ma'am."

Rebecca pushed her wheelchair to the top of the ramp, and suddenly Clark was behind her, holding on and guiding the chair down to ground level. Rachel tried not to react, but she'd never seen anyone move as quickly as Clark had just then.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Sheriff," said Rebecca. "How long have you known the Kents?"

"Oh, 'bout since I was in diapers. My daddy was county sheriff for more'n twenty years before he retired and I got elected to follow him. In fact, Clark and I went to the junior prom together."

The girl's face changed as if she'd never heard that factoid and wasn't sure how to take it. "Oh?" She paused for a moment, then continued. "You'll have to tell me that tale some time. We'll have a little girl talk session."

Out of the corner of her eye, Rachel saw Clark's face all but begging her to say nice things about him to Rebecca, and she almost smiled.

Then the stunning woman in black and silver stepped off the porch and floated down to —

She floated down to the ground.

From the porch.

Without stepping on anything.

And then she spoke in a low and melodic tone with a slightly stilted manner.

"Mr. Kent, Mrs. Kent, if there is no further need for my services, I must depart. Please do not hesitate to ask Clark to contact me should you require my assistance."

Rebecca turned her chair to the woman. "Thank you, Ultra Woman. You've been a big help."

Rachel blinked twice. This was the heroine who flew with Superman! And she was right in front of all of them! She was Rachel's hero and she was about to leave!

"Wait!"

Ultra Woman paused and turned to face the sheriff. "Yes? Is there something with which I might assist you?"

"Uh — no. I mean yes! I mean — oh, fudge!"

Rachel felt her cheeks brighten as everyone but the costumed heroine tried to hide their amusement. But Ultra Woman stepped closer and said, "Sheriff, I must tell you that I admire you. It requires much from a woman to command the respect of men, especially when one is in law enforcement in a small town. I have learned these things as I have worked with Superman, and I am certain that you are exactly the person who should occupy your position at this time." She reached out and gently took Rachel's hand. "Thank you for serving your fellow citizens as you do."

Rachel quickly searched the other woman's eyes, her body language, her memory of those words for any hint that Ultra Woman was teasing her — or worse, mocking her — but she found no such hint. The words were sincere and her touch was both firm and soft.

So Rachel tightened her own grip and shook hands. "Thank you. What you just said — well, it was just about what I was trying to say to you."

Ultra Woman's stern expression softened and she smiled widely. "Thank you, Sheriff. I deeply appreciate it. But I believe that those who hazard their lives in service to others are the true heroes." She released Rachel's hand and inclined her head in the sheriff's direction. "Should you require my assistance, please contact the Kents, and I will be at your service."

"Thanks. I'll let you get on about your business now."

"It will go better now that we have met. Farewell."

Then she stepped back and floated up into the sky, turned east, and rose out of sight.

Funny thing was, Rachel didn't hate her any more.

Then she dropped her gaze to Clark and decided that he didn't exactly hate Ultra Woman either. In fact, Rachel wished there was a young man in her life who looked at her with that expression on his face.

Lois landed on the roof of the Daily Planet and spun into slacks, flats, blouse, and matching jacket. It helped her conceal her costume better than a dress or skirt.

She made eye contact with Perry as she pulled her chair back from her desk. He nodded to her, then redirected his attention to whatever was on his desk.

Time to go to work.

She opened the story file on Ultra Woman's capture of the three home invaders and reviewed what she already had, then added two paragraphs about the victims using quotes from the police spokesperson. She frowned, then moved the new paragraphs further down in the story, knowing that Perry would prefer that her opinions appear on the op-ed page and not on page one below the fold.

She gave the story one more read-through, then saved the file and sent it to the editor's inbox. As she opened her assignment folder, she sighed. She'd been putting this off too long. It was time.

She picked up the phone and called Lex.

He answered on the fifth ring. "Lex Luthor. I hope this is an urgent call."

She tried to put a smile in her voice. "I hope so, too. Hello, Lex."

At once, his manner changed. "Lois! I'm so very glad to hear from you. Where are you?"

"Where us working stiff's have to be most of the day, at work."

He sighed. "I, too, am at work, but of course you know that because you called me here. I'm sorry, I'm a bit... snowed under at the moment. Rebecca's replacement is competent, but she lacks Rebecca's charm and skill in handling impatient people. And I have an interview scheduled with the District Attorney immediately after lunch. He wants to know exactly what happened at Arianna's house and why I sent my people out there."

"I didn't know about that."

"You still don't, not professionally. I don't want any publicity on this until the DA has settled on a course of action."

She hesitated, then said, "Well, I couldn't cover it anyway. I'm involved in the story. But—"

"Ah, yes, that's true. Journalistic ethics can be useful at times."

"What I was going to say was that my boss will be upset when he finds out I knew about this and didn't tell him." She hesitated again. "I have to tell him something, Lex."

"I see," he replied, his tone noticeably cooler. "Those ethics only stretch so far, I suppose."

"Now that's not fair! The *Daily Planet* has always dealt with you and your companies in an honest and open manner! And you've never asked me to violate those ethics before now because of our relationship!"

He was silent for a long moment, and Lois thought he might hang up. Then he sighed deeply. "I'm sorry, my dear. You're quite right, and I apologize. This has not been a good week for me."

"I understand, Lex, really I do. How about I ask Perry to send someone to the DA's office without telling him exactly what's going on? I can just say that I know there'll be something very important happening."

She could almost hear him biting his lip as he thought about it. "Very well. I will grant an interview with this person, assuming he or she is competent and is not a nuisance to me."

"Okay, that leaves out Ralph."

"Who?"

"Never mind. I'll suggest either Eduardo or Dave. Either of them will fit the bill."

"I shall look for them." He stopped, and Lois sensed that he wanted to say more, so she waited. "Lois, I would like to ask you a personal question."

Uh-oh, she thought. "Go ahead."

"Asabi is participating in a martial arts tournament this weekend, and while he has not specifically mentioned it to me, I'm certain that he would very much like for me to be there to watch. Do you think you might be able to get away for a few hours on Saturday afternoon?"

"Uh. Sure. In fact, that sounds like a really good idea. What time?"

"I will have to call you back with the particulars. My office has just been invaded by a barbaric horde of razor-fanged land sharks."

"What?"

"My corporate lawyers wish to speak with me."

She laughed. "Okay, we'll talk later. Call me on my cell phone. I'll be out of the office this afternoon with Lucy. She's registering for school, and yes, I'll tell you all about it when you call. Bye for now."

"Thank you, my dear. Goodbye."

She hung up the phone and smiled. He really wasn't a bad guy to be around. He had a pretty good heart and was mostly honest.

If only he hadn't tried to capture Arianna on his own. He should have left it to the police. And now his actions threatened to come between them.

She pushed back from her desk and walked toward her boss' office. A tip like this would make for a solid follow-up piece. She

only hoped Lex wouldn't come out looking too much like a wannabe third-world dictator.

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Hey, J!

Wow. I didn't realize it had been this long between journal entries, so I'll have to bring you up to date. I got shot and

Sorry. That was hard to write. Let me try again.

That tall scary dude who works for — used to work for Mr. Luthor, that Nigel St. John guy, shot me. We were — that is, Clark and Lois and Mr. Luthor and I — were on a weekend boating trip in the Atlantic and Nigel called us on the radio to get us to stop so he could find us and when he got there he pulled out a gun and told us he was going to kill all of us and he had some kind of green rock that

Sorry, can't tell you that part. Anyway, he shot Lois in the hand and hit Clark with his gun and then he shot me and Ultra Woman took me to the hospital and I almost died and

You know, I'm going to have to learn to finish my sentences. Even if they're saying really scary things.

I obviously didn't die. But they told me it was a close call. And I learned something about Clark that — I don't know what it means. But it's a big, big thing, J, a huge, monstrous, ginormous thing, and it isn't bad and it explains a whole lot of stuff, but it makes a difference to me. It changes things between us, really big time. And I don't know what kind of difference yet, or how big a difference, but I know it changes things between us.

I'm resting here in Clark's parents' farmhouse, doing my recuperating and after-surgery therapy. There's a physical therapist who's going to come over every day for the next ten days to help me walk properly and do some exercises to get my abdominal muscle tone back. Jonathan and Martha — that's Clark's parents' names — are great people and I hope I don't get in their way too much. They both told me I'm welcome to stay as long as I need to, and I believe them, but I'm just not comfortable on a working farm. I'm a marine biologist at heart, and the closest thing they have here to marine life is the bullfrogs in their cattle pond. I just don't do cows and chickens very well.

I love Clark. I told him so, and I told him before I learned his big secret and after I learned it. I really do love him, J, but I don't know if he loves me the same way. I want to go to sleep next to him, wake up next to him, come home from studying marine life to find him there waiting for me. With dinner already cooked and a warm bubble bath drawn just for me.

That's kinda silly, I know, but that's what I want. That's almost as important to me as getting that PhD and becoming famous. I'd much rather have all that than have a bunch of kids running around my feet screaming for toys or snacks, and if I had to choose between the PhD and marrying Clark then I think I'd — well — ooh, I don't know what I'd do!

It's scary, J. Sometimes I think I'd take the doctorate and the fame and sometimes I think I'd take Clark and sometimes I just don't know. And I always argue with myself over it, no matter which choice I make in my head.

I guess I'll just wait and see what happens. Maybe a rock will fall out of the sky with a note wrapped around it to tell me what to do. Or maybe Clark will decide he wants to marry me and follow me all over the world to help me in my career.

And maybe that rock will hit me in the head and wake me up. Or kill me, which would solve all those problems, wouldn't it?

Good grief. I need to stop thinking such depressing thoughts.

I just reread this entry and I must be more wiped out than I thought. I wrote Clark's and Lois' names together instead of Clark's with mine. Boy, I'm really tired.

Good night, J. The therapist is coming tomorrow morning and I need my sleep.

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"She's asleep now, honey. She's exhausted."

Clark nodded. "Thanks, Mom. I didn't want to leave the house while she was awake. I thought she might need me."

Martha smiled back, and Clark thought he caught a gleam of something he couldn't identify in her eye. "Don't worry. Your father and I will listen for her."

"Okay, okay. I just need to make a quick patrol in Metropolis. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I know you will. Are you patrolling with Lois?"

"Not on purpose. She had a lunch date with Lex Luthor today, and I don't know how late it ran."

"Really? I thought you two could—" and she wiggled her fingers beside her head.

"Not unless it's important. I don't butt into her private life and she doesn't butt into mine." He leaned down and gave her a peck on the cheek. "I won't be too late."

"Have a good patrol, Clark."

He grinned at her and floated to the back door, then slowly opened it as he scanned the area. As he'd expected, the few neighbors who were close enough to see the farmhouse were down for the evening. Rebecca's therapist was coming by at ten the next morning, and even though Clark didn't have to sleep that much, he was tired and needed at least six hours solid snoozing.

Early night midweek patrols were usually fairly uneventful, and Clark found himself wishing for one of those nights tonight. It had been his fault that Rebecca had been shot. Never mind that he'd been incapacitated by that green rock, or that Nigel St. John had taken the opportunity to pistol-whip him. He was Superman. He wasn't supposed to lose. He wasn't supposed to fail.

The patrol was done before one in the morning and he headed back toward Kansas. He was tired and he knew he'd be up relatively early the next day, but he felt that there was something he needed to do before he ended his day.

He needed to talk to Bob.

The mechanism in the floor of the barn still worked as smoothly and as silently as it had the first day he'd installed it. Bob couldn't see him, of course, but he still felt funny in the red-and-blue outfit, so he spun back to jeans and t-shirt.

Bob still rested in his rack, but there was something new underneath him, something that the specifications Bob had downloaded to their household computer hadn't contained. He knelt down to get a closer look.

Then he chuckled. It was a cheap necklace supporting a small heart-shaped pendant which read, "I am Bob. If found, please return me to Kent Farm."

That had to be Lois' doing. Of the few people who knew about Bob, only she would do something so frivolous and winsome.

He put his hand under the globe and waited for a response.

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<< Greetings, Kal-El. >>

Sorry, no, just Clark.

<< As you wish. How may I assist you, just Clark? >>

Funny. I see you've been taking comedy lessons from Lois.

<< She has commented on my growing understanding of humor. For example, I believe I understand why the small chain she has looped around my support base is humorous. It is because I am extremely unlikely to wander away from the farm and require a rescue. I believe that this would be classed as ironic humor. >>

I'm surprised you don't have a rabies tag, too.

<< I inquired about that, but Lois stated that it might be a bit over the top, as she put it. As it happens, your mother agrees with that sentiment. I believe she is something of a minimalist in her sensibilities. >>

In that case, I bow to the general wisdom and discretion of those fine ladies.

<< I sense your sarcasm, but I do not believe it is at all mean-

spirited, only very mildly sardonic. >>

You got it. Hey, how do you feel about having a name tag?

<< I do not 'feel' anything in the conventional sense. I have no objection, if that is what you mean. While it does not contribute to my efficiency, neither does it interfere with my general function, nor does it introduce a source of corrosion to my frame. Therefore I have no reason to protest its location. >>

Looks cute on you. Anyway, I wanted to touch base with you on a few things.

<< Of course. Would you prefer to begin with a financial review? >>

No, I'd rather — wait, yeah, let's do the financials now. I haven't gone over that with you lately.

<< It has been one year, two months, six days— >>

Fine! I admit it, I've been a bad boy.

<< That was not my point, Clark. I only wish to be accurate. >>

Let's just get to the bottom line.

<< Very well. The bottom line includes your own personal savings at the Bank of Metropolis, the payments LexCorp has been making to a separate savings account at the Smallville Bank and Trust, and the discretionary set aside for your personal use by the Superman Foundation. That total comes to \$915,312, pending the end of trading on the European stock exchanges. >>

Wh — what?

<< Nine hundred fifteen thousand— >>

No! I heard you, I just — you mean I'm almost a millionaire?

<< In the absence of specific instructions from you, I have taken the liberty of investing in a number of businesses and funds which have produced returns far beyond the norm. Since your mandate to me with regard to these funds was to 'take care of my money,' I have invested to produce the maximum return for minimal risk. If this situation does not suit your needs or sensibilities, I can liquidate your holdings over a short period of time and donate whatever percentage you specify to the charity or charities of your choosing. >>

Yeah, I — wait! I didn't mean for you to do that!

<< I have not. I was merely informing you of your options. I should also inform you that the total I quoted you does not include the money under the control of Digger Enterprises. That fund currently contains \$246,000. >>

Wow! How'd you accumulate so much dough there?

<< Low overhead. >>

Low — wait, that's a joke, right?

<< That was another attempt at humor, yes. You appeared to need a laugh. >>

You are learning. And that was actually pretty funny, in a vaudeville kind of way. Seriously, though, where did all that cash come from?

<< Some \$50,000 came from the Superman Foundation. Much of the rest has come from various museums and other dealers in antiquities who wish to find this pottery shard or that sarcophagus. About ten percent of it has come from small investments I have made, but I do not believe that it is the mission of Digger Enterprises to accumulate wealth. At the moment, the Board of Directors is reviewing three separate grant applications, which, if all are approved, will take the fund's balance below the \$30,000 level. Do you wish to know the specifics of those applications? >>

No, that's not necessary. Just keep doing what you've been doing, I guess. It's working.

<< I shall. Is there anything else you wish to discuss? >>

Um — well — now that you mention it — yeah.

<< Very well. What is the nature of this discussion? >>

Personal, I guess.

<< You are aware that as an artificial intelligence I lack experience in interpersonal matters? >>

You did fine with Lana.

<< In retrospect, I am uncertain if that is true. During my last conversation with her, Lana expressed regret for some of the actions she undertook with my assistance. >>

What were — no, don't tell me. If she didn't fill me in, I can't expect you to break her confidences.

<< You and she were married. By the laws and customs of this nation and its various states, as well as the laws and customs of Krypton, I would not violate any confidences were I to reveal my dealings with her. Besides, from a legal standpoint, I am merely a machine and cannot make rational decisions, much less legal or moral ones. >>

Maybe so, but don't tell me anyway. Unless she left a message with you to give me later on.

<< I have no such message from Lana to you, Clark. My apologies. >>

No problem. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about Rebecca.

<< Very well. What do you wish to share with me? >>

Um, I kinda wanted to get your opinion on whether or not she and I should get married.

<< I repeat, that is not a subject with which I am at all familiar. I have no expertise relating to human relationships. >>

So, Ann Landers you're not?

<< No. And I see that you are not above attempting to inject a bit of humor in our discussion. >>

I guess not. The therapist I'm seeing told me that sometimes I use humor to mask my real feelings.

<< Judging by my own research on the subject, that appears to be a statement which might apply to most humans. >>

Well. Anyway, I— Rebecca and I have been talking about getting married.

<< Is this an outcome which you desire? >>

Um — I don't know.

<< Were I a therapist, I would ask you to expand upon that statement. >>

Well — I feel responsible for her, for what's happened to her, for her getting hurt. And I feel responsible for her recovery.

<< Interesting. Are you responsible for her injuries? Did you point a firearm at her and pull the trigger? Did you board that boat with any intent to cause her injury? >>

Of course not! I just — I'm Superman!

<< Indeed, you are. But not even Superman is without limits. >>

I — Lois has told me that several times.

<< That is something she has related to me. And it is something with which Lana tried to deal also, but I have the distinct impression that she felt she did not succeed in this endeavor. >>

Why?

<< Why do I have that impression or why did she feel that way? >>

Why did she feel that way?

<< I cannot be certain, but I believe it was because she considered herself inadequate to be the wife of a superhero. More than once she asked me how to convince you that you were not only doing the right things for the right reasons, you were having a positive impact on the city of Metropolis as well as on the entire world, just through your example. >>

Really? Wow. I... didn't know she felt that way.

<< She informed me of that also. I believe she was trying to hide her feelings of inadequacy while learning how to be more adequate. Apparently she was successful, at least where you are concerned. >>

But she wasn't inadequate. I — I loved her.

<< And she never doubted that fact, at least as far as I am aware. She hoped you knew how much she loved you. >>

Yeah. I did.

<< Good. I also believe that Lana felt as if she sometimes held you back from having an even greater impact on the world. >>

Huh. Didn't know that either. Do you think that's true, that she held me back?

<< My opinion on that subject is irrelevant, Clark. But no, I do not believe she held you back. I believe that she provided an anchor for you, a sense of reality and a place which you could call home. This is very important to the humans of Earth, and my archival data indicates that Kryptonians felt much the same. To be clinical about your marriage to her, she provided a service to you whose benefit to you far exceeded the cost to her. >>

Ecch. That really is clinical. Um, can we go back to my original question?

<< Very well. Let me ask you a question in return. The thought of spending your life with Lana is a pleasant one, is it not? Despite the brevity of your marriage? >>

Of course it is.

<< I did not doubt it, Clark, I merely wished for you to be aware of it. Now please answer this question. Does the thought of spending your life with Rebecca generate similar pleasures within you? >>

Uh — well — I—

<< Please do not attempt to temporize with me. I am able to discern when you are not being truthful. >>

Uh — okay. Well, she and I — we have fun — we laugh together — she's smart and witty and she says she loves me—

<< You are temporizing. My question was not about her feelings or expectations for your relationship, it was about your feelings and expectations. I repeat, and only because you introduced the subject into this conversation, does the thought of spending your life with Rebecca — >>

I'll have to get back to you on that, Bob.

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With that thought, Clark all but yanked his hands away from the globe. Then he stepped back and stared at the wall.

He'd asked for it. He'd asked Bob for his opinion. And it had felt like a therapy session, not quite the way Dr. Friskin would carefully and subtly dig under his answers for the unvarnished truth in his mind and heart, but a session nonetheless. Bob would make a good radio shrink, even if he was a bit abrupt.

And Clark still didn't have the answer for his relationship with Rebecca — or, more honestly, he didn't want to face the answer.

## Chapter Eight

"Lucy, don't write so fast! They won't be able to read it!"

Lucy glanced up at her older sister. "Do you have any idea how country-hick dumb that sounds?"

"I meant, if you write too fast it won't be legible. Slow down!"

"Back off, Sis! This is my college paperwork, not yours. And I plan to major in something that doesn't involve writing out anything in longhand. If I can't do it on a computer, I'll stick it in a typewriter."

"So why are you writing this in longhand?"

Lucy pointed to a closed door leading to another room. "Every typewriter in there is booked solid for the next two hours. There's a waiting list a yard long, and I don't want to risk messing up my class schedule."

"What are you majoring in?"

Lucy rolled her neck and straightened. "Business with an emphasis on the entertainment industry, and I plan to add a minor in entertainment law."

"You're going to entertain the judge and jury?"

"No, Miss Snarkyface, I'm going to keep my clients away from people like you. Now please leave me alone so I can get this done."

Lois frowned and snorted through her nose. "You asked me to come with you to help you, didn't you?"

"No, I asked you here to be my chauffeur and meal provider today, so hush and let me finish this!"

Lois shook her head and sat back. Was Lucy acting like a brat or like an adult? There didn't appear to be any real anger behind her words, but she still had that leave-me-alone-I-can-handle-this attitude. Was it a good thing or a bad thing?

She put off that mental discussion and looked around the room. She still couldn't believe how young all these people seemed to be. Had Metropolis University opened up their freshman class to high school sophomores, or was she really that much older than everyone else in the huge room?

She still hadn't decided which option she preferred when her phone rang. "Hello?"

"Lois, my dear, this is Lex."

"Oh, hi, Alex!"

"You're in a public place, no doubt."

"That's right, I am. My younger sister Lucy is registering for classes at Met U and I'm here with her. And now that you have me on the line, what do you want to talk to me about?"

"I have the particulars on that Saturday afternoon jaunt I mentioned earlier today. Are you at liberty to hear them?"

She glanced at Lucy, who was scribbling furiously with her head almost touching the desk where she sat. "Go ahead."

"The tournament begins at two thirty in the afternoon. Asabi's event is scheduled for three forty, but these things rarely run on schedule. Shall we go incognito?"

"Oh, that sounds delicious! I haven't had incognito in weeks!"

She heard him hesitate for a moment, then he chuckled. "Not bad. Of course, we could always meet somewhere around noon and dine together. Do you have any suggestions?"

"Hang on a minute, Alex." She put her free hand over the mouthpiece and said, "Hey, Lucy, are you going to need me for anything on Saturday?"

"My master's thesis, but you can wait until that evening to proof it if you want."

"Ha and ha. I'm serious."

Lucy lifted her head from the packet she was attacking and grinned at her sister. "Naw. You go hang with whoever you want. I'll amuse myself. Might even crack a book or two."

"Thanks, Luce, you're a pal."

"Just remember that you owe me."

"How do I — never mind, we'll talk about that later." Lois lifted her hand from the phone. "That sounds great, Alex. Lunch will be where?"

"We haven't patronized your uncle's establishment for some time. Perhaps we should see if his cuisine is still as excellent as I remember."

"It's a date, then. Shall I meet you there at noon?"

"At noon. And I shall come as Alex Winfield, computer programmer extraordinaire."

"And I'll be there as little ol' exceptional me. See you then!"

"Until Saturday."

Lois closed the phone and slipped it back into her purse. Lucy nodded and returned to her paperwork, humming something Lois didn't quite recognize.

"Hey, Luce! Are you auditioning for the college chorale society?"

Lucy turned a mischievous grin to her sister. "Don't you know that tune? It's from *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. It's the song Howard Keel sang when he was looking for a wife in the town and found Jane Powell."

"Wha — why would you sing that song now?"

Lucy's grin broke out into a giggle. "Because you sounded like I do on the phone with my boyfriends. 'Hello, Alex! Great to

hear from you! Dinner? Of course! Yes, incognito sounds delicious!’ Good pun, by the way. Guess it comes from you being a writer and all.”

Lois shook her head and gave her a mock frown. “Just finish your paperwork, young lady! Or you’ll have to go back for seconds!”

Lucy burst out in laughter, closely followed by Lois. They attracted the attention of everyone in the room, but neither one cared. They were family.

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Lucy was more than pleased by the time they returned to the apartment. She’d managed to slide into all of her desired classes, had been fortunate in scheduling them all in the morning, and she’d even secured an interview with the campus bookstore manager for a paid sales position. She figured her life experience would give her a leg up on the rest of the applicants, and she could use the money, even if her parents were paying her tuition and fees this semester. Such largesse might continue until she finished her four-year business degree, or it might fade away after a few semesters, or it might vanish like dew in the desert before the next semester began. So it made her feel better to have a source of income.

And it helped to make up for the way she’d crashed into her sister’s existence. Once again, Lucy Lane had messed up Lois Lane’s life. She thought about the times Lois had gotten her out of trouble, including the night when she’d bailed Lucy out of jail when that high school senior party had turned into a brawl. It was time to make some kind of restitution for all the pain and aggravation she’d caused Lois.

And that payback would start now. “Lois, you can wash up whenever you want. I’m going to start dinner. How does chicken sound to you?”

The reply came from the bedroom. “Sounds good. I’m going to get online and do some research while you’re cooking.”

“Okay. Hey, Sis, is it okay if I use your laptop computer for my schoolwork or should I hit Daddy up for a new one? We’re meeting him for dinner tomorrow night.”

“You probably should try for a new one. Mine has a lot of proprietary software on it and the legal division would throw six kinds of fits if they found out you had it on campus. And I’ll need it during the day while you’re in class, so yeah, you tell Daddy you need a new one. The latest and greatest, too.”

“Nothing but the best for his little girl. I’ve got my eye on one I saw on TV. ‘Dude, I’m getting a Deal!’”

“Is that the best one out right now?”

“If it isn’t, I’ll find out what is. And I’ll get him to throw in the best color laser printer available, too. You want baked chicken for dinner or should I run out to the market?”

Lois walked into the kitchen wearing sweats and twisting her hair into a short ponytail. “Baked is fine. I’ll go shopping tomorrow before I come home. Anything special you want, put it on the list on the front of the fridge.”

“Will do. You want your dinner with parmesan or cream of mushroom topping?”

“My, my, aren’t we the gourmet chef now! You weren’t this enthusiastic about cooking the last time I saw you.”

Lucy frowned. “That was when I was dating Kevin. He was a vegan and insisted that I had to eat what he ate.” She made a face and shuddered at the memory. “I lost about twenty pounds over three months and I wasn’t overweight when I started. I learned to cook in self-defense and I kind of like it.”

Lois picked up a carrot and began munching it as she leaned against the counter. “Hey, I have a question for you.”

“Shoot.”

“Why haven’t you asked me anything else about Ultra Woman?”

Lucy stopped tossing the salad for a moment, then started

again. “That was kind of out of the blue, wasn’t it?”

“A little, I guess. But I am curious. I thought you’d be full of questions.”

Lucy turned to face her sister. “Look, Lois, I respect your privacy. And I understand why you have to keep this all under wraps. I was afraid that if I started asking questions and you told me too much, I might blurt out something in public, something that could endanger your secret.” She went back to the salad. “And I don’t think I could handle disappointing you again.”

Lois stopped in mid-munch. “Wh-what? What are you talking about?”

Lucy’s face hardened. “I know how you feel about me, Lois. You’ve always thought I should have done better in high school. And you were right, I should have. You always ragged on me about my lousy taste in boyfriends, and yeah, you were right there too, none of them were good for me, and you never said — I never gave you any reason to be proud of me or even pleased with me. And now that I find out you’re Ultra Woman, well — now it’s going to be even harder to live up to your expectations.” Her eyes closed for a moment and she took a shuddering breath. “But I’m going to try, Sis, I’m really going to try. I’m going to try to do something good and I’m going to try to do something right.”

Lois’ eyes bugged out and her jaw dropped. “What? Disappoint me? Punky, you know I haven’t always liked the choices you’ve made, but I promise you that you’re not any kind of disappointment to me! I’m proud of you, of what you’ve accomplished, of what you’re doing now and of what you’re going to do! You couldn’t disappoint me if you tried! You’re my little sister and I love you! I always have and I always will!”

Lucy suddenly had a hard time seeing the salad. She sniffed back a sob she didn’t know was trying to push its way out and dropped the salad tongs on the countertop. Then she felt her sister’s powerful arms gently embrace her from behind and she lost it.

They ended up sitting on the kitchen floor, with Lucy leaning back against Lois and crying as Lois stroked her hair and tried to comfort her. They stayed there for a long time, apologizing and forgiving each other for slights and offenses real and imagined, until Lucy’s eyes finally ran dry.

They never did get that chicken cooked that night.

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Lois wasn’t nervous at highway wrecks, buildings turned into raging infernos, delicate search-and-rescue operations, robberies, muggings, gang fights, or even Perry’s staff meetings. In her months as Ultra Woman, she’d learned not to act nervous in any situation. Sometimes she was anxious, of course, she was alert for surprises, and she was always keyed up to do her best, but Ultra Woman never appeared to be nervous.

But now she was facing her parents across a table at Le Dossier, the most expensive French restaurant in town. And she was almost trembling from nervousness that bordered on stark terror.

As usual, Daddy ordered for all of them without asking anyone’s opinion or preference. While they waited for the waiter to pour the sparkling cider — which Ellen Lane grudgingly accepted — Lois sat silently waiting for someone to say something, anything, to open the conversation.

Ellen took a dainty sip of water and asked, “How are you two girls getting along?”

Lucy tilted her head to one side and said, “Just fine, Mom. Thanks for asking.”

“Now, that’s no way to talk to your mother,” Sam chided.

“Hey, it’s more than you two did for Lois. You just dropped me on her doorstep like a foundling in a Dickens novel.” Lucy picked up her wine glass and frowned at it as if checking for uninvited guests. “The least you should have done was ask her

about this setup.”

“Now see here—”

Lucy cut her father off before he could get wound up. “Look, Daddy, I know that you guys want me to further my education. No problem, because that’s what I want too.” She sipped from her glass. “But Lois and I are both adults and you can’t keep deciding our lives for us. Despite your thoughtlessness, she’s agreed to take me in, and now you need to come through for both of us. Do you have any idea how expensive this city is?”

“Wait a moment,” Sam said. “We did contact Lois with this plan and she voiced no objection to it.”

Lois’ eyebrows lifted. “Oh, really? In what alternate quantum reality did this conversation take place?”

“Your mother called you about a month ago! She explained that Lucy needed a place to stay for a while and that we would be more than willing to help with any additional living expenses you might incur.”

“Mom called me?” Sam nodded to her. “Were you there when she called, Daddy?”

“No, but—”

“Mom, was this call made on a Thursday night about eight o’clock?”

Ellen frowned and flipped her hand loosely. “I don’t remember what day or what time I called! I left you a message on your answering machine. And, as I recall, you never called me back.”

Lois closed her eyes and silently counted to ten, then looked at her father. “Mom called me one Thursday night and left me a long, rambling message about family and responsibility and each of us taking care of each other and the machine cut her off in mid-hiccup. I just assumed she was drunk again and randomly calling friends and relatives. There was no mention of Lucy going to school or coming to stay with me.”

Sam clenched his fists, then quickly tried to hide them under the table. “Ellen, you told me you’d spoken to Lois about this.”

“Well, I did! I left her a message and she never called back.”

“Because you were drunk! Ellen, you — you—” He wadded up his napkin and squeezed it tightly for a long moment, then slowly straightened it onto his lap. “Very well. Lois, I apologize for springing this on you without warning. I should have taken care of this myself. But now that we’re all together and Lucy is registered in school, I think we should discuss the financial arrangements.”

“Good idea,” Lucy said. “I think to start with, along with putting this year’s and next year’s tuition in an escrow account only Lois and I can get to, I should get an allowance of around four hundred a month.”

Sam nodded. “I think that’s fair. After all, you’ll need to use public transportation, and you’ll have legitimate meal and clothing expenses.”

“I’ll also need a new laptop computer. I can’t use Lois’ because it has some software on it that belongs to the paper and she has to use it for work.”

“That also sounds reasonable.”

“And you need to give Lois a monthly allowance too, since she’s going to have a roommate for the next year or more, until I can get a place of my own. I suggest at least two fifty a month.”

“Now wait a minute! Your sister—”

“Is being majorly inconvenienced, Daddy! Yeah, she’s a big girl with her own place and enough room for me to sleep, but she didn’t have to let me stay! There are times when I’m going to be in her way and I want to know that she’s being compensated for her trouble!”

Sam glanced at his older daughter, but Lois only smiled innocently. “Don’t look at me, Daddy. I think Lucy is doing just great on her own right now.”

He looked across the table to his wife, who refused to make

eye contact with him. Then he shook his head and sighed.

“Beaten by my youngest child. Very well, Lucille, I agree to your terms. Are there any additional clauses you wish to negotiate?”

Lucy grinned in triumph. “Yes. I want one round-trip airline ticket per semester to a destination of my choosing, anywhere in the continental US. I’ll let you know when and where, but this needs to be in effect as long as I’m a full-time student.”

Sam nodded. “I agree to your terms, but I reserve the right to look at your grades at any time and revoke this quite oppressive arrangement should your overall grade average fall below, say, two point six on a scale of zero to four? Four being an ‘A,’ of course.”

“Since I don’t plan on earning anything below a ‘B’ that works for me.” Lucy looked at Lois. “Anything you want to add, Sis?”

“Nope. Just make sure that the escrow account is at a Metropolis bank, Dad, okay? We don’t want Lucy to have to travel to North Dakota to get her tuition.”

Sam’s mouth twitched and Lois suddenly had the impression that he thought he was coming out ahead of this game. “That’s certainly reasonable, and I would have done that in any case. Lucy, have we concluded this extortion session yet?”

Lucy offered her hand to her father. “It was a negotiation, and it’s done. Shake.”

“Don’t you mean shakedown?”

“Don’t be funny, Daddy. This is my immediate future we’re discussing. Is it a deal?”

He took her hand gently and shook it. “Gladly.”

Just then the waiter brought their salads, and the conversation turned to more mundane matters, such as the weather, the city traffic, the prospects of the Metropolis University football team this fall, Ultra Woman, and the price of taxis in the city.

Lois only hoped that her parents wouldn’t wonder about her reluctance to talk about the super-heroine who had impressed her father with her rescue of their airliner and irritated her mother with her ‘scandalously revealing outfit.’ If they ever found out who Ultra Woman was when she wasn’t wearing the scandalous outfit, Lois would never hear the end of it from them.

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On Saturday, he was waiting for her. Naturally.

Lex smiled at her as she stepped out of the taxi. Of course, he always smiled when he first saw her, as if he’d rather spend time with her than at any of his companies or even with any other woman. Sometimes that made her uncomfortable. Sometimes she wondered why she wasn’t sure that was a good thing.

She pasted on her standard return smile, then turned and paid the driver. “Have you let Uncle Mike know we’re here yet?”

“I have,” he answered as he held her chair. “He informed me that we would be dining al fresco, since it’s such a wonderful day.” Lex gestured to the empty patio. “We would also have the dining area mainly to ourselves, given that it’s still early in the lunch hour. He also informed me, in no uncertain terms, that we would receive the best food and the best service which his establishment could offer and that I had better tip the waitress well or else.”

She laughed. “That’s Mike. He’s very protective of his staff, and they do a good job for him.”

Lex sat across from her and nodded. “That speaks well for him. Employee loyalty is vital to any successful business, and it is always better to build it on real relationships instead of on mere financial incentives.”

“I agree. Of course, those financial incentives are important to us working mortals.”

His smile thinned and he looked past her shoulder. “Ah, here comes our salad and bread now. Mike told me that this was his special wheat loaf, made with loving care and several mystery ingredients which he refused to divulge.”

Lois turned to follow his line of sight and mentally kicked herself for reminding him, even indirectly, of Nigel's betrayal. He didn't need that from her, not now, probably not ever. She'd have to apologize to him as soon as he gave her an opening.

"Hey, Sherry, thanks," he said to the waitress. "How's our steaks coming?"

Lois covered her surprise at his change in manner of speech by gulping her water, which made her cough a couple of times. His parted lips and lifted eyebrows told her that he, in turn, was surprised that Ultra Woman would ever need to cough.

She picked up her napkin and wiped her mouth. "Sorry. Forgot that I'm supposed to drink it, not breathe it."

Both Sherry and Lex chuckled. "Here's your salads, and here's Mike's very special bread, folks," she drawled, "and here's the honey butter. Mike tells me that nothing is too good for his niece and her — her friend. That salad dressing okay for both of you? I can go get anything you want."

"It's Thousand Island, isn't it?" asked Lex.

"Sort of. It's actually a house blend we save for our real good customers, and you two sure qualify as special! Anything I can get you before the steaks get here?"

Lois smiled at her. "You are bringing each of us a baked sweet potato with butter and cinnamon, aren't you? I've always loved the way Mike prepares them."

Sherry frowned for a moment. "I'll have to go check to make sure, but since you asked for it so nice, I'm sure Mike will let you have one of each."

"Thanks. I know they'll be great."

The girl spun on her toes and bounced back inside the restaurant. Lois turned to him and said, "Lex, I'm sorry I reminded you of Nigel just now. This is supposed to be a good day and I didn't get it started off very well."

His smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "I know you meant no ill by it, Lois." He reached out and took her hand. "Let us forget such things today and pretend that we are newly met and deeply in love and still discovering things about each other."

She bit her lip for a moment, then nodded. "I can do that. So, Alex, what do you do for a living?"

This time the grin covered his entire face as he released her hand and sat back. "I'm a computer programmer. I also have a few outside investments, and I fancy myself a fair piano player. Not professional quality, of course, because I don't have the time to practice that much, but I like it and some people say they enjoy my playing."

"I sing a little. Maybe we could get together and work up a few numbers."

His smile quirked up to one side. "I'd like that. Do you dance?"

She grinned back. "I've had occasion to go dancing before, yes. But only with the right partner."

"I'm sure your standards are quite high, as is your skill level. Now, if you like, you can tell me more about yourself, and I will pretend to be a gentleman and cut you a generous portion of this savory bread. Would you like a little or a lot of honey butter on it?"

The rest of the lunch proceeded along the same lines. Maybe she didn't love him like he claimed to love her, but the man sure could charm her. And he was a whale of a nice guy.

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Lex and Lois sat near the middle of the bleachers and watched the various matches play out on the floor below them. Lex spent a few moments analyzing the combatants, then pointed to the man and woman currently facing each other.

"She's going to win this match," he told her.

"Why? Is she that much better than he is?"

"She's not, actually. They're both brown belts, but he's two degrees above her. Plus he has at least eight inches of reach on

her and he's about forty pounds heavier. And he's just as quick as she is."

"Then why—"

The referee lifted his hand and called out, "Point!" then indicated the female combatant.

"It's because he's too enamored of his skills," Lex explained. "He's better than she is, and he believes that his moves will overwhelm her. See, that time he tried a leaping spin kick, and all she did was slide back, let him land on the mat, and shoot in a quick jab to score a point on him."

"Ah. So he's actually beating himself with all that showing off?"

"Exactly. Oh, see there, she ducked under that spinning back fist and kicked him in the hip for a point." He shook his head ruefully. "Poor fellow. All that work and effort going down the drain because he's too filled with himself and his own exalted vision of his worth." His mouth closed in a grim line. "Just like a certain billionaire whom we both know with an overinflated belief in himself."

She put her hand on his and squeezed it gently. "Water under the bridge, Alex. Just remember that your behind is in the past."

The *Lion King* reference threw him for a moment, then he gave her a lopsided grin. "That's very true. Oh, look, the match is over and the young woman won."

"The guy's not being a very good sport about it, is he? He doesn't want to shake hands with her."

"His ego has been pricked on three levels. His own skills failed him, he lost to someone with a lesser belt, and his opponent was a woman. A combination guaranteed to challenge even the best of us."

He didn't look at her, but he knew she was looking at him. "Is that how you feel? Do you think that I beat you at something?" She covered their joined hands with her other hand. "Or are you explaining why you kicked off the operation without talking to me about it?"

He looked down at his feet and spoke softly, knowing that she'd hear his words. "I think so, yes. That is, I think it was both of those things. I know it was foolish of me to react in that manner, but for the moment my ego overcame my reason and now a number of people are dead because of my actions." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I cannot recall ever making such a momentous mistake."

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Please don't dwell on it right now. I know this is something you need to talk about, and I'm flattered that you've opened up to me this much. I'm just not sure this is the right venue. It's a little public, don't you think?"

His head came up and he wiped his face with his free hand. "Yes. You're quite right, of course. I will reserve the baring of my soul to you for a more appropriate time and place." He looked at the exercise floor again. "Besides, Asabi is about to demonstrate his escrima techniques. This is going to be impressive."

In a clear voice, Asabi identified himself and asked the judges to allow him to proceed with his demonstration. They, of course, granted permission, and with his escrima sticks in each hand, he launched into a furious pantomime of blows, thrusts, blocks, and attacks, any of which would have disabled, if not killed, an actual opponent. His hands were blurs of motion and his feet slid across the mat almost as if he were ice skating.

Lois gasped along with the rest of the audience as Asabi spun through his deadly ballet. Lex smiled as he watched his friend glide across the floor and move his hands almost too fast to be seen clearly.

Suddenly he leaped into air with a sharp cry, spun around, and landed with the sticks crossed in front of him as if forcing his opponent's neck to the floor. He held the pose for a long breath, then flowed into a standing rest position and bowed to the judges.

The panel of martial arts masters all smiled and applauded, which released the audience to whoop and hoot their delight at his exhibition of skill and control. Asabi bowed to the audience, then looked directly at Lex and bowed to him.

Lex stood and bowed in return, then sat down. Asabi turned smartly and strode off the mat, pausing only to hear what a man carrying a large curved sword said to him.

Lois chuckled, then turned to Lex and said, “The guy with the sword must be a friend of Asabi. He thanked him for setting the bar too high for any of the rest of them to impress the crowd.”

Lex smiled. “What did Asabi say in return?”

“That he was happy to be of service. The other guy just laughed.”

“Well, since the gentleman with the sword is about to begin his demonstration, we must applaud his performance with enthusiasm equal to our appreciation for Asabi’s.”

Her eyes sparkled at him. “Enthusiasm for a martial artist other than Asabi? Oh, I guess I can fake it.”

### Chapter Nine

As Lex walked away from the dojo with Lois’ hand in his, he smiled to himself. There were so many things about being Lex Luthor that both pleased him and advantaged him that he wasn’t sure where to begin listing them. He enjoyed the prestige, the power, the political influence, the deference his social and financial equals showed him, and the opportunity he had to influence history.

But he also knew that he could never buy what was happening to him at that moment.

He leaned over and gave Lois a quick kiss on the side of her head and was rewarded with a bright smile and a look that he thought suggested future possibilities. And he didn’t want the moment to end, despite the outside pressures on him from the media and from law enforcement and from the public, not to mention all the constant internal pressures of running a business as large and varied as LexCorp and its subsidiaries. No deal, no merger, no sale or takeover could give him this thrill up and down his spine like being with Lois could.

So he said, “Why don’t you and I go get some coffee? I’ve asked Asabi to join me, and I’m sure he’d enjoy seeing you.”

“I don’t want to get in the way, Lex.”

“You wouldn’t be. I’m certain he’d enjoy spending some time with you.”

They took two more steps, then Lois nodded. “Okay. I assume this is your treat?”

He laughed. “Yes, it’s my treat! I wouldn’t want to bankrupt you, seeing that you only bring in a meager reporter’s salary.”

“You’d better believe it. Even with my dad’s allowance for Lucy living with me, I don’t have nearly enough money to make it rain.”

Lex stopped short and stared at her, then laughed. “Oh, my dear, I can just picture you at Chesterfield’s, throwing dollar bills at the men in tiny shorts as they shake whatever it is they shake.”

She blushed slightly and shook her head. “I knew I’d be in trouble as soon as those words left my mouth. Hey, where’s that coffee you promised me?”

“I have a favorite table at the local Starways. If it is not occupied, we will claim it and wait for Asabi to join us.”

“We might have a long wait. I heard several people, including a couple of the judges, ask him about setting up a time to demonstrate some of his techniques.”

“I’m not surprised. Asabi is a past master of the art, and he delights in sharing his expertise with anyone who wishes to learn from him.” He pointed. “Excellent! The table is unoccupied.”

He helped her sit, then she folded her hands under her chin and smiled at him. “I have to admit that I’ve enjoyed this afternoon more than I thought I would. There were a few moves Asabi made that I don’t think I could have followed”—she

tapped her temple—“if not for my special advantages.”

“I confess that I couldn’t follow some of them at all. In fact — ah, here comes the hero of the day himself. Congratulations on a wonderful performance, my friend.”

Both Lex and Lois stood as Asabi reached their table. Lex shook Asabi’s hand enthusiastically, but Lois put her palms together just below her chin and bowed slightly. Asabi returned the bow as both of them held the position for a long breath, then straightened.

“Thank you, Mr. Luthor. And thank you, Miss Lane. You both honor me beyond my accomplishments with your praise.”

Lex slapped him gently but manfully on the shoulder as they all sat. “Nonsense! You’ve earned every bit of approbation you receive. You were terrific.”

“I agree, Asabi,” Lois added. “I can’t remember ever seeing such a masterful escrima exhibition.”

Asabi’s eyes twinkled. “How many such demonstrations have you seen, Miss Lane?”

“A few. My former sensei insisted that we be acquainted with a number of different techniques. He said that what works for one person may not work so well for another, and it had nothing to do with each person’s skill level or commitment to the specialty itself. Some opponents are vulnerable to certain moves and others aren’t. Plus he wanted us to be able to counter all kinds of holds and attacks, and it’s hard to learn that if you’re locked into a single style.”

Lex nodded and waved for a waiter. “A wise man, your instructor. One should always be ready to meet any situation, whether in combat or in everyday life.”

“Expect the unexpected?” asked Asabi.

“Absolutely.”

“But if one expects the unexpected, it therefore becomes the expected and not the unexpected, and the aphorism collapses in on itself, does it not?”

Lex gave him a sideways frown, but Lois chuckled. “Well put, Asabi. I’ve never heard it explained like that.”

“It is much like the saying that whatever does not kill you will make you stronger.”

This wasn’t the direction Lex wanted the conversation to go. “It does.” He leaned back in his chair, his good mood quickly evaporating. “Unless, of course, it cripples you. Or it actually kills you.”

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Martha bustled about the kitchen, trying to explain to Rebecca how to trim a freshly-shaped apple pie without actually doing it for her. “Just run the knife around the rim of the plate, Becca. It doesn’t matter what happens to the excess as long as it doesn’t fall on the floor.”

Rebecca slowly and carefully trimmed the pie until the dough on the top was even with the edge of the pan, then she cautiously pressed the edge down to the lower crust. “Got it! Do we bake it now or wait and let it age?”

Martha laughed. “No, we can put it in the oven now. Use the potholder so you don’t burn your hands.”

Rebecca stopped and frowned. “Before it’s cooked?”

“Baked, dear, and remember that the oven is pre-heated.”

“Oh, right. I forgot.”

The pie slid into place on the oven rack and Martha set the timer for fifteen minutes. “I’m so glad I have this timer. We don’t have to stare at the clock. Now, when the timer goes off, we turn the oven down to 375 degrees and bake it for another forty-five minutes.”

“And then we have pie?”

“After it cools for another hour or so. You don’t want to burn your mouth on hot apples.”

“No, I guess not.” She plopped down in one of the kitchen chairs. “I’m so sorry, but I’m just about out of energy already.”



"I understand. You're still recovering from a gunshot wound. That would take a lot out of anyone."

Rebecca picked up the glass of tea Martha had made for her. "It's surely taken a lot out of me. I don't know how I'm going to handle going back to work week after next."

"Oh, I think you'll do just fine. Your therapist told you that you were making good progress yesterday, remember?"

"I think Lynn says that to all of her patients just to keep them going."

Martha laughed. "Well, I think you're doing well. You don't have any more pain except when you do your crunches too fast, and you can climb the stairs all by yourself and go the bathroom without any help, just like a big girl."

Rebecca tried to growl at Martha, but it turned into a chortle. When she finished, she leaned back and smiled. "I know, I know, I'm just a constant complainer. I plead guilty to not liking my recovery from what I hope to be my greatest and most dangerous adventure."

"Me, too. Are you hungry? I can probably be coaxed into making you a sandwich for lunch while I make mine."

"Thank you. That would be nice."

"Ham and cheese or turkey?"

"I pick turkey and cheese."

"Consider it done. I'll even refill your tea for you."

"Oh, no, I can handle that. I'm making good progress on my recovery, remember?"

Rebecca poured tea for both of them while Martha assembled two champion turkey sandwiches. They ate in companionable silence until Rebecca leaned back again and muffled a small burp.

"Oops! Excuse me."

Martha smiled and gathered the dishes. "Did you know that there are cultures on the Earth where a belch after a meal is considered a compliment to the cook?"

"No, I didn't. But I know that orcas sometimes catch seals and bat them around to each other with their tails before actually eating them. Some researchers think they're trying to teach their young about seal behavior, and others think they're just playing."

Martha sat down again. "What do you think?"

"I think we don't have enough data to make a call on that one. Most of the folks who have strong opinions about that behavior also have a vested interest in proving they're right, so they're not exactly objective observers."

"That sounds like a true scientist talking."

Rebecca sighed. "I just wish I could be that objective about my own life."

Martha's ears twitched. "What do you mean, dear?"

She sighed again. "I'm not sure about Clark. I mean, I know that I love him, but — well, he doesn't like to talk about the future, except for me moving back to Metropolis and going back to work for LexCorp. I can't get him to talk about a future that directly involves the two of us together."

Martha knew this was a minefield and she'd have to tread lightly. "Do you have any idea why that might be so?"

"No. Well — maybe. Okay, yeah, I do. I think part of the reason he's being so attentive is because he feels responsible for me getting hurt. But he shouldn't. There wasn't anything he could have done to stop it."

Martha nodded. "But he's a man, so he thinks it's his responsibility anyway."

"Yes! That's it exactly! And he won't talk about that with me, either." Rebecca crossed her arms and exhaled sharply. "It's so frustrating!"

"I know, dear. You just have to give him time. He'll come around eventually."

Rebecca looked out the kitchen window and waited a long moment before she said, "What if he doesn't?"

"What if he doesn't what?"

"What if he doesn't come around? What if he breaks up with me? What if I'm — I'm just wasting my time with him?"

Martha shook her head. "A woman never wastes her time being around a good man, Becca. And Clark is a good man. Whether you and he should or shouldn't make a life together isn't my call, it's yours and his. I can give you advice until we're both blue in the face, but until you and he both have peace about your relationship, nothing I say or do will make much difference."

"You mean — are you saying that we shouldn't get married unless we're both deliriously happy? Was it like that for Clark and Lana?"

Martha laughed. "Oh, no, dear. Just before they got married, they had a huge fight over a series of stories Clark had written about an archaeological dig her father was heading up. It took them the entire flight back from Africa to make peace."

Rebecca smiled a little. "Really? Clark never said anything about that. In fact he rarely mentions her, except to refer to something really good or really fun that she did. As far as I can tell from the little bit Clark has told me about her, Lana was some kind of saint, like Ingrid Bergman in *Joan of Arc* and Jackie Kennedy in *Camelot* and Mother Teresa all rolled into one perfect person."

Martha laughed again. "Oh, that girl was no saint, I promise you. If you want to know about her, ask Clark, but be ready to sort through some 'Lana was so wonderful' stories before you get to the ones where she was just another human being."

Rebecca nodded thoughtfully. "I'll do that. Thank you, Martha."

Just then the timer dinged. "Time to reset the oven temperature," Martha said. "Do you want to do it, Becca? After all, you are making good progress."

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Cat knew she had a shadow. She'd glimpsed him several times in the past few days, and she figured that Arianna had told him to follow her after the shootout at her upstate house. The man hadn't threatened her, hadn't tried to pressure her, hadn't deliberately made his presence known to her, but she knew he was there and it made her nervous.

Her taxi dropped her off about three blocks from the Daily Planet. She'd planned to do some shoe shopping that afternoon, but Perry had called her in to make some changes to her column before the Sunday morning edition was put to bed. Since it was just after lunch and her real deadline on the changes was eight o'clock that evening, she decided to do some window shopping along the way.

She sauntered slowly past Macy's shoe display and a pair of dark blue pumps caught her eye. Color, not so much, but the style was very nice. Maybe they had them in a lighter—

The man on the other side of the street, the one leaning against a lamppost and holding a newspaper in front of him — the *National Whisper*, she thought — caught her eye. He hadn't been there a moment ago, and he wasn't looking her way, but it was her shadow. She'd never seen him quite so clearly, and she forced herself to look away before her gaze alarmed him.

Her shopping mood was gone and she walked the rest of the way to the Planet as quickly as she could without breaking into a trot.

By the time the elevator opened on the news floor, she felt safe again. She put her purse in the bottom drawer of her desk and headed to Perry's office.

"Hi, Chief. Do you have — oh, sorry, didn't know you had someone in here."

Perry waved her in. "It's okay, Cat. Do you know Bill Henderson?"

She extended her hand as he stood. "Don't think so. Good to meet you, Mr. Henderson."

His slate-gray eyes didn't waver behind his glasses as they shook hands. "Hope you still feel that way in a few minutes."

She frowned and took her hand back. "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"Sit down, please, both of you. Cat, I didn't tell you what Bill does for a living."

"What's that?"

"He's a cop."

She froze in place with her rear end just touching the chair seat. "He's — a cop?"

Bill lifted his lapel and showed her his badge. "Detective Inspector. Homicide division."

She sank down the rest of the way. Her mouth was suddenly dry and her palms felt slick. "So — uh — I guess you want to talk to me about something?"

"We do. I want to get a preliminary statement from you about your involvement with Dr. Arianna Carlin, and we also need to set up a time for you to come in and give us a formal deposition."

She felt her eyes bulge. "But — but Perry knows everything I know! Can't you ask him?"

"I'm sorry, Ms. Grant, but no, I can't. You have to be the one to testify about what you know. The words have to come from your mouth."

"Um — that's gonna be a little tricky right now."

"Why is that?"

"Someone is following me."

Both Perry and Bill shifted forward. "Are you certain of this?" Bill asked.

"Yes. I've seen him six or seven times since Dr. Carlin's house got shot up and she disappeared. In fact, I saw him this morning as I was coming in."

Bill leaned back and shook his head. "You were right, Perry. Having her come to a precinct might have gotten her killed."

"I told you Carlin is dead serious about this, Bill."

"I know. It's just — until I have evidence, I tend not to believe what I hear from the media. No offense intended, you understand."

Cat lifted her hand. "Look, the longer I'm in here the more suspicious that guy is going to be, so can I give you my statement and get going?"

Bill nodded. "Perry already has a statement typed up for you to sign. I want you to look it over and make sure it's both accurate and complete. If it is, we'll be able to arrest Carlin as soon as we find her."

"What? You mean you can't arrest her with what you already have?"

"No. The most we could do would be to bring her in for questioning, and her lawyer would put a stop to that in a Metropolis minute. But with this"—he tapped a thin stack of paper on Perry's desk—"we can hold her without bail until her trial. That would give us enough reason to commit significant resources to investigating her."

"I don't understand. Why can't you do all that now? What about the stuff Lex Luthor said about her in his press conference?"

"That came from Nigel St. John, but it's hearsay from a dead man repeated by another man involved in a pretty complex investigation. The DA strongly advised Luthor not to mention her name, but his lawyers were focused on deflecting public blame away from him, and now we have to make sure we do everything legally perfect or some judge is liable to throw out our case and rule all of our evidence inadmissible, just because a public figure accused her without proof and poisoned the jury pool against her."

Cat nodded slowly. "I see. So, you making your case is all on me?"

"No. We need your testimony to get things started, but after

that the investigation will take on a life of its own. To put it in chemical terms, you're the catalyst to make this volatile combination of elements ignite."

"Okay. Let me read over this, and while I'm doing that, you can send someone to protect my parents."

Perry said, "I got that covered. I called for Superman just after I called you. He should be here soon."

Just then the stairway door opened and someone stepped onto the floor. Cat felt Bill Henderson straighten, and when she glanced at his eyes they were bright and focused. She turned and saw a woman she assumed was dressed for a movie role until she stepped closer.

The woman opened the door to Perry's office and stepped in. "I am Ultra Woman. Superman asked me to come in his stead. He has another issue with which he must deal at this moment. How may I assist you?"

Bill was standing now. He moved to one side and invited Ultra Woman to take his seat. "Thank you, Detective Inspector Henderson, but I suspect that I will not be here long."

Perry was also standing. "Ultra Woman, this is Catharine Grant. She has a problem and we think you can help her."

Ultra Woman turned her dark eyes to Cat, who was still seated. "How may I assist you, Ms. Grant?"

"Um — yeah. My parents are in Georgia, just outside of Atlanta, and someone needs to go rescue them."

Ultra Woman frowned, then looked at the two men in turn. "I take it that this is not an urgent problem?"

"Not right now," said Bill, "but it will be very soon. See, Ms. Grant is a confidential informant in a criminal investigation, and the criminal we're investigating is threatening to harm her parents if she talks to the police. We need someone who can protect them while we get the investigation started."

Ultra Woman crossed her arms. "Why do you not simply ask the Atlanta police department for their assistance?"

"Because we don't know if any of them have been compromised by the person we're investigating. If we make an informal request for protection for her folks, and right now we don't have the evidence to make a formal request, the people we're looking into would probably find out and make their move before the Atlanta cops can get set up. We need someone to go in quick and quiet."

"I understand. But do your laws not provide that, because this criminal enterprise appears to cross state lines, your federal law enforcement agencies may become involved?"

"That would take too long. The goal is to protect her parents, and I strongly suspect she's not going to cooperate unless we do that first."

Ultra Woman turned her gaze back to Cat. "Is this a true statement, Ms. Grant? You would refuse to give vital information to the police because of a threat to your parents?"

Cat didn't flinch from that hard gaze. "I've gotten pictures of my parents walking their dog on the street. I have pictures of them in their front lawn, pictures of them eating at restaurants, having dinner at home, driving to work or to a dental appointment or shopping for groceries. I even have one of them riding a roller coaster at Six Flags Over Georgia. And they have no idea that any of these pictures exist. Yes, I'm scared for them! Wouldn't you be if you got those kinds of pictures of your parents and knew that someone could kill them in a flash?"

Ultra Woman's gaze softened, along with her voice. "I apologize. I did not consider the situation from your point of view. Your position is quite understandable under the circumstances." She turned back to Bill. "Detective Inspector Henderson, I will do as you ask. How may I locate these people?"

Perry picked up a manila folder and held it out. "Here's their names, address, phone number, description, and a couple of pictures of each of them."

Ultra Woman opened the folder and looked at the photos, then looked at Cat again. “They appear to be very nice people, Ms. Grant. I will do my best to protect them.”

Cat let out a breath she hadn’t known she was holding. “Thank you. Thank you so very much.”

Ultra Woman nodded. “With your permission, gentlemen, I will assume this duty now. Ms. Grant, I will leave as I arrived, via the roof, so as not to alarm the man who is following you.”

“Can you describe him to us?”

“I can do better than that, Detective Inspector Henderson, I can point him out to you. He is at this moment on the far side of the street in the small park facing the front of the building, pretending to read a newspaper. If you will send two uniformed officers to the park area, I will land in front of him, engage him in conversation, and your officers may apprehend him.”

Perry chuckled. “On what charge?”

Ultra Woman tilted her head at him. “Why, the charge of reading a paper other than the *Daily Planet* while in full view of the editor-in-chief of the *Daily Planet*, of course. It is a clear case of disrespect to one of the city’s most noble institutions.”

With that, she spun on her heel and strode to the stairwell. Funny, thought Cat, she walks a lot like Lois does.

But the thought was pushed to the side as she sat down and began to read the statement she was to sign. She ignored the call Bill Henderson made from Perry’s phone.

Four minutes later, Perry chuckled. She looked up to see him next to Bill at the window. “There he goes,” said Perry.

“One cheap thug down,” said Bill, “a couple of dozen more to go.”

Six minutes after that, Cat signed the statement and initialed each separate page. Both Bill and Perry did the same. Bill slipped the papers into his briefcase and said, “I’ll call you, probably later this evening but no later than Monday morning, to set up an appointment for you to speak with the DA. You’ll be formally deposed at that time.” He paused, then said, “I know you were blackmailed into doing what you’ve been doing, Ms. Grant, but you may still face some charges. And, depending on what happens with Arianna Carlin and her associates at trial, you may have to relocate, maybe even change your identity. This isn’t over, not by a long shot.”

Cat swallowed hard. “I know. But I can’t go on like this any longer. I have to get out from under this, one way or another.”

Perry said, “We’ll help you, Cat. I think this is a brave thing you’re doing.”

“So do I,” Bill said. “I just wanted to make sure you know that you’re not in the clear yet.”

Cat looked at him, knowing that her face said as much as her words did. “I’ve lived with this for more than five years, Inspector, and I’ll live with it for the rest of my life. There’s no way for me to make up for what I’ve done or forget all the people who have been hurt or even killed because of me. All I can do now is to try to stop it from happening again.” She turned and reached for the door. “And I’ll never be in the clear. I’m already serving a life sentence.”

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Ultra Woman skimmed over the north Atlanta suburb where Cat’s parents lived. She scanned the area around their house and spotted two men who didn’t quite fit the neighborhood. One was a man with his head under the open hood of a car, but who wasn’t doing anything beyond wiggling wires and touching belts. The other man was raking leaves into a pile, but he was the only one on the block who was working like that. And there weren’t that many leaves in the yard he was raking.

She hovered high above the street and checked on the Grants. There they were, sitting on the couch next to each other watching television. Judging by their laughter, it must have been a comedy.

Suddenly the man with the rake stopped and dropped his tool.

He reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a cell phone. He listened for a long moment, then put the phone back and started walking toward the Grants’ house.

The man fiddling with his car stood and closed the hood, then reached into his jacket and pulled out a compact revolver. The first man did the same as the second man fell into step almost beside him.

Something was happening and it wasn’t good.

Ultra Woman swooped down behind the men as they started moving faster. The man who’d dropped the rake moved to the side of the house where the windows were alight, and the man who’d been playing with the car moved to the front door.

The first man lifted his pistol and aimed through the window. Ultra Woman flashed down and snatched the weapon out of his hand before he could pull the trigger. Then she zoomed around to the front of the house and yanked the second man backward off the porch.

His revolver skidded out of his hand and she grabbed it before he stopped sliding. Then she grabbed the first man and threw him on top of the second man.

She stood over them and glared fiercely. “You men will remain where you are while the police come. When they arrive, you will—”

The first man tried to get up and run, but a blast of icy breath knocked him to the grass and drove the breath from his lungs. The second man lifted his hands in front of him and closed his eyes. “D-don’t kill me!” he begged.

“I will not kill either of you,” she snapped. “But I also will not allow you to leave this yard.”

The front door opened behind her and a man called out, “Hey! What’s going on out there?”

“Mr. Grant,” she answered without turning, “please call the police and tell them that Ultra Woman has captured two men who meant you and your wife great harm. Please ask them to come here at once, or I will not be responsible for the condition of these men.”

The first man gasped and tried to roll over. “Do it, mister!” he yelled. “Do it now!”

Mr. Grant said, “Will you tell me what’s going on here?”

“I shall explain everything, Mr. Grant, as soon the police arrive. Please call them now.”

She heard a woman’s gentle voice behind her. “Come on, Hugh, do as the scary lady says. If she wants the police here, she probably isn’t a criminal, right?”

Hugh grunted. “Okay, Sandra. Just don’t go out there.”

Ultra Woman nodded to herself and smiled. The men on the ground saw it and apparently misinterpreted her expression. The first man turned and buried his face in the grass and moaned, while the second man crossed his arms in front of his face and again yelled, “Don’t kill me! Please don’t kill me!”

“Very well. I will not kill either of you as long as you remain where you are. But do not attempt to flee again. Do you understand me?”

“Yes! I — I got it! I understand! Just don’t kill me!”

They remained in that state of abject fear until the police cruisers pulled up with lights flashing and sirens wailing.

Ultra Woman had no problem convincing the police of her identity once she folded her legs underneath herself and sat in mid-air. She handed the men’s weapons to one of the arresting officers, finished giving him her report, then rose out of sight to the north.

That was a good save, thought Lois. Wish all of them could be like that.

## Chapter Ten

Cat unlocked her apartment door and slipped inside. She hadn’t seen anyone following her, but that meant little since Carlin knew where she lived. She hung up her windbreaker on

the coat rack beside the door and put her purse on the table next to it, then threw the deadbolts and turned to shuffle to the kitchen.

"Boy, I'm tired," she said to the room. "I could sleep all night and all day."

"Betrayal is most exhausting, isn't it, my dear?"

The woman's low, almost friendly voice startled Cat and she spun in its direction. On her couch sat a woman of perhaps thirty-five, slender, of medium height, shoulder-length dark hair just starting to turn silver in tiny spots, wearing a modest blazer and skirt combination. She almost looked as if she planned to interview Cat for a job.

The woman smiled and stood, her right hand hidden in the folds of her skirt. "My dear Catharine, you haven't called lately. Is your phone broken?"

Phone? Broken? Called lately? What was she talking about?

Then it hit her. This woman was Arianna Carlin.

"D-Dr. Carlin! I — I was going to — to call you — when I — I got home — b-b-but I —"

Carlin's right hand lifted and revealed a small semi-automatic pistol. Cat gasped and stumbled backwards until she bumped against the nearest wall.

"Interesting," Carlin purred. "You know who I am, despite our never having been formally introduced. Now I wonder who could have given you that information?" She made tch-tch sounds with her tongue. "Oh, of course! You were having a conversation with a policeman, weren't you? I'm certain he revealed my identity to you. Don't you remember our first rule, Catharine?"

"N-never talk about Fight Club?"

Carlin laughed. "Oh, Catharine, you are so very droll! No, it's actually 'Never talk to the police about anything.' But, oh dear, I'm afraid you've broken that rule."

"I — I didn't call him! He was just there when I went to the office! He asked me a bunch of questions but I didn't tell him anything!"

Carlin stepped closer. "Now that's not what I heard from my little birdie. My little birdie says that the man who was following you — according to my orders, by the way — was arrested for carrying an illegal weapon. And do you want to know why? Ultra Woman, of all people, just randomly floated down from the sky and asked him why he was there in the park. He said he was waiting for his wife. Then Ultra Woman asked him about his marriage, claiming that she wanted to learn more about human customs and practices. And while he was distracted, trying to figure out how to get rid of her politely — she's supposed to be quite fetching in that costume, you know — two officers arrested him for loitering, searched him, and found his pistol and his knife. And the silly man had forgotten his license in his other suit. His lawyer will have him out by Monday afternoon, of course, but it strikes me that this was no coincidence."

Cat said nothing. She just stared at that little pistol in Carlin's hand.

"I'm sorry, dear, cat got your tongue?" Carlin laughed. "I've wanted to use that joke ever since I learned your nickname. I'm just sorry it has to be now."

Cat blinked. "Wha — what do you mean?"

Carlin's eyes went flat, her voice lost its teasing, sing-song quality, and she suddenly looked much older. "I mean that I do not regard betrayal lightly, Miss Grant. You had a conversation with the police. That is something I cannot tolerate."

"But I —"

Cat didn't finish her sentence. The pistol in Carlin's hand snapped loudly four times, and at a range of five feet, she didn't miss.

The twenty-five-caliber bullets didn't penetrate far into Cat's body, but they didn't have to. Each one tore tissue and blood vessels, and the fiery burn from the combined wounds robbed her

of the ability to stand. Her legs turned to jelly and she fell against the wall. Then she slid to the floor, her hands trying to cover the suddenly bloody holes in her chest and belly.

Carlin lowered the smoking pistol and stepped closer. "I'm so sorry, Catharine, but your debt has come due in full. And since you don't have the money — well, let's just say that your parents are paying off the balance even as we speak. At least, as I'm speaking."

Cat tried to say something but she only dribbled blood from her mouth. Her head drooped and she saw the front of her dress where there was a rapidly spreading red stain. She tried to lift her head, but she no longer had the strength.

As if from far away, she heard Carlin say, "I missed your heart, dear, but I believe I did hit the descending aorta. That's the main artery carrying blood to your lower body. You'll bleed out in another minute more. Of course, I'll be gone by then."

Cat felt a hand on her chin, then the hand lifted her head and banged it against the wall. She barely felt it. Carlin's face seemed to be miles away.

"Oh, I see that you're almost gone already. Well, ta-ta, my dear. Say hello to your parents for me, and give them my hate. Enjoy Hell, assuming there is one waiting for you."

Cat tried once more to speak, to lift her hand and grab Carlin, to do something. But any effort was beyond her remaining strength. Her eyes slipped shut and her breathing came hard. She felt herself slip slowly to her left, away from the leg that was folded under her. She heard a metallic clicking that sounded like someone picking up small pieces of metal.

Then she was gone.

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Because he was watching his favorite college football team, Louisiana State University, destroy their overmatched rival Tulane University, Jimmy Olsen almost didn't answer his phone. But he knew he'd wonder who it was and why he was being called after nine o'clock on a Saturday evening, so he picked up the extension as the battered Tulane quarterback called a timeout.

"Hello?"

"Olsen!" The Chief's voice was unmistakable. "Get over to Cat Grant's place and check on her!"

"What? Why? What's wrong?"

"She's not answering her phone and you're closer than I am! Hurry and you might get there before the police do. I'm calling them when I get through with you."

"Police? Chief, what's going on?"

Jimmy heard Perry take in a breath and let it out slowly. "I'll explain it all later. Right now you need to check on Cat. She's not answering her phone and I'm worried about her."

"Maybe she's on her other phone," Jimmy snarked back. "You know, the special one?"

Perry hesitated, and Jimmy could almost see him wiping his face with his hand out of sheer exasperation. "I'll tell you later just how big a jerk you're being, Olsen. Now get over to her place and call me from there! I'm at home."

Jimmy sighed, resigned to missing the rest of the game. "Okay, Chief. Give me fifteen minutes."

"Make it ten." And the phone slammed down at the other end.

Jimmy frowned at the phone and replaced it in its cradle. He didn't know why it was so important for the Chief to know that Cat the spy was okay, but he knew he'd better do as he was told. Besides, there just might be something going on. Maybe he could catch her with Dr. Carlin. That would show his boss just how smart Jimmy was.

He switched off the TV, grabbed his keys, and locked the door behind him. He ran down three flights of stairs to his car, thinking that if Morgana wasn't already in Chicago he might have been on a date with her and would have missed Perry's call and wouldn't be checking up on a spy and a traitor. Oh well, that's

life.

He pushed the speed limit as much as he dared and slid sideways to the curb next to a parking meter across from Cat's building in just under nine minutes. He leaped out of the car and skittered across the oncoming traffic, with horns and squealing brakes providing an arrhythmic counterpoint to his footsteps.

He ran up the stairs to Cat's apartment and knocked on the door. There was no answer so he knocked again.

Still no sound from within, so he rang the doorbell and banged the door with his fist. "Come on, Cat, Perry wants to talk to you. Open up!"

No one came to the door and no one called to him. He began to turn away, then thought that his boss would have his hide if he didn't at least try the door.

To his surprise — and belated alarm — the knob turned and the door ghosted open to reveal a darkened front room. The only light came from outside the window across from the doorway.

There is a feel to a place, almost a viable presence, when someone is there. That presence was missing, and Jimmy started feeling antsy.

Then he smelled something that shouldn't have been there. It was a sharp coppery scent mixed with a hint of old food left out on the counter for too long. Maybe Cat had been called away while she was making hamburgers or something.

He slowly reached in and felt for the light switch, then flipped it on. The room looked empty as he scanned from left to right —

Until he saw the body.

Despite his youth, he was no stranger to death. He didn't have nearly the experience either Clark or Lois had with dead people, but he'd seen a few corpses in his time.

But he'd never seen a dead person whom he'd known in life.

He listened closely and scanned the room minutely, ready to run at the first indication that the killer was still there. For murder it had to be. No one died of natural causes with that much blood on the front of her clothes and on the floor without any on her head.

Satisfied that he — that they — were alone, he looked for the phone and found it on a desk opposite Cat's body. He stepped as carefully as he could to it and dialed the police emergency number.

"Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?" came the operator's perfunctory response.

"I'm at someone's apartment and she's been murdered. Please send the police."

The operator lost her bored tone. "Sir, can you verify the address where you are?"

He did so. "I just got here about one minute ago and I'm pretty sure she's been dead for a while. She was either shot or stabbed, I don't know which."

"Have you examined the body, sir?"

"No, I haven't gone near her — near it. I didn't want to mess up any evidence."

"That's good, sir. Please remain on the line until the officers arrive, okay?"

"No problem."

"What is your name, sir?"

"James Olsen. I work for the *Daily Planet*."

"The officers have been dispatched and will be there in about three minutes. Do you know the identity of the victim?"

"Yes. Her name is — her name was Catharine Grant. She also works — worked — for the *Daily Planet*. This is her apartment."

"Thank you, sir. Can you tell me why you are there?"

"My boss — that's Perry White, the editor-in-chief of the *Daily Planet* — called me at home and told me to come and check on her. He was trying to call her and no one picked up the phone." He took a shuddering breath. "I guess now we know

why."

"Sir, please remain calm and stay on the line. Is there anyone else in the apartment with you?"

"As far as I know, Cat and I are the only ones here. I haven't checked any of the other rooms. I'm in the front room right now."

"Thank you, Mr. Olsen. Please let the officers search the apartment when they get there. They will ask you this also, but can you tell me what you've touched in the apartment?"

"The light switch in the front room and the phone. Nothing else. I know what not to do at a crime scene."

"That's very good, sir. Ah, the officers are entering the building now."

"The front door is standing open and I'm in plain sight. Please tell them that I'm not armed and I'm not a threat."

"They'll have to search you, sir, but I'm sure you'll be fine."

"I'll let them search me as much as they want as long as they don't shoot me."

A short, dark-skinned officer appeared in the open doorway with her weapon drawn. "Police! Don't move!"

Jimmy lifted his free hand and said into the phone, "The officers have arrived. Can I hang up now?"

Another officer slipped in behind the first one and moved toward the kitchen. "Just do it slowly, sir," said the operator.

"No problem." The woman with the pistol slowly advanced toward him as a third uniformed policeman danced toward the bedroom, weapon leading. "Officer," he said, "I'd like to hang up the phone now, if you don't mind."

"Who are you talking to?" she snapped.

"The 9-1-1 operator. She told me I could hang up."

The officer lifted one hand to the microphone clipped to her shoulder and pressed the transmit button. "Officer O'Brian reporting. Front room secured. One person on the phone, male, early twenties, non-threatening attitude."

Her radio crackled back. "The man on the phone is the 9-1-1 caller. He reported the crime."

"Roger that." She relaxed slightly. "Please hang up the phone, sir, and turn around and put your hands on the wall and spread your feet."

"Yes, ma'am." He complied as she searched him efficiently and thoroughly.

She stepped back and holstered her pistol. "What's your name, sir?"

"My name is James Olsen. I work for the *Daily Planet* as a photographer and IT tech. My boss, Perry White—"

"Perry White!" she interjected. "How do you know him?"

"I told you, he's my boss. He called me at home about fifteen, maybe twenty minutes ago and told me to come over here to check on Catharine Grant. She's one of — she was one of my coworkers. Mr. White couldn't get her on the phone so he told me to come check on her." He pointed across the room where a tall older man wearing latex gloves and a cheap gray suit was kneeling beside Cat's body. "That's her against the wall. She's dead."

"How do you know that? Did you check on her when you came in?"

"No. I could tell she wasn't breathing, and that's way too much blood for anybody to lose and stay alive. The only things I touched when I came in were the light switch and the phone."

"How did you get in?"

"The door wasn't locked. I just turned the knob and it opened."

The man in the suit stood and walked over to Jimmy's side of the room. "She was shot four times at close range with a small-caliber weapon, a twenty-two or a twenty-five. Probably a Saturday night special. Her skin is cool but she's not in rigor yet. My guess is she's been dead between two and four hours. The ME will tell us for sure." He waved toward the back of the

apartment. “As far as we can tell, nothing else in here was touched. This looks like a deliberate killing, not a robbery or something else gone bad. And the shooter either policed his brass or used a revolver.”

“Thanks, Lennie,” the officer said. She turned to Jimmy again as the plainclothes detective walked back to the body. “You have some ID on you?”

“In my wallet. Left rear pants pocket.”

“Bring it out slowly, please.”

He did so, then opened the wallet and pulled out his driver’s license without being asked. She held it for a moment, then returned it. “You have much experience with the police?”

“Enough to know you won’t look at my license while it’s in my wallet. I told you, I work for the *Daily Planet*.”

“You did, sir.” She pulled a small notebook from her shirt pocket. “Would you mind giving me your home address and phone number?”

He repeated the information to her. “The address is the same as what’s on my license.”

She snapped her notebook shut. “Yes, sir, but sometimes people move.”

He nodded. “Is it okay if I call my boss and tell him what’s happened? That’s why I came over in the first place.”

She turned around. “Lennie? Can this guy use the phone in here?”

“He already touched it, didn’t he?”

“Yeah. You need to dust it for prints first?”

“No, let him make his call. We’ll check the usage records to make sure, but I doubt the killer called anyone from this phone.”

Jimmy nodded to both officers. “Thanks.”

Then he picked up the phone and did the hardest thing he’d had to do in his young life.

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Lois saved the story of Ultra Woman’s capture of the two men in Atlanta and sent the file to Perry’s inbox. Then she put her hands behind her head and leaned back, satisfied with how that had gone. No one had gotten hurt and the bad guys were behind bars. Plus, if there were any crooked cops on Carlin’s payroll in that department, they’d surely keep a low profile knowing that Ultra Woman was on the case.

She rocked in her chair a few times, then sat up. It was time to go home. She felt good about herself and about her mission and about the way the net was closing around Arianna Carlin. It shouldn’t be too long before Lex was out from under the menace of her presence also.

And maybe it was time to bring Cat in on the secret of Ultra Woman’s identity. After all, Lois had just saved her parents’ lives, and whatever Cat knew about Arianna Carlin, and however she’d learned it, was going to be used to bring her to justice.

All in all, it felt like a very good night.

The phone rang just before she stepped on the bottom of the ramp. She chuckled to herself and returned to her desk. “Lois Lane, *Daily Planet*.”

“Lois? Honey? You — you should sit down if you’re not already.”

She blinked. It was Perry’s voice, but he sounded as if he’d suddenly gotten old. Something was wrong — no, check that, something really big was wrong.

She found her chair. “Okay, I’m sitting. What’s going on?”

Something like a sob came over the line. “Are Cat’s parents okay?”

“Yes. Ultra Woman caught the bad guys and handed them over to the cops.”

“Good.” He hesitated again, then spoke. “So the only call I’ll have to make is to them.”

“What? Why do you need to call them?”

He took in a long breath, then let it out slowly. “Cat was

killed this afternoon.”

The room spun for a moment and Lois heard a crackling by her ear. It took her a moment to realize that she’d almost crushed the receiver in her hand.

“Cat — dead? How? Who?”

“The police — they think Arianna Carlin shot Cat in her apartment about three hours ago. I sent Jimmy over there to check on her and he — the kid found her body.”

Now the room was tear-dimmed. “Where is Carlin now?” Lois growled.

“We don’t know! And don’t you go off by yourself trying to find her. If Superman and Ultra Woman can’t find her, you won’t do it alone.”

“Give me your best guess, Perry.”

“I don’t have any kind of guess. I think she’s somewhere in or around Metropolis, but that covers a lot of territory. No one has reported seeing her lately.”

“What about that woman in custody, the one from Carlin’s upstate hideaway?”

“She’s in the secure wing of the jail— No! You stay away from her! You hear me?”

“I just want to ask her a question or two.”

“There’s no way Bill Henderson or the DA is going to let anyone talk to her now! If she doesn’t help them find Carlin she’ll find another murder charge filed against her! And I’m not going to let you screw up that case!”

“Perry—”

“I want your word, Lois! And I want it right now! Promise me you’ll stay away from the jail no matter what you’re wearing!”

She almost finished crushing the phone receiver, but after a long moment her control returned. “You have my word. I will not go anywhere near the jail to talk to her.”

“Good.” He took another deep breath. “You didn’t know this, not all of it, but Cat was reporting everything she — wait, you don’t know that either. Look, I need to see you and Clark at my place tonight. Jimmy will be there too. There are some things I need to tell — tell all of you.” His voice caught, then he cleared his throat and said, “It’s time for me to come clean on this.”

“I think Clark’s on a date with Rebecca.”

“Get in touch with him however you need to and get him over here. I want to see all three of you at my house in the next forty minutes.”

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Rebecca looked up as Clark came back to her seat, expecting to be handed a box of popcorn and a soft drink. Instead, he leaned down and whispered, “There’s an emergency. I have to go.”

She frowned and whispered back, “Can’t Lois take care of it?”

He shook his head. “My boss wants both of us, along with Jimmy, to meet him at his house right now.”

“Oh, Clark, we’re not even halfway through the movie! Can’t this wait?”

“No, it can’t.”

She jerked back at his sharp tone and the woman sitting behind them stage-whispered, “You two need to take it outside, okay? We’re trying to enjoy the show here.”

Rebecca turned and muttered. “The boat sinks and almost everybody dies.”

“Oh, thanks for spoiling it for me, lady.”

Clark turned and lifted his open hand to the woman in a gesture of peace, then looked at Rebecca. “I have to go now. Either come with me or take a cab home.”

She hesitated a moment, then stood and followed him to the aisle, pouting inside with every step. Her subtle campaign to cut down on Superman’s public appearances had been going well — maybe too well. Maybe that’s why Clark had been a bit harsh

with her. Maybe she'd been pouring it on a little thick.

As they left the theater and walked into the mall proper, she muttered, "Don't you have any time to yourself?"

He didn't look at her. "You know I'm a reporter. You know I have to respond to the needs of the paper. And right now I have to go see my boss at his home. Something really big has come up."

Her irritation morphed into curiosity. "Really? What's it about?"

He sighed and waited until they were in the parking lot to speak again. "I don't know yet, but it's big or Lois wouldn't have called me while we were out together."

"I didn't hear your phone ring."

He opened the passenger door and handed her the keys. "You'll have to drop me off." Rebecca frowned at him, then walked around the car and they each slid into their respective seats. "And Lois didn't call me on the phone."

Rebecca's eyes widened. "You mean—" she touched the side of her head.

"Yes. Now please hurry. She wouldn't give me any information, but I could tell she was really upset about something."

"Got it." She started the car and eased out into the parking lot, then headed for the main road. "I'll need directions to your boss' house. I've never been there."

"No problem. Take a left on the Curt Swan Parkway and head west. I'll direct you from there."

Whatever was wrong, thought Rebecca, it was bad. Maybe she should ease up on Clark for a while.

Or maybe he needed to learn how to say 'no' once in a while.

\*\*\*

The funeral had been torture for Jimmy.

Telling Cat's parents how sorry he was had been sheer agony.

But the knowledge that she'd been one of the good guys after all almost crushed him.

He'd gotten used to speaking carefully around Cat, to keeping sensitive information out of her hands as much as he could, to pretending that he tolerated her presence in the newsroom. He'd almost tipped his hand a few times, but as far as he or Perry knew, she'd never known that he'd been tracking her movements and her conversations with Carlin for months.

And then Perry had revealed to him that she'd been reporting every word to her editor, that the only reason he'd kept Jimmy on the case was to verify her information, that they had been feeding that information to the police, that Cat had planned to testify against Carlin after the doctor's arrest, and that Cat would have almost surely disappeared into witness protection after the trial.

None of that would happen now.

Jimmy watched as Perry told her parents that Cat had been murdered by someone she'd been investigating and that the information she'd discovered would help the police find her killer quickly. It didn't comfort them, of course, but the knowledge that she had been working for the good guys might help deal with her death in the future.

The thought that the Chief was telling them the truth cut Jimmy even deeper.

Lois was barely able to stand. Jimmy had never seen her so inconsolable. She might have fallen more than once had Clark not stayed by her side the whole time, often holding her upright. Even through his own pain, he saw how much Lois would miss Cat, how much this loss was taking from her. Had Clark not been walking beside her, she might have collapsed to the floor when she passed by the open coffin.

And Clark looked stricken, as if he'd lost a friend. But he hadn't, not like Lois had. He'd never been as close to Cat as Lois was. Maybe he felt Lois' pain over losing her friend.

There was also a fleeting thought that Clark and Lois looked very natural together, that they fit together as well as any two

people he'd ever seen, but the thought didn't hang around and Jimmy didn't try to call it back when it drifted away. He didn't even wonder where Rebecca was, since he knew she and Cat hadn't known each other.

Just before he walked out of the chapel, Inspector Henderson motioned him to an unoccupied corner. "Olsen, what can you tell me about the Dangerous Boys?"

Jimmy didn't bother to hide his shock at the question. Henderson wasn't supposed to know anything about that. "What? Who?"

"Look, I know they're not a new punk band. I also know that you're connected to them and that you and they do some really high-tech computer stuff. We have reason to believe that Arianna Carlin knows something about you guys and about you poking around in her business, which means that she might decide to use up some ammunition on you."

Jimmy's eyes widened and he glanced around to make sure no one else was listening. "I don't believe it! We were careful not to leave any tracks!"

"Well, one of you must have stepped in a digital mud puddle and left a footprint. The woman from Carlin's hideout who we have in custody told us this morning that Carlin asked all of her team to find out whatever they could about you and some guy named Philip Knowles and who they were hanging around with."

"But — that means — Morgana!"

Henderson grabbed Jimmy's arm and kept him from sprinting away. "Calm down! Tell me about Morgana."

"She's part of the gang, one of the Dangerous Boys, but she's also a musician and she moved to Chicago to play in the symphony and I have to tell her she's in danger!"

Henderson shook his head. "If she's that far away, she's safe as long as she stays there. What's left of Carlin's organization is all up and down the East Coast, but they haven't penetrated the Midwest yet."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"We have a number of sources and the FBI is working closely with us on this case. If Luthor hadn't gone after Carlin with his militia and pushed her underground, we probably would have been able to arrest her a couple of weeks ago."

"She's not so far underground that she can't still kill people!" snarled Jimmy.

Henderson's face softened. "I know. And I'm sorry. I should have taken Ms. Grant into protective custody, but we didn't think Carlin would react so quickly and so violently. We'll know better next time."

Jimmy leaned closer and snapped, "Cat doesn't have a next time, Inspector!"

This time Henderson's face went almost blank. "I know that too. Now you know this. Carlin won this battle but she won't win the war. We'll get her. In the meantime, you call your dangerous buddies in your little group and tell them to run for the hills, preferably some place two or three states to the west, and not to come back to Metropolis until this is over. And do it now, before we have to attend any more funerals."

Before Jimmy could respond, Henderson stepped around him and walked outside.

Great, thought Jimmy, just great. Now we're targets too. Me and Raoul and Phil and Morgana and—

His eyes popped open again. He'd better tell Clark that Rebecca was one of the targets. Maybe he could get Superman to watch over her until the danger passed.

### Chapter Eleven

Jimmy fidgeted on his couch. When he got tired of that after a long and boring fourteen seconds, he picked up the TV remote and started surfing channels. Twelve seconds of that sufficed, so he snapped off the TV and walked around his living room straightening various items on the shelves and the end tables

which he'd already straightened at least six times that morning.

A knock on the door startled him, then the second knock, the coded one for the Dangerous Boys, sounded. He all but ran to the door and swung it open to see Raoul and Philip.

He stepped back to let them in. "It's about time you clowns showed up."

Philip frowned. "Ease off, Jim, we're here now."

"I wish you guys had come over sooner."

"Sorry, Jim, but both of us had stuff to do," countered Raoul.

"I told you this was important."

"Hey, Jim, Phil already told you—"

"It's Philip, not Phil. How'd you like for someone to call you Ra? Or maybe Ool?"

Raoul laughed at the joke so old it was almost a set routine.

Jimmy didn't laugh. "Hope you dudes are thirsty." He handed a soft drink to each of his visitors. "Here you go, guys. Not quite a classic Dangerous Boys meeting, is it?"

"Nope," agreed Philip, aka Harry Potter. "Not the same without Rebecca and Morgana. And we don't usually meet on Thursday afternoons, either."

Raoul popped open his drink and took a swig. "Where are the girls, anyway?"

"They're both safe," said Jimmy.

"Safe?" asked Philip. "Safe from whom?"

"The killer who's after all of us. You two have to get out of town now. Tonight."

Raoul and Philip exchanged a bemused look, then Philip asked, "What do you mean, there's a killer after us?"

"It's Arianna Carlin! Somehow she found out about us and now she's got us in her sights! She's already killed a reporter at the *Planet*!"

"Who's Arianna Carlin?"

"Don't you read the papers, Phil?" Raoul cut in. "Lex Luthor's mercenaries shot up her house a few weeks ago and she's in hiding. She's the criminal mastermind of the city, the Boss."

"Name's not—"

"Forget that!" Jimmy broke in. "This woman is a walking shooting gallery!"

"Man, I got no idea what you're talking about."

"Get the afro out of your ears! We're learning more about her every day! She's behind more than half of the high-dollar crime in the city, and now she's killed a friend of mine! And somehow she found out that we were poking around in her business online! Now which one of you birdbrains hacked into that Cayman Islands bank?"

Philip put his drink down. "It wasn't me, Jimbo, honest. I've been a good boy lately."

Jimmy glared at him for a moment, then nodded and turned to his other guest. "Raoul?"

Raoul took a deep breath, then nodded. "I confess. I cracked it and found a bunch of transactions from that guy Nigel's accounts. Copied them off to a hidden directory on my home machine and gave them to the DA. But I didn't know about the woman you're talking about, not then. How'd she find out I was in that system?"

Jimmy ran his hand through his hair. "We don't know. Might have been a file access trigger, or maybe you tripped a silent alarm when you hacked in. We just know that she asked her people to find out about me and you, both by name. There's no way she'll miss the connection to the rest of the group. On top of that, my police source says that your info can't be used to start an investigation because it's stolen."

"But I'm not a cop! Can't they use things ordinary citizens give them without looking at it too close?"

"Not on something this big. We're talking multi-state task force, FBI, IRS, and a couple more alphabet agencies chasing this

maniac. And you pointed her right at us!"

Raoul's face fell. "Man, I'm really sorry. I didn't think it would get that heavy."

"Well, it has." Jimmy stomped to the far side of the room near the window, then turned to face his friends. "Look, we're all in danger, you two more than me. This woman is crazy dangerous and she's bound to make a try for you. I have the *Daily Planet* to give me some protection, but you guys don't have much of anything."

Raoul lifted his hands palms-out in a 'peace' gesture. "Easy, Jimmy, just take it easy. What do the police say we need to do?"

"Get out of the state, not just out of town. Go west somewhere, Chicago or farther. Your lives are in danger if you don't go and go now!"

Philip shook his head. "Sounds great, but I don't have any money to travel. And I just got my teaching assistant ticket and classes to teach at Metro University. I can't afford to leave town."

"The *Planet* will front you the money you need."

Raoul shook his head next. "I have a couple of job offers of my own in the works, Jim. If I disappear, so do they. I can't afford to leave town either."

Jimmy gritted his teeth and hissed. "You idiots! You can't afford to stay here! Arianna Carlin will find you and shoot you in the head! Or worse!"

Philip chuckled. "What could be worse than that?"

Jimmy opened his mouth to answer when he heard a scraping sound at his door. Jacked up with adrenalin, he grabbed his friends by their shirt collars, fell backwards, and pulled them down onto the floor behind his couch.

Before either of them could say anything to protest, Jimmy's apartment door blew open and someone emptied an assault rifle into the front room. Several bullets ripped through the couch above their heads and slammed into the wall behind them, as well as others which buried themselves in the plaster and wood around the room.

His smoke alarm went off almost immediately, along with a special strobe light in the ceiling which Jimmy had installed as an added security measure. The alarm's sing-song tone combined with the flashing of the strobe through the smoke of the explosion and the gunfire to create a surreal atmosphere.

The shooting stopped as abruptly as it began.

Philip had his face buried in the carpet and his hands over his head. Raoul was curled up in a fetal position beside him, breathing rapidly. Jimmy strained to listen, but the concussion of the explosion had created a high-pitched ringing in his ears.

There were no sounds of anyone walking through the living room — at least, none that he could hear over the siren and the ringing — so he risked a slow belly crawl to the end of the couch.

He got up on his hands and knees and peeked around the end of the couch.

Nothing.

He saw no one in the room, near the doorway, or in the hallway of the apartment building. He did, however, see a number of empty shell casings on the floor, along with the remnants of his front door.

He crept slowly to the shredded doorway and gingerly peeked out. All he saw was the heads of two of his neighbors looking out to see what had happened.

"Call the police!" he yelled. The man across the hall and three doors down wiggled the phone next to his head, indicating that he was indeed doing that very thing. The woman directly across the hallway, whose head was covered by a pink hairnet, seemed to be yelling something at Jimmy, but he heard none of what she said.

He stood, flipped off the security strobe and alarm, and leaned against the wall. The place was a total wreck. Every surface in the room was either peppered with debris or



pockmarked with bullet holes.

He sighed. He knew he wasn't getting his security deposit back, not after this party.

\*\*\*

Jimmy watched the officers go over his apartment with a fine-tooth comb. They catalogued every spent cartridge, every bullet hole, every burn mark, every piece of shrapnel, every shred of couch stuffing on the floor. They had even partially reassembled his front door in the hallway outside.

Philip was sitting on Jimmy's bed, being questioned by the same scruffy detective he'd seen at Cat's apartment a few nights before. Raoul was in the kitchen being debriefed by Bill Henderson himself. Jimmy had already given his statement to the attractive Officer O'Brian, the woman he'd met at Cat's apartment, whose first name, he had learned, was Leticia. Now he and Leticia stood beside the ruined couch, waiting for the crime scene techs to finish their work.

"How are your ears now?" asked Leticia. "Can you hear me okay?"

"Yes. Still a little ringing, but it seems to be fading." Jimmy shook his head and sighed deeply. "You know, I liked that couch. It was a good couch. Too bad Carlin had to shoot it up."

"Are you sure it was Arianna Carlin, Jimmy?"

He shook his head again. "I didn't see her, didn't hear her voice, but I can't think of anyone who's that mad at me except her. She, or whoever she hired, just blew the door down and started shooting."

"And you say that Dr. Carlin knows it was you — your group, I mean — that hacked into her offshore accounts?"

"Again, if it wasn't her, I have no idea who else it might be."

"Jealous boyfriend, maybe? Spurned girlfriend?"

He looked at her and almost smiled. "I wish it were that easy, but I haven't had the time to date anyone seriously for more than a year. Closest I came was with Morgana."

"Who's that?"

"Morgana? She's a musician and an amateur scientist. She and Rebecca Connors were working on a biology project for Becca's undergrad degree about three years ago, and they invited Raoul to help them with the computer setup. He brought in Philip — he hates being called Phil — and Philip called me for help on the technical stuff." He chuckled. "Turns out that the five of us together make one whale of a cracker-hunter team."

"Cracker? Don't you mean hacker? And aren't those the guys who break into computer systems and steal data and erase people's files?"

"No! Just the opposite. Those guys — the bad guys — are crackers, and us hackers — the good guys — go after them. We helped the FBI catch some computer-savvy bank thieves a couple of years ago, and just a while back we — that is, Raoul — penetrated Carlin's offshore accounts and gave transaction dates and amounts to the District Attorney. He even dug out Carlin's personal account number."

"I hadn't heard about any of that."

"That's because we didn't want this"—he waved at the apartment—to happen. I don't know how she spotted us, but I figure she must have had a backtrace set up in the bank's computer to let her know if anyone got into her account. I guess Raoul was so excited to get in the system he missed it. That kind of thing can be hard to catch unless you're looking for it, and I guess he figured she felt safe enough out there."

"So her offshore accounts are frozen now?"

He sighed again. "I wish. The DA has to make an arrest, then track the money independent of our hacking to make any kind of case using it. Mr. Riesman told us thanks for the info, now knock it off before we blow his case." He shrugged. "I hope this jump-starts the investigation, because I don't think I can take getting shot at very often."

Leticia leaned closer and said in a low voice, "I think you're doing very well, Jimmy. A lot better than your friends, in fact."

Jimmy listened to the raised voices coming from different directions in his apartment. "Yeah, well, unfortunately I have more experience at this kind of thing than they do."

A knock on the shredded door frame caught their attention. "Jimmy?" asked Lois. "Are you okay?"

He smiled in relief. "I'm good, Lois. thanks. Don't come in, okay? This is still a crime scene."

Leticia took a step toward the door. "Please identify yourself, ma'am."

Lois flipped open her press pass and held it up. "My name is Lois Lane. I'm with the *Daily Planet*. I work with Jimmy and I was worried about him. I heard about this on the news, and I wanted to make sure he had a place to spend the night." She looked around and grimaced. "You sure don't want to stay here."

Leticia said, "The city can provide a safe place for him, Ms. Lane."

Lois put her pass away. "Given the level of carnage Arianna Carlin has spread around the past week, I suspect that Jimmy's still in danger."

"Yes, ma'am. That's why the police department should provide a safe place for him."

Henderson came out of the kitchen. "I thought I heard your voice, Lane. Knew you couldn't stay away from a train wreck like this."

"As I live and breathe, it's Metropolis' answer to the Dark Knight, all moody and brooding. Anything for publication, Bill?"

"Nope. And I won't until we find Carlin." He turned his attention to Jimmy. "Olsen, you didn't leave town."

Jimmy gave him a deadpan stare. "What gave me away, Inspector?"

Henderson almost snarled and all but leaped across the room. "I don't like people shooting the citizens of my city! Especially when I told you to tell them to leave town! And as I remember it, I didn't just ask you to leave, I told you to leave! I don't want you idiots dead on my watch! I want you alive and breathing and working and paying taxes and paying my salary! Now are you going or do I have to arrest all three of you?"

Jimmy looked at Lois, who shrugged from the doorway. Then he turned to Henderson. "Okay, Inspector, I give up. Take us, all three of us, to your finest safe house."

Henderson, who seemed to have gotten himself under control, frowned. "Can't. The woman we have in custody already gave us two of our safe house locations, and we can't be sure how many more Carlin knows about. We have to do something else."

Lois looked around the room. "You know a good maid service?"

"Ha, chuckle, guffaw, and tee-hee, Lane. Not to mention giggle and snort."

"You forgot the chortle."

Jimmy was astonished to see Henderson fighting a smile.

"Okay, Lane, I give up. What should we do with our three little lambs who have obviously lost their way?"

Lois assumed an exaggerated thinking pose. "Well, aside from leading them in the Whiffenpoof Song, you might let them come with me. I think I can find them a safe place to be for a few days."

"Good. As long as you let me know where they are, that is."

Lois' face morphed into a Cheshire Cat smile. "Why, my dear Inspector, I wouldn't have it any other way."

Another uniformed officer leaned past Lois. "Excuse me, please, ma'am. Inspector Henderson? We got a body down in the alley beside the building. A tenant found the deceased face-down on the ground when she went to the dumpster to take out the garbage."

"I'm not done here. Call the precinct for another detective."

"Well, I'm pretty sure it's related to this case."

Henderson leaned forward slightly. "What makes you say that?"

"The recently departed was wearing a ski mask, gloves, and a gray jumpsuit. He also had an empty AK-47 under his right arm."

Henderson's eyebrows rose. "You're right, that is interesting. Can you tell the cause of death?"

The officer shrugged. "Can't be sure, but I don't think the two small bullet holes in the base of his skull did him any good."

"How small?"

"ME will have to extract them, but I'd guess a twenty-two or a twenty-five. Close range, too. There's what looks like gunpowder residue in his hair and on the back of the mask."

Henderson turned to Jimmy. "Looks like Carlin is trying to clean up all her loose ends. When did you say you three guys were leaving town?"

Jimmy looked at Lois. "First thing tomorrow morning, Inspector. I promise."

"Tonight would be better."

"Inspector?" Lois said. "I think I know just the place to park these three miscreants."

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Arianna was furious. She'd risked everything to strike Olsen quickly. When she learned that the other two male members of the group tracking her were going to meet with him, she decided to hit the place with a frontal assault.

But the idiot she'd hired had botched the job. Instead of entering the room and making sure the targets were dead, he had simply sprayed the apartment with his assault rifle and run. He'd proven he was a waste of DNA when he turned his back on her. The only positive aspect of this job was that she didn't have to pay him.

The biggest problem was that now she had to disappear again. And she was running out of rabbit holes to dive into. A quick mental evaluation told her that the closest and safest place was the parking garage across from Lex' building. It was unlikely that the police would look for her there, and she'd have the chance to take care of these so-called Dangerous Boys at a later date.

No one had seen her near the dumpster, no one had seen her shoot the incompetent gunman, and no one had recognized her in scarf and sunglasses as she strode out of the other end of the alley. It was an eight-block hike to the garage entrance, then three more blocks underground, but there was a serviceable bed, a store of preserved military rations, fresh water, a small but clean bathroom with a shower, and a change of clothes waiting for her. She could remain hidden for several days, if necessary, and no one would ever know she was there.

Maybe she could arrange a final meeting with dear Lex, too.

\*\*\*

Lois leaned out her Jeep's driver's side window and tossed the keys to Perry's fishing cabin to Jimmy. "You have dried food and fresh water, clean linens, a VCR with a hundred movies, and a state-of-the-art computer with a satellite Internet connection. You boys be neat, okay? Don't let anyone see you. And no fires!"

"Yes, Mommy," whined Jimmy. "We promise to be good."

"Don't go there, Jimmy. I'll tie your arms in knots behind your head if you do."

Jimmy leaned down to Lois' Jeep window. "Lois. I know what's going on and how much danger we're in. Raoul and Phil got shot at for the first time tonight. They're too scared to do anything but keep their heads down, and I have my phone handy. If anything happens I'll call you, then Henderson, then we'll run for the hills through the back door."

She tried to keep the mist from her eyes, but she knew she couldn't. "Well." She cleared her throat. "I just don't — don't

want to lose anyone else."

Jimmy put his hand on her shoulder. "We'll be fine. Really." She nodded and turned the ignition. "Okay. See you in a few days."

She drove away, but not far. Just over the second hill, she pulled off the dirt road under a stand of trees and stepped out. She listened, then looked around.

No one nearby.

A whirl of dust and starlight and Ultra Woman lifted up from the ground.

Her patrol route took in a ten-mile radius around the cabin. At four thousand feet, she could see further than that, and no one on the ground was likely to identify her, much less see her clearly. As long as she dodged low-flying aircraft she'd be fine.

And so would those three young men.

The wind from her flight dried her tears even as she shed them. When she'd picked up the emergency call for Jimmy's apartment, that shots had been fired, she feared the worst. Had Carlin succeeded in killing Jimmy, Lois would have begun her own search for the woman and not stopped until Carlin had been found. When she'd learned that Jimmy and his buddies were alive and unhurt, she'd almost driven off the road in relief.

She wasn't sure she could have taken that blow. Cat's death, her spying on the newsroom, her reporting to Perry and the DA, all conspired to knock a huge hole in Lois' self-image. There was no reasonable doubt that Carlin had killed Cat for going to the police. And there was no doubt that Lois had completely missed any indication that there was a spy in the newsroom, much less that it was Cat.

She'd never have lunch with Cat again, never share tidbits of gossip with her, never watch her smile and make men jump over themselves to please her, never hear her unexpectedly deep and personal insights, never laugh with her again—

It was almost too much. Cat's death and the revelation of her secrets had nearly broken her. It was worse than the incident with the three home invaders. Lois had trusted Cat, had depended on her friendship, and she'd never suspected that the other girl was giving sensitive and sometimes secret information to a mass murderer.

What else had she missed? Had she missed something about the people close to her? Was there something about Rebecca or Perry or Jimmy she should know but didn't?

Was there something about Clark—

No. Clark was exactly who he appeared to be, either in the Suit or in civilian clothes. She would bet her life that anything she didn't already know about Clark didn't matter. He was a true hero and she owed him her life several times over. And the link they shared would have revealed his secrets by now, had he had any she needed to know.

Clark was honest and good and true. He was the best friend she'd ever had — Cat included — and she loved him. He—

Wait a minute.

Lex. She loved Lex, not Clark. Clark was a great guy and Rebecca was lucky to have him in her life, even if she kept trying to pull him away from being Superman. Becca loved Clark, so it was natural that she wanted to spend time with him.

And she had a date with Lex on Saturday night. This was no time to overturn her heart, especially when there was no one to turn to. Clark would be her friend forever, but that was all he'd be.

Her head was surprised at the flow of sadness from her heart at the thought.

Enough mental musings. She needed to focus on this sweep of the area. And if it remained as clear as it was so far, maybe she'd drop in and see Bob. She hadn't spoken to the artificial intelligence for some time, and she knew he'd want to take readings or some such thing to check up on her.

Just once more around the perimeter, just to make sure.

\*\*\*

Bob? This is Lois.

<< Greetings, Lois. It is pleasant to converse with you. >>

Yeah, me too. I — I dropped by to let you take some readings from me.

<< While it is true that obtaining more physiological data from you would be a positive development, that is not why you are here. >>

Oh. Right. Would you believe — um — I dropped by for a review of my financials?

<< No. >>

Drat. Missed it by that much.

<< You are attempting to use humor to mask your pain. If you wish for me to surmise the probable reasons for your emotional discomfort, I am able to do so, but I prefer a more direct method in data input. >>

So you just want me to tell you, right?

<< Yes. >>

You sure you don't want to guess?

<< While Clark believes that I could have some success as a 'radio psychologist,' I have no innate understanding of human emotions or interactions. They are too complex to be broken down into equations, and there are too many variables whose values and weights change from moment to moment in the same person, never mind from one person to the next. >>

So you don't want to guess?

<< No. >>

Okay. I — I had no idea Cat Grant was spying on us for Arianna Carlin.

<< This is a true statement? >>

Yes. But she was also passing everything to Perry and the District Attorney's office, too, so I guess that makes her a double agent or something. And I also found out that the reason she was reporting to Carlin was because Carlin bought Cat's gambling debt that she ran up in college, and she was also threatening her parents in Georgia. I took care of the bad guys in Georgia, but Carlin got to Cat and — and killed her.

<< May I have a moment, please? >>

Sure. Just don't take too long.

<<<>>

Um, Bob? Hey, Bob, are you still on the air?

<< Yes. Thank you for being patient. I had not accessed all of the information you have just given me, since it was not released for national publication. I was aware of the murder, but I was not aware of the intricacies of the ties binding Ms. Grant to Dr. Carlin, nor of her importance in yours and Clark's lives. Now that I know where to look, I am able to read the databases of both the police and District Attorney in Metropolis to gather all the pertinent details. >>

Huh. Never knew you could get caught with your variables down.

<< If you mean that you are surprised that I do not have all existing information in the world ready for immediate retrieval, please remember that I am a finite artificial being. I cannot know everything. >>

I see. Then maybe I shouldn't ask you what I came here to ask you.

<< You are more than welcome to ask, but I may not know the answer. And if the question involves human interpersonal relationships, it is likely that I will not be able to provide a satisfactory response. >>

Okay. Let me try anyway.

<< Please proceed. >>

Here goes. Do you think — no, can you calculate that Lex Luthor and I should get married?

<< This is not a matter for numeric calculations, Lois. This is

something you must decide for yourself. I can ask you questions which are designed to guide you to your own answer, but I cannot supply the correct response. I can advise you, I can point you in a general direction, but I cannot give you a definite answer. I know of no machine intelligence which could do so. >>

Hmm. Okay. Why don't you ask me some questions and see what happens?

<< Very well. Please respond without considering your answer. If, for example, I say the name Lex Luthor, what impressions come to your mind? >>

Rich. Good laugh. Powerful. Great dance partner. Likes music and plays a pretty good blues piano. Inspires loyalty in his employees. Good-looking in a slightly rugged way. Nice guy, too. Did you know Rebecca plans to go back to work for LexCorp when she's recovered just because Lex is her boss?

<< I did not, but that is not germane to this discussion. >>

Is that enough of an answer?

<< Yes. Please respond in the same way to the name Perry White. >>

Oh, Perry? He's the greatest boss ever. He's firm but not mean, demanding but fair, and at heart he's a great big pussycat.

<< Thank you. Now please respond to the name Rebecca Connors. >>

Ah, Becca. She's cute, perky, brilliant, friendly, ambitious, determined, a little bit sneaky, has great hair but isn't vain about it, loyal to her friends, and — well, she's just a darned nice girl.

<< Thank you. Once more, please respond to the name Clark Kent. >>

Wow. I — uh — Clark's the greatest. Friend, I mean. In the world. He has all those powers and won't use them for personal gain, which is totally cool because not even I could stop him if he went all Darth Vader on us, and he helped me figure out how to control mine when I got them and he never got jealous or anything and never resented me getting some of the publicity he'd been getting because he sure could have and—

<< Thank you, Lois. I believe you have an answer to your question. >>

Huh? What answer?

<< The question of whether or not you should marry Lex Luthor. >>

But you haven't told me what I should do!

<< No. But I believe you have. >>

Well, yeah, maybe I'd understand all that if you came with a decoder ring! What am I supposed to do?

<< I do not often advocate that humans follow their hearts. Too often, humans are focused on their own desires and needs to the exclusion of the desires and needs of other people, and those desires are often not conducive to civilized behavior. But in your specific case, you wish to know if you should wed a particular man. I cannot give you the answer. You must find that answer within yourself. >>

In other words, I should follow my heart?

<< In this case, yes. >>

You're a big help, you know that?

<< I have assisted you to the limits of my programming and my design. I regret that I cannot go beyond these limitations, as I am not human. >>

You could have at least given me a name!

<< No, I could not. I am unable to supply that data for you. The only concrete advice I can offer is that you should not compromise yourself when and if you marry. This course of action is a serious one, a course guaranteed to bring you both joy and heartache, and that assumes that you marry a man as committed to you as you must be committed to him. >>

But — but that's just common sense! Who'd miss something that obvious?

<< If the divorce statistics of this nation are to be trusted, it is

sense which is far less common than you assert. I can tell you no more, Lois. I wish you well on this, your own personal quest for a life mate. >>

Oh. Then — our conversation is over?

<< Not if you wish to continue. But I have exhausted my store of counsel for you on this subject. I have nothing more to offer. >>

Okay. Then — I guess this is good night, huh?

<< Good night, Lois. Have a pleasant flight home. >>

## Chapter Twelve

Lois was looking forward to her date. She was having dinner not with Lex Luthor, the fourth richest man in the world, but with Alex Winfield, computer programmer and all-around regular guy. Dinner at Mike's would be followed by a quick trip to Stern Communications Stadium to watch the hometown Dragons take the diamond against their division rival Gotham Spiders. Both teams were vying for the title and a shot at the World Series, and this late in the season every game counted. It was bound to be hotly contested and fun to watch.

Lois giggled as she thought about the visiting team's logo and decided anew that — super-powered or not — she could never play baseball with a snarling arachnid stitched to her cap. All she'd be able to think about would be those eight hairy legs crawling down onto her face as she tried to field a pop-up or swing at a pitch in her wheelhouse.

I'll have to run that one by Cat the next—

No. She couldn't.

And she realized anew that she'd never see Cat Grant again. She leaned against the cab window, closed her eyes, and let one tear from each eye slip down her face. Both Dr. Friskin and Martha had told her that the pain would ease with time, that she'd learn to deal with it, but that it would never go away completely.

She remembered Cat telling her about a best friend she'd lost at age twelve and how the pain would occasionally pop up seemingly out of nowhere and startle her. Lois sighed. Cat had joined Lana in Lois' heart as a lost friend, making that emptiness just a bit larger.

She'd lost two good friends to the violence embodied by Arianna Carlin. There would be no more, she vowed again. No one else will suffer because of that evil woman.

However, there was nothing she could do about it now. Carlin had vanished again, and until the woman showed her face somewhere the only thing to do was to wait. And everyone needed a break now and then, even Ultra Woman. So Lois wiped her face, fixed her minimal makeup, and prepared to have a fun evening with the man who claimed to love her more than life or money.

But when she opened the front door to Lex' apartment, she found him sitting in the middle of the front room surrounded by piles of paper of various sizes, shapes, and colors. And neither his body language nor the bit of his face that she could see made her think this was anything but good news.

"Lex? What happened? What's wrong?"

His head slowly rotated in her direction. "Oh, no," he moaned.

She stopped and planted one hand on her hip. "That's not exactly the reaction any woman would want from her date."

He rose with a groan and a momentary limp. "Lois, my dear, I'm so sorry. I completely forgot about our date tonight."

She grinned and took his hands. "I forgive you. Now just go throw on some jeans and sneakers so we'll match and—"

"I can't go."

She stopped with her mouth open, then closed it and nodded once. "Okay. The Spiders are in town for a four-game series, so maybe tomorrow—"

"No, Lois. I'm very sorry." He turned and gestured at the papers around him. "I have two board meetings on Monday and

one on Tuesday with various groups of people who want either answers or my head, and I'm not certain many of them have a preference for answers. They want to know what effect Arianna's duplicity and Nigel's criminal behavior will have on my business ventures, and I must have concrete answers for them." He sighed. "Unfortunately, my accounting team has been unable to ferret out the answers to those very valid questions, and I am afraid that the task may be beyond my own capabilities."

"Oh." She looked at the almost-defeated expression on his face and sighed. "I'm sorry I was so selfish."

He turned and hugged her firmly but not passionately. "You were not being selfish. You had no idea that this had happened. I should have called you and explained the situation."

She leaned back. "I understand completely."

He smiled. "Thank you. I will try to make it up to you next week." He relaxed his embrace and leaned back. "Assuming, of course, I still have a business to run."

She frowned and looked around, then stepped back. "I could help you."

"Excuse me?"

"I could help you work through this stuff."

"What? Lois, I can't ask you to do that!"

"You're not asking. I'm offering. Besides, you look like you could use a break."

He rubbed his face with his hands. "I won't deny that. But Monday is coming whether I work or play or sleep or just sit at the piano all weekend. At any rate, my dear, I don't recall that you have any training or experience in finance."

She put both hands on her hips and leaned closer. "I'm an investigative reporter, Lex. I can spot something out of the ordinary even if I don't know exactly what the problem is. And I can recognize patterns and put items together with the best accountant. On top of that, a fresh and uncluttered perspective might just be the thing you need right now."

He put his hands out and waved them at the room full of documents. "I freely admit that a second pair of hands would help, but we're still talking about a two-week job that has to be finished by nine o'clock Monday morning. I just don't think we can get this done by that time."

"You're forgetting something."

"What?"

"I'm a little faster than the average bear."

Before Lex could respond, she zipped around the room for less than a second. One piece of paper fluttered towards the floor, but she caught it before it landed. "Here's the summary of special expenses for April of this year."

He blinked. "Yes?"

She handed him two other sheets and pointed at the top one. "This one is an invoice for \$916 in office supplies."

"That's not unusual. The executive floor alone—"

"This second sheet is also an invoice for \$916. Same supplier, same date, same item breakdown, paid by different checks." She lowered all three papers. "One or both of these orders was skimmed, Lex. And"—she lifted one invoice—"Ogilvie Office Supply probably didn't get both checks. Nigel probably directed one towards Arianna, assuming he didn't just put it in his pocket."

Lex reached out and snatched all three pieces of paper. "How did you — no, I know how you did that. But what made you look for them?"

"The date and the amount. When I looked closer I saw that the invoices looked identical, so I looked for the expense summary. There's one listing for Ogilvie and one for Oglesby, close enough to be missed by anyone who's not an auditor. And speaking of that, you might want to call in an outside auditing firm after your board meetings. Arianna probably has people on the inside."

"I've worked with these people for years, Lois! I trust them completely! They've never done anything that would cause me to doubt them!"

She lifted her hands. "Hey, I could be completely wrong about that. I don't know them or anything about them, and I have no evidence that they're anything but squeaky clean. But I still say that I can organize this mess faster than any five normal people."

Lex sighed, then nodded slowly. "You've convinced me. How can I help?"

She crossed her arms and glanced around. "I don't want to come across as superior or anything, but the best thing you could do for now is just stand back." One corner of her mouth curled up. "Better yet, you could go get some Chinese takeout."

"What? But Lois, I can't leave this information in possession of someone who's not an officer of the company! It's against the bylaws!"

"Okay. Then either stand way back or go get something from the kitchen and put it on to cook. I'll have a preliminary summary of possible problems in about forty minutes if I can go full speed, and then you'll have to figure out what's legit and what's not."

He sighed deeply and waved his hands helplessly. "Take it away, Ultra Woman!"

She watched him stalk into the kitchen without looking back. Hope I haven't bruised his self-image too badly, she thought.

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Lex turned on the oven and set it to pre-heat, then opened the refrigerator and pulled out the ingredients he needed to make a lasagna. He fumed to himself as he opened a container of sauce, a box of noodles, all the cheeses, and put everything together in the pan. He was the businessman, he was the financial genius, not Lois! These were his companies, and it was his responsibility to answer the questions put to him by the various boards!

As he checked the oven temperature and turned to prepare the garlic bread, he told himself to get a grip. If Ultra Woman — Lois — could help him to answer those questions honestly and completely, if she could help him satisfy their concerns, then it was the right thing to do, even if it bent his pride a bit.

He chuckled ruefully to himself. He'd never win any physical contest with Lois, no matter what it was, and she was at least as intelligent as he if not more. The only arena in which he could possibly outperform her was the business and financial one. He needed to feel that he had some kind of advantage over Lois in some area, else he'd risk becoming completely dependent on her.

And that was the problem, wasn't it? His ego had just taken a serious blow, on top of the one he'd suffered in admitting that he couldn't sort through all those papers by himself. Lois could make some general sense out of that mess in there far faster than he could, and it galled him. But as he slid the pasta into the oven, he realized that the mission was to get those records in order, not to prove himself better than Lois at something. It really didn't matter which of them performed that task as long as it got done.

What a big man he was! He resented being pushed to the side by a woman as she did his job, and did it far better than he could.

He wished he could convince her to stay with him. For the entire night. And maybe even for the rest of their lives.

The thought pleased him greatly. The only thing that might please him more would be her agreement to his plan.

As he stirred the tea, he realized that the whirlwind sounds from the other room had stopped. Lois cautiously poked her head around the corner. "How's it going in here?"

"Very well, actually. There will be a lasagna, a salad with my own special Italian dressing, iced tea, and if you can spare me for a few more minutes, garlic bread."

Her soft smile lit up her face. "Sounds delicious. And the lasagna smells great."

She hesitated and he stopped with the bread knife in his hand.

"Have you hit a wall already?"

"No — not really. It's just — I thought I should let you know that the information out there was sorted by industry and company, and a lot of the questionable transactions I've already found tend to go between companies at least twice. Working at normal speed, you never could have found them by Monday. Did you re-sort those papers or was it stacked that way when you got it?"

He frowned. "The way you found it was the way it was given to me. My actuarial staff sent it over with a note asking me to keep it — oh. Oh, my."

She tilted her head. "What is it?"

He closed his eyes and sighed. "Upon reflection, I believe you were right to suspect chicanery in the actuarial department. It appears that Nigel may have had his fingers buried deep in the Lex Industries financial infrastructure. If the auditing staff was involved in the cover-up, then they had to know about the embezzlement as it was happening, and they also had to know how difficult it would have been for me to unravel all that information by myself."

"That's likely, but that's not something I'd be able to figure out from just looking at this data. That's why I can't do this alone. I can do the preliminary stuff really fast, and I can point to things that don't look right, but I can't be certain what's kosher and what's not without your expertise."

He stepped around the counter and kissed her forehead. "Thank you for rebuilding my shattered ego, my dear."

She stepped back. "That's not what I'm doing! I'm not sugarcoating this for you, Lex, I really do need your help. At least, I will when I'm finished sorting all this stuff."

He smiled. "I'm sorry. I was trying to make a joke. That should remind me why I am not doing standup comedy for a living." He made shooing motions at her. "Now please leave my kitchen and complete your task. I will call you when dinner is ready."

She smiled easily. "Okay, boss man. Sheesh, you're such a slave driver."

"You may address me as High Commander."

Her voice bounced around the corner of the kitchen. "In your dreams, Lex, and maybe not even then." Then the whirlwind sounds returned.

He smiled as he returned to his domestic chores. There was definitely hope for the two of them. A great deal of hope.

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They both had a good time at dinner. Examining the documents stacked up in the study did not make for a good time.

Lois handed Lex another handful of paper. "This one concerns Vasquez Construction, Inc. They did some site work at one of the secondary LexLabs facilities. Parking lot street access, foundation pouring, and the electrical wiring for the parking lot lighting." She pointed to the amount on the first page. "This is what Vasquez billed LexCorp."

Lex nodded. "It looks correct to me."

"It probably is. But take a look at the second sheet."

Lex shuffled the papers, and after a moment he frowned.

"Why were two checks cut for this payment?" He looked closer. "And both on the same day?"

Lois grimaced. "I'd guess that Nigel took the smaller check and 'convinced' Mr. Vasquez to accept the partial payment. The difference is over \$2,000 dollars on a \$42,000 contract. On a job that size, \$2,000 would have cut deeply into his profit margin."

He nodded. "I believe that we met this man several months ago. Remember our date at the Miller concert? The bar where we had drinks after the show?"

Her eyes widened. "Yes! The one where — oh, what was her name — Rosita! Where Rosita took me aside and told me that Fernando hunted trouble when he'd been drinking. That was

Fernando Vasquez?”

“Yes. His anger at Lex Luthor does not appear to have been misplaced after all.”

She put her hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Lex.”

He sighed and nodded. “This makes sixteen — or is it seventeen? Seventeen different instances in the current calendar year where Nigel diverted funds from my projects for personal gain. And these are just the ones of which I am aware. Surely there must be many more.” He slapped the papers together and shoved them down beside the chair. “It’s quite apparent that I am a horrible judge of both character and my own business acumen.” He stood up and rubbed his neck with both hands. “Perhaps the board members are correct. Perhaps I should step down.”

Lois stood beside him and spoke softly. “Nigel fooled a lot of people, Lex, not just you. From what you could see, your businesses were taking off and making money hand over fist. You shouldn’t blame yourself for one mistake.”

He chuckled humorlessly. “Even if that one mistake cost more than fifty people their lives? Would you excuse me for even that excess?”

“You didn’t kill those people. Nigel did, and he did it because Arianna Carlin told him to. She’s the one responsible for those deaths, not you.”

He turned to face her and dropped his hands. “I cannot simply ignore my culpability. Asabi warned me about Nigel on more than one occasion and I dismissed his concerns because Nigel appeared to be helping me to succeed.”

“He did help you.”

His voice rose. “By ‘convincing’ people to accept being cheated? By suborning my in-house accounting and legal teams to cover his tracks? By killing people? No, I am not without guilt in this matter.”

He turned away and leaned against a wall. Lois stepped closer and wrapped her arms around his chest from behind. “And now you have the opportunity to make those wrongs right. You can live up to your responsibility for what Nigel and Arianna did and atone for your mistakes.” She slowly turned him to face her. “I know you want to do the right thing, Lex, but I’ve learned that doing the right thing often means doing the thing you least want to do. It would be easy to cut and run, to hide from this, but it wouldn’t make things right! You need to face those directors and reveal the truth.” She cupped his face with her hands. “And I can’t do this for you, no matter how much I might want to. This is definitely not a job for Ultra Woman.”

He smiled slightly and pulled her close. “I know. I’m tired and frustrated, but I’m sure I’ll feel better in the morning.” He bent down and kissed her softly. “Thank you, both for what you have said and for what you have done.” He smiled. “You know, I am fairly certain that I am madly in love with you.”

She smiled back and kissed him lightly on the nose. “Thank you for that, too. And as much as I would like to help you with the rest of this, I have a patrol to make tonight before I go to bed. I’m sorry, but I need to go.”

He let her slip from his embrace but caught her hands. “Lois?”

“Yes?”

Now. He had to ask her now. “Would you — would you consider returning here after your patrol?”

She lowered her eyebrows. “To work on this mess some more?”

“No.” He licked his lips. “To — to spend the night with me.”

Her jaw dropped. “Oh.” She didn’t speak for a long moment. “Lex, I — I —”

He sighed again and squeezed her hands. “Never mind. I was out of line to suggest such a course of action. I’m sorry.”

“No, Lex, it’s not that—”

“Yes, it is. You are not ready for such a step in our

relationship, and I should have been aware of that fact. I apologize.”

“Please understand, Lex, you don’t—”

He stopped her lips with a finger. “I do understand. Truly I do. My only defense is that you have completely bewitched me with your beauty.”

Her face softened. “You are such a terrific flatterer.”

He smiled. “Thank you, although I do not believe something is classed as flattery if it is completely true. Now go and perform your patrol. I’m sure Clark will rest easier knowing that you are on the job.”

She didn’t smile back. “I’m sorry.”

“No. I am the one who should be sorry.” He released her and stepped back to open the door. “Thank you for all your help. I believe I can make some sense of this now.”

She ducked her gaze and turned to find her purse, then walked slowly towards the door. He stopped her with a feather touch. “Lois? Will you — might you have an early dinner with me tomorrow? At the penthouse, where you first — interviewed me?”

She met his look. “Yes, I will. What time?”

“Four, I think. We can make it a very late lunch or a very early dinner with plenty of time to talk afterwards. If you are willing to risk it, I will cook again, and this time it will not be such a hurried affair.”

She nodded. “Four o’clock it is. I’ll see you then.”

“Shall I send Asabi to chauffeur you?”

She hesitated, then nodded. “That would be nice. Thank you.”

“I shall ask him to pick you up at three forty, if that would be acceptable.”

She managed a small smile. “Sounds good to me. Three forty it is, followed by dinner at four.” Her eyes shimmered slightly. “What’s on the menu?”

He almost laughed. “I believe I shall surprise you.”

“I look forward to it.” She leaned towards the door, but hesitated. Then she pulled him close to her and kissed him, soft and sweet and tender. “Until tomorrow afternoon.”

As the door closed behind her, Lex tried to catch up on his breathing. He seemed to have forgotten to inhale.

Tomorrow afternoon would not come quickly enough for him.

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By the time an exhausted Lex Luthor went to bed well past the midnight hour, he’d documented a total of thirty-seven confirmed instances of corruption within his organization and fifty-one probable cases. And he’d made enough connections to people on his actuarial staff to call in the District Attorney, who would probably empanel a grand jury and start filing any number of criminal charges.

Some of those charges would be laid at his feet, he knew. He didn’t want to face them, but he knew he’d have to. It would be his punishment for hiring a thief and murderer.

Nigel had always been quiet and even a bit secretive, but he’d always performed whatever task he’d been given. It was a shock to learn how much more he’d done over the years. Lex wondered how much of the stolen money had been routed to Nigel’s personal accounts and how much had gone to Arianna.

Ah, dear Arianna. Dear sweet, vicious, deadly Arianna. It was too bad the operation to detain her had failed. Some of the pressure he was under now might have already been alleviated had she not remained free. He knew she was still active, even if she was now working from behind the scenes instead of just being invisible in the public eye. She’d learned her lessons altogether too well, and thus far she had eluded the long arm of the law.

But now it was time for her to face justice, and Lex was

determined not to allow her to bring him down. He'd fight back with every weapon at his disposal, and he'd win. It would surely cost him a great deal, but he'd see her in prison — or accept death himself — before he'd surrender to her onslaught. And the board meeting on Monday where they would surely try to force him out of his own company was surely her doing, just as the labyrinth of accounting he was facing was surely hers also. Thanks to Lois, however, that particular hurdle would be far easier to overcome.

And perhaps, thanks to Lois, he could also announce a new personal beginning to the world, that of a newly engaged man.

No prenuptial agreement would be required. Lois was far too honorable and honest to take cab fare from him without his knowledge, much less any significant money or property. In fact, when she learned that she was already one of his main beneficiaries, she would certainly mount a vigorous protest. But he knew that her innate openness and integrity would see her through any difficulties she might encounter along those lines.

And she'd have Superman as a personal advisor if she wished. Lex didn't particularly like Clark Kent, but he did respect him both as a journalist and as a person. The two men had too many differences to be close friends, but Lex hoped that Clark thought as highly of him as he thought of Clark. If Lois needed any counsel at all, Clark would give her the most honest and forthright advice of anyone Lex could think of.

He slid under the covers and closed his eyes. Normal humans needed sleep in order to function at peak efficiency, and Lex had to be at his best for the next three days. He had a board meeting to prepare for, criminals to uncover, a dinner to prepare, and a proposal of marriage to deliver. He was swamped, and he needed rest. After all, if you haven't got your health, you don't have much of anything.

And he was very tired. He slipped into the welcoming arms of Morpheus almost immediately.

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Arianna put down her binoculars and smiled to herself. The Lane woman had left hours before, and Lex' apartment lights had just now dimmed. She was sure he'd be baffled by the interlocking accounting trails she and Nigel had laid over the past year. The board would surely relieve him of his duties on Monday, and she'd be one step closer to her ultimate revenge against him, a truly wonderful going-away gift from her. It wasn't quite as sweet as she thought it would be, though.

A thought crossed her mind. She dismissed it immediately, then called it back for further consideration.

Yes. Yes! That might be even better. She could arrange it so that the board meeting would be a mere formality, a recognition of Lex Luthor's past service to his various companies, a requiem for a fallen community leader and philanthropist. He wouldn't see it, wouldn't know of it, but she'd know. And it would be truly sweet. It would be a day she could take out of her memory at any time to savor and taste all over again, a day she could frame in her remembrances of things past which would validate her life and her real achievements.

It would fit with her getaway plans, too. Preventing Lex from making any more wild accusations against her would ease her escape. She could already feel the sun on her skin and hear the surf gently caressing the beach where she would spend her money. And the nice part was that the beach she'd picked out lacked an extradition treaty with the United States. All she had to do was to put the plan in motion.

And the best way to do that would be to kill dear Lex herself. This job would not be sub-contracted out to some thumb-fingered dolt with a metal pipe or a Swiss army knife. No more hiring contractors to blow up doors and shoot up apartments. She'd perform the lovely deed herself, using the very nine-millimeter pistol with which Lex had taught her to shoot.

Of course, she'd always have her backup weapon. Her dainty twenty-five caliber semi-auto had served her well over the years, most recently dispatching the Grant woman and the inept failure who'd tried for three of the hackers who'd invaded her financial privacy, and she just wouldn't feel fully dressed without it resting in her purse. Not to mention that last shard of Kryptonite, her defense in case Super-Goof or the Ultra Bimbo tried to capture her. A quick dose of green, a small-caliber bullet between the eyes, and she'd be free from them forever.

When? Tonight? No, it was too late. The building was locked up for the weekend, and the secret passages Nigel had shared with her were useless without some entrance into the building itself, even if it was merely the parking garage. No, she'd bring water and some dried food and sneak into one of the dead Brit's hidey-holes early in the morning to await the perfect moment.

Arianna didn't know when that moment would come, but she was sure she'd recognize it when it arrived, the perfect final act in her career. Lex had taught her many things, some of which were not the lessons he'd intended that she learn, but he had also shown her the most important lesson — that winning wasn't everything, it was the only thing.

And she was determined to win, no matter who her opponent might be.

### Chapter Thirteen

The swim park had been a bit cold this late in the year, but fun nonetheless. Despite her fair complexion, Rebecca didn't sunburn easily as long as she worked up to longer exposures over a couple of weeks and remembered her sunblock. And so far, this Saturday had been one of the best in her memory. She was still surprised at Clark's awkwardness in the water, but after she thought about it, she realized that his powers made what would be basic swimming skills for someone else totally useless to him. Still, she could tell he'd enjoyed her love for the water and her abilities afloat. Her favorite move had been popping up in front of him inches from his face, grabbing his neck, and yanking him under the surface. Those kisses had been some very memorable wet ones.

And the day wasn't over yet.

Rebecca stepped back as Clark unlocked his apartment and snapped him on the rear end with her towel. He jumped as it popped against his backside and he turned to grab the towel before she could retrieve it. He pulled her into a hug, which she turned into a long soft kiss, which he returned with less enthusiasm than she would have preferred.

She pulled back and forced a smile up at him. "I really need to change clothes, Clark. Let's go inside."

He opened the door and gestured for her to enter. She looked around and nodded. "Oh, I really love what you've done to the place!"

He frowned in confusion. "I haven't done anything to it lately."

She shook her head and chuckled. "I know, Clark. I was joking."

"Oh. In that case, ha-ha-ha, giggle, guffaw, and chortle. Not to mention chuckle and tee-hee. That was most amusing."

She lifted a sardonic eyebrow for a moment, then picked up her clothing bag and headed for the bathroom. "I got first crack at the mirror! Maybe I can brush this mop into something resembling neat."

"Okay. I'll fix a snack for us."

"Something light, I hope. I can't eat anything heavy for at least an hour."

"What? Why not?"

"Because I've been swimming. Didn't your mother ever tell you not to eat anything for at least an hour after you go swimming?"

He looked at her totally innocent expression. "Oh, you're just

full of them today, aren't you?"

"I'm full of something. Now get to your snack fixing and I'll get to my hair brushing."

"Yes, ma'am."

She laughed as she skipped into the bathroom. Today had been a very good day so far — and she hoped it got even better.

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He couldn't help it. Her pixie laugh made him smile. And she was fun to be around. Rebecca was a party waiting for a place to happen, and she wasn't particular about the location or the guest list.

He was so very glad that she'd recovered so well from being shot, even though she'd carry the marks of her injuries for the rest of her life. And he knew that her one-piece swimsuit not only fit her most flatteringly, it covered the scar on her abdomen that she might not ever show to anyone who didn't already know about it.

She was young and alive and beautiful. She was smart and talented and so very full of life. And he was sure that if he asked her to marry him, she'd tackle him and say "yes" so many times she'd deplete the oxygen in the room.

Did he love her?

He thought about that question as he prepared a veggie tray for them to nosh on while they watched a video. He compared her to Lana, and he decided that there wasn't any real comparison. They were two different people, and it wasn't fair to either Lana or Rebecca to decide that one woman was better than the other in any way. He'd loved Lana. She had died. He had grieved for her for more than a year. Was he ready to move on?

Yes, he decided. He was ready.

Was Rebecca the one? Was he ready to move on with her?

Was she the one he could marry and plan to spend the rest of his life with?

His smile faded. That one he wasn't so sure about.

Rebecca was beautiful and fun and vibrant. She was brilliant and driven to succeed. She was going to make a difference in the world someday.

She'd already made a difference in Clark. He'd cut down on his patrols at her urging, despite Ultra Woman's hints about needing a little help now and then. She'd never asked him not to respond to any emergency situation, but she had discouraged him from looking for additional ways to help, saying that he needed more time for himself. The fact that "more time for himself" usually translated into "more time with Rebecca" hadn't struck him until just now.

And he wasn't sure how he felt about that little realization either.

He thought about Lois. He thought about how he felt when he was with her, how his spirits would lift whenever they were together or when they communicated mentally. He thought about all the things they'd shared over those months when he was so emotionally fragile, how she'd helped him and supported him and yelled at him and treated him like a real person instead of a super-powered mannequin. He thought about how she'd gained a copy of his powers and how she'd trusted him to teach her how to use them. And he thought about how well she'd worked with him despite their differences.

He mused about the way she'd proclaimed her independence from him as a super-heroine with that costume that looked like a star map tattooed on an exotic dancer. He thought about how they'd argued about so many things, both trivial and vital. He pondered what his life might be like if they were together.

It startled him when he realized that he loved Lois Lane. He loved her fire, her zeal for the truth, her crazy mixed-up way of working through a story and coming to the right conclusion. He loved her smile, her laugh, her soft eyes and her easy way of working with him on super-jobs. He even loved the way she'd

been hesitant to embrace her powers at first, that she had feared — unrealistically, of course — that she wouldn't be able to do what he did, or at least not nearly as well.

And then he thought about how much Lex loved her.

He couldn't put himself between them. Even though Lex Luthor wasn't his favorite person in Metropolis, he'd forced himself to get to know the man better, and he'd finally admitted that Lex wasn't a horribly evil troll just because he cared about Lois so much. If they got married, Lois would never want for anything, including a husband who cared for her so deeply that it was a little intimidating to those who'd never loved anyone like that.

And Clark realized that if he really cared for Lois, he'd want her to be with the man she loved. Even if it was — ew — Lex Luthor.

And even if the man she loved wasn't him.

He shook himself and finished loading the tray, then poured two tall glasses of soda with a modicum of ice. Rebecca would be coming out soon, and he wanted her to feel at home.

Until he pulled the rug out from under her, of course. He hoped she'd land softly.

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Rebecca opened her bag and pulled out a hairbrush, then looked in the mirror and sighed. She'd have to wash it before she styled it, and there wasn't time for that. She was going to make her big move on Clark today. The poor boy wouldn't know what hit him.

In the spirit of Bonnie Raitt, she planned to give their friends something to talk about. Maybe Clark would dance with her again, like he had way back when they'd first met at a Dangerous Boys work session. Over the months they'd known each other, she'd been intrigued by him, then attracted to him, then impressed by him, then in love with him.

And now she knew he was also Superman. It was almost overwhelming at times, but he was human enough to be vulnerable to her. Lana had proved that.

She pulled out the shirt she'd planned to wear, then her eyes fell on the stack of towels on the rack on the far wall and an even better idea invaded her mind. The one on the bottom — yes! It was large enough to wrap around her and small enough to make her intentions plain. She pulled it out and held it up, bit her bottom lip in thought, then decided to go for broke. Clark would have to notice her once she walked out of the bathroom wearing that towel and nothing more. They might not get to that snack he was making, either, but in life some sacrifices must be made.

The thought made her giggle.

Then she noticed a folded piece of paper on the floor. It had to have fallen out of the towel or off the rack when she pulled the towel out, but she couldn't imagine why it was there.

She picked it up and began reading.

\*\*\*

Hello, Darling!

I love you. I know I've told you that a thousand times, but I really, really love you. If there were anything else I could say to tell you that I love you, I'd say it. I'd write it down on the back of every envelope we'll ever buy and make you go buy some more so I could write it again!

Oh, I know I'm being silly. I know I'm going on and on again. Seems like I do that every time I try to write to you. But I can't help it. And even though you're a far better writer than I am, and a better speaker, too, I just had to put these thoughts down on paper. I love you so much!

We've had so little time together lately, what with you starting at the *Planet* and me at the museum. We flash past each other in the morning and meet up at dinner time. And sometimes when I wake up late at night or early in the morning and I reach over for you, you're not there. Oh, I know why you're not there. I



know Superman has to be out in the world saving lives and stopping crime and rescuing kittens and so forth, but I still miss you. I hate having to share you with the whole city. Is it really so bad to be jealous of an entire metropolitan area? If so, then I'm really, really bad, worse than some of the criminals you catch.

But I love it when you come back home. Sometimes when you come back to bed and I'm holding your pillow and you try to ever so gently take it away from me and I wake up — I'm not asleep, I'm just waiting for you. And then I pretend that you woke me up and I slide over close to you and snuggle up against your incredible manliness and pretend that I forgot to put on my underwear and it's way better than sleeping!

But I wanted to tell you something else, something I've never really said to you. At least, I've never been able to say it very well. You know how much I want to be a successful archaeologist. You know how badly I want to make my dad proud of me. Not that he's ever put any pressure on me to do anything particular except to excel in whatever profession I choose, but I still love him and I want him to be proud.

But I love you more. If I had to make the choice, I'd put down all the digging tools and the subscriptions and the journals and leave the museum and follow you wherever you wanted to go. Do you want to wander the world and write about it? I'll go with you and take care of your mail. Do you want to move to California and become a movie actor? I'll go with you and help you with your makeup and even be your agent if you want. Do you want to play professional football? Pick a team and it'll be my favorite. I'll cheer for you to win every game, score all the points and be the best player in the league. I'll even learn what a punt is and why you'd do it. And I'll mail out all the press releases myself. I'll be the best agent and cheerleader you could ever have, too.

You gave up so much when we moved to Metropolis, and I know you did it for me. Sure, you got a great job at the *Daily Planet*, and you're investigating the bad guys and reporting the news, which is what you've wanted to do with your life for so long, but you could have done that just about anywhere. You came with me because of my situation, because of my career, and I don't believe I've ever told you just how much that means to me. You sacrificed for me and I love you so much for that.

I don't think I'm saying exactly what I feel about you. Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it like this in her sonnet, and I don't think I could do better in a million years.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.  
I love thee to the level of every day's  
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.  
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;  
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.  
I love thee with a passion put to use  
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.  
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
With my lost saints — I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears, of all my life! — and, if God choose,  
I shall but love thee better after death.

I can't put it any better than that, Clark. You're the man I want to grow old with. You're the man I want to father my children. You're the man who holds my heart in his hands. I love you.

I know that you'll probably outlive me, and that means that you'll probably have to watch me die at some time in the future. I'm sorry. I don't ever want to leave you, but I know I probably will, and I'm pretty sure that you won't take it well. That thought is driving this letter. I want you to find it someday when I'm gone and know that I expect you to find a nice woman and marry her.

Assuming, of course, she's not as beautiful as I am. And she'd better not be a better lover than me either!

I'm kidding. I'm sure any woman who could attract your attention enough for you to think about marrying her will be a wonderful woman. I'm sure she'll love you and support you in all your super-duties at least as well as I ever could. Or will. Or have. Maybe even better than me. No, almost certainly she'll be better than I ever could be.

This is the fourth draft of this letter and I'm still not satisfied with it. I'm writing this one in the bathroom while I'm waiting for you to come back from a fire in the bad part of Metropolis, I think. The rescues kind of run together for me after a while, and I'm sorry that I can't always remember where you've been or where you're going in the flashy suit. And I'm sorry that sometimes I get jealous over Superman and the amount of time he takes you away from me. It's just so hard for me to share you with the entire world! Sometimes I feel like a military wife, one whose husband is constantly getting no-warning one-day duty assignments out of town. I'm selfish and I want you all for myself, for me alone, all the time. But I think I'm getting better at understanding that it can't be that way. I just hope it's enough.

I'm sorry that I'm not that good at comforting you when you've had a tough rescue. I'm sorry that I still can't find the words to say to make you feel better, to help you know that all the good that you do is worth doing, even if you don't think it's enough. I wish I could help you understand that you doing good is more than anyone else could do, and even if you can't save the whole world, you can save a pretty big piece of it.

But most of all, I want you to know that I love you. I want you to know that I'll stand by you and support you as long as I have air in my lungs and legs that will hold me up. I will hold you close and kiss you and brush the soot from your hair and wash your suits and I may even let your mother teach me how to sew them.

But most of all, my darling, I love you.  
I will always love you.  
Your loving wife,  
Lana

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Well.

No towel. No fancy movie vixen tricks. No seduction or proposal today.

Probably not ever.

No. Definitely not ever.

Rebecca loved Clark. She did! Really. But try as she might, she couldn't imagine ever writing anything like this to him. Lana was — just unbelievable. She wondered if she would have liked Lana, then decided no, she would have hated her for being so perfect.

And she would have been so very jealous of her.

For that matter, she was still jealous. If that letter was any indication, and if half the stories she'd cajoled from Clark were true, Lana had been a terrific wife to him. And even though Rebecca loved Clark and wanted to spend the rest of her life with him, she knew she didn't have that kind of unselfish love for him — maybe not for anyone. She knew that she'd keep trying to reduce his Superman time and increase his Rebecca time, and she knew that she'd keep on trying as long as they were together.

She knew that Superman was a vital part of Clark's life, but she didn't want to think of herself as Mrs. Superman. Apparently Lana hadn't minded it all that much, but the thought of trying to comfort Clark after a bad time at a rescue all but terrified her. She hadn't considered their relationship in those terms before, but Lana's letter had torn down that veil and forced her to see the truth — that she loved the idea of being Clark's wife but hated the idea of being Superman's wife.

And that wasn't fair. Not to Clark, not to the people he could

save if he wasn't with her, and not to Lana's memory. For that matter, it wasn't fair to her. If she were the only person to have Superman in her life, she would be selfish and cruel to everyone else.

And she couldn't do that, not to herself or to Clark. She just couldn't.

If Clark married again, he'd need to marry someone who would be a wife, a friend, a lover, a supporter, someone for whom he could be a husband, friend, supporter, and lover. Someone not like herself, who loved Clark but also wanted her own life and didn't mind sharing him with the world. Someone like—

Someone like Lois.

The thought stunned her for a long moment, then it resolved itself into a best-case scenario. Clark should marry Lois, and not because she was Ultra Woman. Lois was strong enough to stand up to him while she supported him in all of his endeavors, and she was secure enough to accept his help and support for hers. And it would eliminate any problems about Superman making his wife jealous of Ultra Woman. Or vice versa.

It was almost too bad that Lois was involved with Mr. Luthor. She'd be a great wife for Clark. Not only would she love him unreservedly and support him in everything he did, she'd never let him get away with being anything but the best reporter or hero or man he could be. Lois Lane would have been perfect for him.

And Rebecca Connors wasn't Lois Lane. She couldn't be. It wasn't in her to be anyone else.

Rebecca sighed. Now that that was settled, all she had to do was get out of his life and make room for whoever should be there. The penguin study offer couldn't have come at a better time. She'd go there, he'd stay here, and in the long run they'd both be better off.

She only hoped that he appreciated all that she was giving up for him.

She dug out her phone and quietly called for a LexCorp car to take her home. It was one of the perks she'd miss when she went to Antarctica, but she wouldn't miss it all that much.

Not as much as she'd miss Clark in her life.

She refolded the letter and put it back in the bottom towel. Maybe someday Clark would find it and read it and smile as he remembered Lana.

As long as it wasn't today. Rebecca hated losing, and she knew she'd already lost to Lana. Losing to a dead woman can really put a crimp in your day.

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Clark was getting nervous.

Rebecca had been in the bathroom for almost twenty minutes. He was tempted to check on her to see if she was okay, but he figured she was trying to get ready for some kind of big entrance.

And that thought made him even more nervous. A big entrance would probably signify a big moment of some kind. Maybe she was putting on a special outfit of some kind, something which would give him a special message. An unmistakable, clear, unambiguous message. Like with flashing neon lights around her head and a big banner wrapped around her body with a very specific question on it.

He stopped and shook himself. As attractive as Rebecca might be wearing only a cloth banner, he didn't want to go there. He didn't want to envision her that way.

And he didn't want to marry her. He liked her — a lot — and he got along with her very well. They could disagree without arguing most of the time, and when they did argue it was usually about issues and not personalities. As he mentally reviewed the time since he'd met her, he realized that she'd grown and matured in her outlook on men in general and on her life prospects in particular. She'd gone from being afraid of imperfect relationships to understanding that relationships were always works in progress. She'd learned to deal with her past issues and

had come to grips with her limitations. He admired that about her, and they'd come to be good friends.

But he wasn't comfortable with the idea of spending the rest of his life with her. She was, and would probably always be, determined to get her way and be more than just a little bull-headed about getting it. She'd probably always do what she had to do to further her career and let her relationships bob and bounce in her wake. As her husband, he'd always have to take second place to a pod of orca in the central Atlantic or a research project in Malaysia or the penguin study in Antarctica she'd been offered. As a mother — that didn't bear thinking about, especially not now.

He knew about the offer she'd received to lead the field research team for the penguin study. She'd left the offer letter on her dining room table the week before, and Clark had read half of it before he'd realized that this wasn't the first communication she'd had with the foundation funding the research. He'd recognized the name from the Superman Foundation grant request list. They'd applied for supplemental funds and had been turned down because their mission didn't fit the Superman Foundation's parameters for funding, but the directors had managed to match them up with another source of funds, which, ironically, was Lana's organization, Digger Enterprises. The people who wanted Rebecca were reputable, they were established and they were serious about who they wanted to work with.

That letter wasn't an initial offer. It was part of the negotiations for her to come on board and work with them. And Clark wasn't sure he was willing to play second fiddle to a colony of emperor penguins.

He frowned at himself. No. He was sure. He wasn't willing.

He'd been okay with Lana traveling for her career, though. The difference was that he knew that he'd been Lana's top priority. Even if Lana had been asked to unearth Atlantis and get all the credit and the money and fame that would have come to her, she would have involved Clark in the decision to take that job. And even though Lana hadn't begun their marriage involving Clark in such decisions, he had no doubt that she'd grown into that mindset before she'd died.

He was equally sure that Rebecca wouldn't fully involve him. She'd leave detailed notes or give him a full explanation of where she was going, why she was going, how long she'd be gone, and how to contact her, but she'd make the decision on her own without any input from him — without any thought of how his life might be turned upside down. He had no indication from her that her attitude would ever change.

And he couldn't make a life with a woman who'd do that to them, who was willing to scramble their lives in such a cavalier fashion. He'd have to tell her that they couldn't be together, let her down easy—

Yeah. Like that was going to happen.

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It was time.

She had to exit the bathroom now. Her hair was as brushed as it could be. Her wet swimsuit was wrapped in her towel — not the one she'd briefly planned to wear — and she was dry and fully dressed. She had to face him and tell him that although she loved him, she didn't love him enough to commit to marrying him. And she had to make him understand that she'd never, never, ever even hint that she knew who Superman was in his civilian life. Or that she even knew that Superman \*had\* a civilian life.

She opened the door and hesitated. "Rebecca?" she heard him call. "Are you okay?"

No. She wasn't okay.

But she would be. And so would he.

One of Bonnie Raitt's songs popped into her head, just not

the one she'd hoped to hear. Not one of the fun and peppy ones, either.

Bonnie sang in her head as she looked at the man she'd almost decided to marry.

*Turn down the lights, turn down the bed  
Turn down these voices inside my head  
Morning will come and I'll do what's right  
Just give me till then to give up this fight  
And I will give up this fight*  
Except for the part about the bed, it fit.  
"Hi, Clark."

He seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. "I was starting to get worried about you."

She glanced at the floor in front of her. "And you never considered looking through the door to check on me in case I wasn't suitably attired."

He frowned. "Something like that, yeah." He stepped toward her but not close enough to touch. "Is something wrong?"

She lifted her face and caught his eyes with hers. "Would you marry me if I asked you to?"

His mouth dropped open for a moment and he goggled at her, then got himself under control. "Wow. Where did that come from?"

Now she really wasn't okay. If he'd wanted to marry her he would've said so.

But at least, now, she knew the truth.  
And it hurt.

*I can't make you love me if you don't  
You can't make your heart feel something it won't  
Here in the darkness in these final hours  
I will lay down my heart and I'll feel the power  
But you won't, no, you won't  
Cause I can't make you love me  
If you don't*

She licked her lips and glanced to one side. "I've been wondering if you were going to ask me or if you were waiting for me to ask you. But now I know."

He licked his lips. "Rebecca, I—"

She lifted her hand. "Please don't, Clark. I wouldn't marry you now even if you begged me on bended knee."

His brows drew down. "That's a little harsh, don't you think?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't, actually. Because you don't love me enough to marry me. And please, don't protest. I'm not sure I love you enough either." She shook her head again and tried to smile. "I know I don't love you like Lana did."

"That's not a fair comparison, Becca. No one expects you to be another Lana, least of all me."

"I know that. And that's not what I meant." She turned and took one step toward the front door, then stopped and turned back. "You talk about your future, you listen to me talk about my future, but you don't talk about our future together. I don't think we have one. What do you think?"

He hesitated. "Well — I — I guess I — maybe we—"

She'd heard enough. "That's what I thought. Look, you stay here and — and decide how to spend your life. I know you'll make the right decision. And don't worry about me getting home. I've already called a LexCorp company car to take me back to my place."

"What? Wait, no, please. At least let me take you home."

She shook her head again. The tears wouldn't hold back much longer and she couldn't have him around to comfort her when they burst out. "Not necessary. I'm really disappointed, of course, but I guess I brought it on myself. I chased you even when you let me know you weren't all that eager to be with me. This is more my fault than yours, Clark. Please don't feel guilty."

He looked smaller somehow, almost deflated, like all the

happy had somehow leaked out of him. "I — I don't know what else to say except I'm sorry, and that's so lame."

She tried to smile. "But I know you really mean it, so it's really not so lame. Besides, I'm sorry too." She turned and headed for the door. The dams behind her eyelids were near collapse and she had to get out of there. "Please don't call me for a few days, okay? I need some time to myself."

He didn't answer. She opened the door and stepped through, then pulled it almost closed. Knowing that he'd hear her, she whispered, "Goodbye, Clark. Have a great life."

The door latched and she pointed her footsteps toward the elevator, wondering if she were the weakest, the most fragile, and absolutely the dumbest woman who'd ever lived, or if she were one of the strongest and wisest. Maybe she'd figure that out in a few years, assuming she could get past the pain of today.

She wasn't okay. But she would be.

There were penguins waiting for her. And she was sure she wouldn't disappoint them.

And they wouldn't disappoint her.

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Clark sat on the living room floor. This is a truly messed-up day, he thought. Rebecca breaks up with him and he gets slammed in the face with a reminder of Lana at the same time. What was he supposed to do now?

He stared at the floor, not really seeing it, for long minutes, while he tried to think of nothing. He tried to focus on the wallpaper pattern, without success. Then he tried to extend his hearing to pick up a sports event of some kind, but no one seemed to be broadcasting a game in the city.

Nothing really worked. He needed to talk to someone. But who?

Duh, Clark. When in trouble, talk to your parents.

He jumped up, grabbed his cordless phone, hit the speed dial for the Kent farm, and floated to the floor.

His mother answered on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Hi, Mom, it's me. Clark."

"Well, howdy, stranger! Long time no hear from you."

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry about that. My life has been a little crazy lately." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "In fact, that's kind of why I called."

"Okay. Is this a situation we can deal with over the phone or do you need to come out here?"

He chewed his lip for a moment, then said, "I think I need to come see you and Dad." He glanced at the clock. "Can you handle another place setting at dinner?"

"Sure! I'll even whip up some apple pie. No store-bought pie in my house, just fresh and homemade!" He heard her hesitate, then ask, "Um, is Rebecca coming too? You know she's welcome any time."

It was his turn to hesitate. "No. She's not coming. And that's actually part of what I need to talk over with you and Dad."

"I see. Or, rather, I suppose I will see. You just take your time. Dinner will be on the table about six thirty our time. And since it's Saturday evening, we can stay up with you for a while. We'll have our ears on, honey."

"Thanks, Mom. I guess I'll see you in a few hours, then."

#### Chapter Fourteen

Lex hummed softly to himself as he laid out the silverware and arranged the flowers just so. The tune was one of his favorite arias from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. He knew Lois wasn't a huge opera fan, but she liked — or at least tolerated — his ongoing love of the art form, and since she would be joining him soon, he wanted to be in the best mood possible. Because tonight was the night which would change his life forever.

Tonight, he would ask Lois Lane to be his wife.

He was confident that she would accept his proposal. With his contacts and his position on the board of LNN, he could give

her a much bigger and more influential platform for crusading journalism than even the *Daily Planet* could provide. He could give Ultra Woman all the privacy and logistical support she could ever need or want. His media companies could let her know where she was most needed at any time of the day or night. Her rapidly growing business acumen could help him run his businesses both more efficiently and more compassionately.

And best of all, he loved her more than he had loved anything or anyone else in his life.

That was his trump card. He loved her. All the other stuff was just icing on the cake, more ammunition to convince her of the wisdom of his proposal. There was no need for a pre-nuptial agreement. Lois' basic honesty and integrity were beyond reproach or any taint of suspicion.

And he wouldn't mention the change to his will leaving her control of his fortune if he predeceased her until after she'd accepted his proposal. He knew it would make no difference to her, but he wanted her to know that he trusted her more than he'd ever trusted another human being, even Asabi.

Although the codicil in the will giving Asabi twenty percent of Lex' stock in his companies spoke volumes about him as well. At least, he hoped both Lois and Asabi would understand the gesture as he intended.

The thought that she might not accept his proposal, despite all the additional inducements he might offer her, fluttered through his mind. He banished it with a brutal thrust of will. Nothing would interfere with this evening. No one would disturb them. It was their most private time. A personal time, one which no one else could intrude.

He even knew exactly what he'd say to her. The best part was that every word was utterly and completely true, the best kind of romantic speech. He'd rehearsed it often enough to have it memorized forwards and backwards, but once more — out loud — certainly wouldn't hurt.

First, he'd stand beside her chair at the table and hold her hands gently. He'd say, "Lois, I'm no saint. I've done questionable things in the pursuit of my success, but unfortunately that's the nature of big business."

Then he'd step back, just a little, and continue. "And sometimes — through jealousy or frustration — I've overreacted. I've been ruthless with my enemies."

Then he'd lean closer and seal the deal. "But, as God is my witness, I swear to you, from this moment on, I'll change. I no longer want to hurt anyone."

Then he'd kneel and give her the big finish. "I'm willing to devote my life to you, to commit myself to you totally and eternally."

A pause for breath. His warmest smile. "Will you marry me?"

Someone clapped slowly and said, "A very nice speech, Lex."

His smile faded. That wasn't Lois' voice. Who—

"Did you miss me, darling? Or are you rehearsing for some other beautiful young thing?"

Now he placed her. He knew the voice. And he knew that he was in serious trouble.

He stood slowly, then turned to face the intruder. "Hello, Arianna."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Surprised to see me again so soon? And here, of all places."

"Yes, actually. How did you—"

"Get in past your upgraded security measures? It was one of Nigel's secret passageways. To be honest, it was the only one that wasn't blocked."

"I'll have to send a stern memo to building maintenance."

She chuckled and oozed towards him holding a pistol in her right hand, the muzzle pointed at his abdomen. "You prepared dinner for me? How very thoughtful of you!" She clucked her

tongue once. "But I'm a poor guest. I should have brought a bottle of wine. Let's see, you're serving seafood. That calls for a gentle Merlot, don't you think? Chateau-Thierry '61, perhaps? Or perhaps not. It's still early in the day."

He cocked his head to one side, hoping that she'd be careless and step just a bit closer. "I am just as happy to see you here without wine as with, my dear Arianna."

She stopped just out of his reach. "You're still as charming as you ever were, Lex. And just as diplomatic. I know you'd rather cuddle an enraged rattlesnake than see me again, at least in a social gathering." She indicated the table with her free hand. "Very nice setting. I'd imagine that your lovely young guest will be here shortly."

Still too far away. He leaned in her direction. "How do you know this isn't a business engagement?"

"No closer!" She stepped back and lifted the pistol. "This is a personal dinner, Lex. I know the signs. Besides, I saw the limo leave earlier. Asabi should have dropped Miss Lane off at the front door already. I'd imagine she's all a-tingle with the thought of having dinner with the third richest man in the world."

He smiled lopsidedly. "The new rankings came out in *Forbes* already? Drat. I was hoping to surprise you."

Her eyes flashed. "You know I could never let anyone else have you, don't you?"

Uh-oh. She was planning something bad. Maybe he could dissuade her. "Arianna — please don't do what I think you're planning to do."

She smiled brightly and eased backwards. "What are you afraid of, darling? Are you frightened for your own life or for the life of your lovely young lady friend?" She tilted her head to the side. "I'd imagine that she's quite willing to please you in any way possible. How fortunate for you."

"Arianna—" and he stopped. He couldn't tell her about Lois' secret. And he couldn't let her discover it on her own. The first bullet that hit Lois would reveal Ultra Woman's true identity to the world, and Lois would never again have a moment's peace. They would have to isolate Arianna for the rest of her life or kill her, and he couldn't risk letting Lois make that decision on her own. He had to deal with this situation by himself, and he had to do it before Lois walked out of the elevator.

"Cat got your tongue, Lex? Oops. My apologies. I shouldn't repeat my taunts. Perhaps your mouth is too dry? Perhaps a sip of that lovely champagne you have chilling beside the table would moisten your lips."

He examined her pistol more closely. It appeared to be a nine-millimeter Beretta, the same model the uniformed Metropolis Police used, the same model he'd used to teach her to shoot, and he was certain that Arianna could hit him multiple times at this range no matter how quickly he moved. He had to get closer to her.

"Arianna, if you need money—"

"Money?" She laughed without taking her eyes from him.

"When I leave, I'm heading to Antigua and nineteen million pounds Sterling. That's about thirty-seven million dollars or so, depending on today's exchange rate. But you already knew that, didn't you, my darling Lex?"

He didn't answer and she didn't give him an opening to move. "I also have a new identity waiting for me. By the time they discover your bodies, Arianna Carlin will have vanished."

Bodies? No! She was planning to kill Lois as well as himself! He scrambled for something, anything, that might slow her down, even if just a little bit. "What about your practice? It would be a"—he barely stopped himself from saying 'a crime'—"a mistake to abandon your profession. You always loved helping people. You were very good at it, too."

"Oh, please! Psychiatry was simply a means to an end. I used it to get to you and then to your mob contacts in the labor unions,

and from them to the Mafia dons in the city. I did the rest of it myself, including the elimination of my competition. Did you know that I was the one who wiped out the leaders of the three major gangs two years ago?"

His eyebrows rose. "You? The District Attorney's office claimed it was an internecine struggle between gangsters."

"That's how I set it up. No one knew I was involved except Nigel and Beth-Ann, and they're both dead." She sighed. "How unfortunate for them. And for you, actually, since you are ultimately responsible for their deaths."

"Me? How am I responsible?"

She winked without moving her head. "Oh, darling, you pointed me at those 'businessmen' like a heat-seeking missile and stepped back. That day as we left the marriage counselor's office five years ago, when you pointed out Don Meucci to me, all I had to do was to keep my ear to the ground and learn the names of his chief rivals, the Taylor family and the Goldmans. I lured them to that warehouse meeting. I set it up so that each of them thought the other two were there wipe out the competition." She chuckled and sighed. "Ah, the good old days. Nigel planted the explosives which he triggered once the first round of shooting was over, and — well, dropping that roof on them didn't do them any good." Her eyes grew bright and her smile covered her face. "But it helped me quite a lot, don't you think?"

As Lex hunted for something else to say, the express elevator dinged once. "Ah. Miss Lane is finally on her way up here." She waved the pistol at him. "Back up against the bookcase."

He complied, moving as slowly as he dared. "Since we're already in my private library, might I recommend a suitable volume for you? May I suggest my copy of Machiavelli's *Discourses on Titus Livius*, a first edition in Italian? Or perhaps you'd prefer a good murder mystery? I have Robert Parker's latest Spenser novel, signed by the author himself."

"Stalling, Lex? That's not exactly your style either." The elevator dinged again, a higher pitch this time. "Good. She's just now passing the sixtieth floor. She'll be here in seconds."

Lex glanced towards the elevator, trying to calculate his chances for a quick grab of the pistol when the doors opened. Suddenly Arianna lunged against him and jabbed the pistol hard against his belly. Her eyes stared up into his, and her face was alight with secret evil. "How about one last kiss, my darling? For all the good times?"

It wasn't a good chance, but it was a chance and he had to take it. "If you'd like, Arianna."

She licked her lips and he bent his head to touch his mouth to hers. He slowly slipped his hands down to her shoulders. Her left hand curled up behind his waist as she relaxed into the kiss. He was almost ready to make a grab for her pistol. Just one more second—

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She still didn't know if her clothing sent the right signals. Asabi had been more than polite when he'd picked her up at her apartment and had spoken easily with her, discussing the weather and sports and Asabi's recent escrima exhibition, but she wasn't dressing for him. She'd modeled three dresses, five different blouse-skirt combinations, and four pantsuits before deciding on dark slacks with a spiffy pastel blouse and low heels. Yet she still wasn't sure it was the appropriate outfit for the ordeal she knew she would undergo tonight.

Lois shook her head and sighed as the elevator signaled the passing of the sixtieth floor. She was sure that Lex planned to propose to her tonight, especially after their working dinner the night before. He'd been giving her signals for nearly three weeks, and the dinner he was cooking for her was probably his best dish. She was positive that he intended to do or say whatever he could to convince her to marry him.

And she still didn't know how she would answer. He'd stood

by her in good times and bad. He surely wished that she'd spent more time with him, but he'd never complained. And not once had he so much as hinted that Ultra Woman was taking up too much of her time or coming between them in any way. In that aspect of their relationship, he beat Rebecca, who seemed determined to reduce Superman's visibility, by quite a wide margin.

Even so, the prospect of marriage to Lex — becoming Lois Lane-Luthor — neither filled her with giggly anticipation nor gripped her heart with cold dread. While Lex was, and always had been, a pleasant companion, an excellent dancer, and an interesting conversationalist, he didn't knock her shoes off when he kissed her. The thought of spending time with him didn't fill her heart with fluttery joy the way the thought of spending time with Clark did.

She sighed and admitted the truth to herself. She loved Clark. She liked Lex, tolerated his attentions, enjoyed the effort he put into their relationship, but she didn't love him.

The thought of all those consecutive L's in her monogram made her grimace, too.

For some reason, the realization that staring at 'LLL' on her bath towels for the next forty years would drive her to permanent and utter distraction tipped the scales to 'no' on the question of marrying Lex. There was no way she'd wed him just on the basis of convenience, companionship, or tolerant friendship. It wouldn't be fair to either of them.

But she'd have to let him down lightly. She'd apologize for leading him on, of course. She'd promise to remain his friend — ew, that sounded awful, even in her head, and even allowing that she really did want them to remain friends. She'd assure him that any press coverage she gave him would be fair, unless he wanted her not to cover him at all. And she'd be okay with that, too. It was the least she'd owe him. And if the tabloid press got wind of the story of the breakup, she'd volunteer to be the bad guy and take the blame for the end of the relationship.

By now she was pacing the elevator, two steps across and three steps up, walk the diagonal back to her starting point, repeat the process while muttering to herself.

It wasn't fair to him, she told herself, but it was better than being married to a woman who didn't love him, who would end up being a problem to him, a woman who might even be angry with—

She suddenly stopped pacing. What was that sound?

It sounded like — a gunshot? How could that be? No one else was supposed to be here tonight, and surely Lex wasn't taking target practice up there. It had to be something else, something mechanical. She replayed the sound in her mind and it still sounded like a gunshot, but she wasn't sure if that's what it really was.

The elevator reached its destination and the doors slid open. She picked up the acrid scent of cordite immediately. Lois glanced around the outer office but saw nothing amiss. She walked across the room and pushed through the door to the library.

She smelled the blood before she saw the body. "Lex!"

She scurried to his side and gently rolled him over onto his back. The steady stream of dark blood flowed from the lower left quadrant of his abdomen, just above the belt line.

He groaned weakly as she looked inside his belly and saw the misshapen bullet resting against his rib. Worse, the bullet had tracked directly through his liver and shredded the tissue badly. He was bleeding internally and externally.

She shuddered. A human being cannot survive without a liver, nor without sufficient blood volume. If she flew him to the hospital right now—

"So glad you could join us, Miss Lane."

Lois' head snapped up to take in the woman in the connecting

doorway leading to the lounge. She wore a dark, stylish pantsuit, low-heeled, sensible but obviously expensive shoes, and lazily brandished a deep blue semi-automatic pistol in one hand.

The woman looks like a cross-dressing English movie spy, thought Lois. Bond, Jane Bond. Or an ad for some obscure Canadian whiskey.

She shook herself out of her reverie. "I have to take him to the hospital right now."

"How very direct you are. But I'm afraid it won't help him."

"He can be there in—"

"It doesn't matter how quickly he gets medical attention, my dear," the woman broke in. "The bullet track proceeds upwards through the small and large intestines, then bisects the liver. I'm afraid there is no chance whatsoever for his survival." She sighed deeply, then pointed the pistol in Lois' general direction. "You do, however, have time for a short goodbye. A very short one."

"But—"

"Please, Miss Lane, believe me when I say this. I am still, after all, a doctor. If poor Lex had taken that bullet and fallen directly onto an operating table with an entire surgical team standing by for him, ready to operate on that particular wound and on Lex specifically, he would never awaken from the anesthesia."

"A doctor?" Lois' eyes widened with recognition. "I know you! You're Arianna Carlin!"

Arianna smiled. "Very good, Miss Lane. You win — oh, dear, I'm afraid you don't win anything except—" she waved the pistol at Lex.

Lex groaned again and grasped Lois' arm. "I'm afraid — Arianna is telling the truth. No — no doctor can save me now."

Lois looked down at him. "I can get you help. You know I can."

He flinched, then smiled thinly. "Not even Superman could — could help me now." He tried a chuckle but it faded into another groan. "I — once killed a man in a very similar fashion. Unintentionally, I assure you. I was trying to arrest him, not kill him. And I didn't — ohh! — I didn't kiss him first."

A tear formed and crept down Lois' cheek. "Lex — please let me—"

"No. I don't want my last moments to be — to be spent being mauled by well-meaning but — uh — futile attempts to save me. No — no heroic measures. I have a Do Not Resuscitate order on file with — aaah! — with my personal physician."

Her eyes dampened. "No! Let me try to help you. Please!"

He paused and shuddered, then relaxed again. "I was going to propose to you tonight. I had it all planned. We'd have dinner, drinks on the — ahh — on the balcony — ohh!"

"Lex, please don't try to talk! You can—"

He fumbled around until he caught her hand in his. "Lois, my — my darling. I only want to know — before I die — if you would have accepted — my proposal."

Lois forced a smile and wiped the tears from her face. "I've been thinking about tonight, too. I kind of expected to hear a proposal from you."

He closed his eyes and smiled back. "Then you've also — you've thought about your response."

"Yes. Yes, I have."

He squeezed her hand weakly. "Please don't — don't keep me in suspense."

He's going to die, she thought. And I can't let him die feeling disappointed in me. "I would have said — yes, Lex, I'll marry you."

He smiled and sighed. "Thank you. I — I apologize for the setting, but I — ahh! — I am thrilled with your response." He reached up and cupped her cheek with one bloodied hand. "I love you, Lois."

She held his hand to her face. "Now let me take you to the

hospital. Please."

He took a deeper breath and let it out slowly. "Too — late. I would have — tried to — make you — happy—"

His hand slipped from her cheek and flopped to the floor. "Lex?" she called. "Lex!"

"Oh, I'm afraid Lex has slipped the surly bonds of earth and shuffled off this mortal coil, my dear," Arianna purred. "I hope you don't mind that I'm conflating those references. But don't worry. I intend that you join him momentarily."

With that, Arianna lifted her pistol and touched it to the back of Lois' head. Then she pulled the trigger.

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Killing people was so satisfying, Arianna mused, that it was a shame she got to do it so seldom.

As the bullet struck her, Lois' head leaned forward, then turned towards Arianna. The murderess thought for a moment that gunshot victims sometimes moved oddly at the moment of death.

Then Lois lifted her tear-tracked face to Arianna and stared at her with malevolent intent. Arianna stepped back as Lois stood up and turned to face her.

She fired again, this time at the center of Lois' chest. Her intended victim's hand blurred but her clothing didn't puff out with the impact of the bullet.

She couldn't have missed! Not at this range! Arianna stepped back again and fired once more. Lois' hand blurred again. There was no other response except to step closer.

"Die! Why don't you die?" Arianna fired three more times. Lois didn't bother catching these shots. She only let them smash into her torso and clatter harmlessly away.

Suddenly Arianna felt a wall behind her. She lifted her pistol once again, intending to put a bullet into Lois' eye, but her hand was unaccountably empty. She saw her weapon in Lois' hand.

Lois turned her head and blew a puff of air toward the balcony doors. They banged open just as Lois tossed the pistol through them and off the edge of the balcony to the street one hundred eighteen stories below.

Panic. Arianna hadn't felt panic for years, but she felt it now. How could Lois be invulnerable? How could she move so quickly? No one could do those things except — except —

"Ultra Woman! You — you're Ultra Woman!"

Instead of answering, Lois reached out and grasped Arianna's jacket in one hand and pulled her closer. "You killed Lex, Arianna. Now I'm going to kill you."

Hysteria joined panic in Arianna's mind. Her voice wouldn't work properly and her bladder control deserted her. "No! Please no! D-don't — don't kill me! Please!"

Lois pulled Arianna's face next to hers. "Mercy?" asked Lois. "You want mercy from me?"

Arianna felt her knees turn to water and her feet go numb. "Please! Mercy, yes, mercy! Please—"

Lois shook her effortlessly. "You just deliberately murdered a man you claim you once loved! And you would have murdered me! You're responsible for six deaths I personally know of! You blackmailed a frightened young woman for years and then shot her to death and tried to kill her parents! You've stolen, lied, cheated, bought judges, bribed lawmakers, destroyed people's lives! And for what?" Lois shook her again. "Tell me why you did all of that!"

Desperate, Arianna grasped Lois' wrist and tried to force her to let go, with no success.

"Talk to me!" Lois growled. "These will be your last words, so make them good ones!" A feral smile crept across her face. "Make them suitable for the morning paper. I promise to quote you exactly."

Arianna suddenly found herself thrown into a wingback chair. Both she and the chair went over backwards and she ended up on

her hands and knees, looking down at her purse.

Her purse! The Kryptonite!

She heard Lois' shoes slip softly across the carpet as she scrambled for the small lead box. "Looking for another gun, Arianna?" Lois taunted. "What makes you think it would do you any more good than the last one did?"

The box! She'd found it! She flipped it open as Lois grabbed her by the collar again and lifted her bodily into the air, then released her and let her crash down onto the floor. Desperately fighting through the pain, Arianna spun and kicked out at Lois' legs.

Lois let out a cry of shocked surprise and fell to the floor. Arianna was thrilled. It works! The crystal works on both of them!

Before Arianna could react, Lois was on her, slamming her fists against Arianna's face and head. Arianna returned the punches as best she could, but even with the green crystal sapping her powers, Lois was younger and stronger. They traded blows for several moments until Arianna called up her last reserves of strength to shove Lois away with her leg. As Lois tried to resume her attack, Arianna kicked her once more, this time opening a gash on Lois' cheek which spurted blood.

Lois fell to her elbows and knees, stunned. Arianna snatched her purse up and rolled away. She pulled out the little twenty-five caliber automatic pistol she kept there for backup or quiet killings and snapped a shot at her adversary.

Her hurried aim was awful. The bullet slapped against the wall far above Lois' head, but the younger woman's shocked expression was worth it. Arianna lowered her aim and pulled the trigger again, but Lois rolled out of the way and ducked behind a sofa. Another miss.

Arianna staggered to her feet. "I've got you now, Lois Lane, Ultra Woman, whatever your name is! I'm going to shoot you right between the eyes and watch you die. The Kryptonite will make you weak and helpless and I'm going to finish the job." She limped towards the sofa carefully, knowing now that it was a dangerous mistake to underestimate Lois Lane. "Come on, Lois, don't make this any harder that it has to — whoof!"

Lois popped up and threw her shoes into Arianna's face, and before she could fire, Lois had rolled the sofa over towards her. Arianna stumbled backwards and tripped onto her back and fired another round into the ceiling as she fell. She recovered as quickly as she could and fired three times into the overturned sofa, trying to hit Lois with a lucky shot.

She rose to her knees and looked around, despite the swelling she felt around her right eye. Lois wasn't making any noise that Arianna could hear, so she crept closer to the sofa and lunged around it with the pistol at the ready.

Nothing but a few splashes of blood on the floor.

Arianna quickly checked the magazine in her pistol. Four rounds, plus the one in the chamber. This was turning into quite an adventure, and she didn't have any spare ammunition for the lethal little popgun. She'd have to be careful not to waste any more shots.

"Where are you, Lois?" she sang softly. "Come out, come out, wherever you are. I'm going to find you." She grinned, enjoying the hunt. "Marco?" There was, of course, no response of "Polo" from Lois. "Come on, Lois, play the game with me. Marco?"

She stifled an urge to laugh. It had been too long since she'd personally taken care of her opponents. She'd let Nigel or Beth-Ann do it for too long. She missed Beth-Ann, but maybe it wasn't such a bad thing that Nigel was dead. After all, the money he'd squirreled away was waiting for her to draw on like vintage wine from a cool storage cellar. The silly man had believed that Arianna hadn't known exactly where it was, how much was there, and how to get to it. Nigel's hoard combined with hers

would allow her to pick and choose any young man she wanted. All she'd have to do would be to bait a hook with a few dollars and a little cleavage, and they'd climb over each other to sacrifice themselves to her. It would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

But first she had this one little brunette fish she had to shoot. "Come on, Lois, don't make this hard on both of us. You know I'm going to find you."

Something whacked the floor across the room by the library entrance. She spun in that direction, then stopped at the obvious deliberate distraction. "You're getting clumsy, Lois. The crystal is sucking your life away. Let me end your pain, Lois. Let me help —"

She turned as she sensed someone beside her, but something hard slammed into her wrist. She gasped at the sudden pain and stumbled slightly as she tried to transfer the pistol to her uninjured hand. A sudden sharp impact on the back of her neck took her breath away and turned her limbs into melting wax. She fell limply to the floor, face down, and dropped the pistol.

She tried to reach for the weapon but her hands refused to move. She felt her body going into oxygen debt, but she couldn't make her lungs inhale. In fact, she couldn't feel anything. Not anywhere.

She started to panic, then something made her roll onto her back. Her head wobbled loosely for a moment, then she felt a hand on her chin.

Asabi. It was Asabi kneeling over her. She tried to say something to him, but her mouth wouldn't quite form the words.

She heard his voice as if from across the room. "You have murdered my finest friend, Dr. Carlin. And you have tried to murder Miss Lane, who is also my friend." He showed her a straight stick of some kind. "You have forgotten that I am a master of escrima, and that it is a deadly fighting art. Your neck is broken and your spinal cord has been severed. You are dying. Not as slowly and painfully as you deserve, but you are dying nonetheless."

Dying! Her neck was broken! No! It couldn't be! She couldn't die, not like this — he wouldn't—

Her vision grayed out as if the lights were being turned down. She fought to sit up, to move her head, to do something, anything!

Nothing. No response. Nothing below her chin worked.

Asabi lifted his gaze and said, "Miss Lane, is there not an important task for you to complete?"

The light faded nearly to darkness. She heard a distant click, then Lois said, "The crystal is back in the box."

"Then you will soon be well, Miss Lane?" answered Asabi.

"I think so. Thank you." There was a moment of near silence as the lights went out completely. Only Arianna's hearing still functioned. "Asabi? Did you really — I mean—"

"Yes. I did."

"So she's—"

"Yes. She is dead."

It was the last thing Arianna Carlin heard in this life.

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Lois paused, trying to figure out how to feel. On the one hand, a woman was dead at her feet, a woman she herself had, in a moment of rage, intended to kill. What did it matter who actually did the deed? Lois had succumbed to the desire for revenge.

On the other hand, that dead woman had been a criminal mastermind who'd tried to kill her and had killed Lex. And she'd been responsible for dozens of other deaths, not to mention all the other hundreds of other crimes which would be laid at her feet.

One of which would be the death of Lana Lang-Kent.

On top of that, Lois hadn't taken any of the several opportunities she'd had to kill Arianna. Did that make her more or less a heroine?

She'd deal with her feelings about her intent to kill Arianna later. Maybe tomorrow she could schedule some time to think about that. Or maybe she could stuff them in a blender and press the 'puree' button.

But why was Asabi there? What had brought him to the penthouse?

"Asabi?" she began. "How did you know to come up here?"

He stood and clasped his hands together in front. "The pistol."

"What? Which pistol?"

"The one which fell from the balcony. It struck the limousine and penetrated the windshield. When I saw it, I knew that there was much trouble here."

"I see." She hesitated, then asked, "Is that how — I mean, was that what tipped you off to me being Ultra Woman?"

He shook his head slightly. "No, Miss Lane. I had suspected your dual identity since our journey to Brazil last year, and when Mr. Luthor returned from your boating trip several weeks ago it was confirmed to me by the simplified and almost identical stories told by all four of you, combined with several facts I gathered from each of you."

"Oh, good. I suppose dozens of people have figured it out by now."

"No. I know this only because of my close relationship with — my friendship with Mr. Luthor. Had I not been in this position, I would not now have this knowledge." He closed his eyes and shuddered for a moment. "And now — my friend — my friend is — I have failed him when—"

Lois stepped closer and hugged him lightly. "Asabi, I'm so sorry. I know how much he depended on you and how much he cared about you. I know that he considered you his closest friend in the world." She turned her head to one side and sniffed. "You didn't fail him. If anyone failed him, it was me."

He slowly put his arms around her back and bent his head until it rested on her shoulder. Then he wept quietly for a long time.

So did Lois.

## Chapter Fifteen

Clark walked onto the news floor, at once hoping he'd see Lois and knowing that he wouldn't. "Hi, Perry. Hey, what are you doing here on a Saturday afternoon? I thought the Sunday edition was already put to bed."

Perry hauled himself out of his chair. "Much to my wife's displeasure, there is always news happening. And this is the biggest story since Elvis and Priscilla's triplets a few years back."

Clark frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"You haven't — of course you don't know, it's too soon. Come with me. I'm about to initiate a call with Bill Henderson. Since you're here, you need to be in on it."

Perry gestured for Clark to sit down in front of one of the notepads on the table. As usual, there were a dozen or so freshly sharpened pencils in the middle of the table.

The editor thumbed the 'on' button and the speakerphone buzzed with a dial tone. Perry punched in a number and waited two rings, then a voice answered, "Henderson."

"Bill, this is Perry. Clark Kent is here with me."

"You sure that's wise?"

Perry sighed. "I'd never hear the end of it if I shut him out."

"You're changing the front page for this, aren't you?"

"Wouldn't you?"

A dry chuckle grated out of the speaker. "I don't have to write this up for the public, just for the DA."

"So give us the lowdown, Bill."

"Here goes. This afternoon, at about four o'clock, Lex Luthor was shot in his apartment by his—"

"WHAT!"

"Easy there, Clark," Perry said. "Right now that's all we

know. Let Bill finish his statement, okay?"

Clark took a breath and closed his mouth, then nodded.

When Clark heard Bill say that Lex Luthor was dead and Lois was being questioned, he almost stopped breathing. The news stunned him. He could barely see his pad to take notes, much less find his desk and know where his fingers were on the keyboard.

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Breaking news always took precedence over a reporter's personal life, even Clark Kent's. So Clark found himself at his desk, trying to make sense of what he'd learned that evening and reminding himself to call his parents and tell them not to wait dinner on him.

Lex Luthor was dead, murdered in his own apartment by his ex-wife, Dr. Arianna Carlin. Dr. Carlin had then died at the hands of Lex' friend Asabi, who was in police custody along with Lois Lane, who had fought with Dr. Carlin prior to her death. Neither Asabi nor Lois was expected to be charged with anything, and neither one was under arrest, but they were being interviewed in order to discover just what had happened in that apartment.

There was the finished sidebar with Dr. Carlin's biography, including her brief marriage to Luthor and her psychology practice, where she had specialized in counseling incarcerated felons. The sidebar also contained the public information about Dr. Carlin's involvement in LexCorp and its associated businesses, and it also hinted at more nefarious involvement on her part. The quoted speculation by the District Attorney that her practice had been a front for her criminal activities was detailed in the main story.

After about forty minutes of Clark struggling with his word processor, Perry stopped by his desk and asked about his progress. When Clark confessed his difficulty in putting together a quality front-page piece, Perry glanced over it, told him it looked pretty good as it was, and to send whatever he had to the editor's inbox for a final polish.

Then Perry told Clark to go get his head on straight and all but pushed him out the window.

He changed into Superman in the alley behind the Daily Planet and began his patrol, but he needed more than this. He had to talk to someone about all the sudden and drastic changes in his life. Lois was otherwise occupied, of course, besides which she had shut off the link at her end, so Clark couldn't talk to her without forcing himself on her. And he didn't want to do that.

He realized that he needed to go to Smallville after all. So he aimed himself west.

Despite stopping three muggings in Metropolis, unstacking a nine-car pileup in Kentucky, preventing a carjacking in St. Louis, catching an apparent suicide jumper from the Red River bridge in northwest Louisiana, and controlling a runaway SUV with a ten-year-old driver in northeast Oklahoma, he was early.

As he landed just north of Smallville, Clark spun into jeans, polo shirt, and tennis shoes, then looked at his watch. With the time zone difference, it was still more than two hours to dinner, and he didn't want to get in his mother's way in the kitchen.

He also didn't want to face her interrogation alone. He had to give his father time to get there.

Besides, it was time for something he hadn't done for a while, something he'd put off too long.

It was time to visit Lana's grave.

Her body had never been recovered after the explosion, of course, but her memorial headstone was situated in Smallville's main cemetery, almost at the back of the grid work of graves and markers. He'd never seen the headstone, since it had been placed after the memorial service, but he knew the epitaph read, "Lana Lang-Kent — Beloved Wife and Daughter — Rest In Peace."

Now if Clark could only get some peace about his future.

He approached the entrance and waved to the elderly security



guard. Mr. Dolman was in his early eighties now, wore trifocal lenses and hearing aids, walked slowly despite his flame-painted cane, and his voice cracked when he tried to speak loudly. But he'd been the guard at the cemetery entrance since before Clark had landed in Shuster's Field, and the man knew everyone in the tri-county area.

"Afternoon, Clark," he called. "Reckon I know why you're here. You just take your time, son, and I'll be here when you leave. As long as it's before dusk, of course, cause I gotta get these old bones home and let them rest."

"Thanks, Mr. Dolman. Oh, I won't bother anyone in there, will I?"

The older man slowly shook his head. "You won't bother anyone. All of our guests are permanent residents and they don't mind visitors."

Clark smiled at the old joke and walked in. To get to Lana's grave, he had to walk down a slight incline, then up and over a low rise, through a stand of sycamore trees, and past the huge Martin mausoleum. The family had helped Smallville get through the worst of the Great Depression in the 1930s, and out of gratitude the townsfolk kept their final resting place neat and trim.

As Clark stepped around the Martin memorial, he saw a woman kneeling not far from Lana's headstone. He slowed his approach so as not to startle her or disturb her, but then he realized that she wasn't just near Lana's grave, she was kneeling beside it.

She was wearing a stylish dark pantsuit and low-heeled shoes, with a matching sweater draped over her shoulders and tied by the sleeves in front of her neck. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was gathered expensively on top of her head. He still didn't quite recognize her, so he decided to find out, very discreetly, who she was.

Then he saw the bottle of Jack Daniels in her right hand. And the pill bottle in her left hand.

She was trouble with a capital 'T'.

He quickened his pace as much as he dared and walked into her line of sight. "Ma'am?" he called out. "Are you okay?"

She lifted weary eyes to look at him, and he thought he recognized her. But who was she? How did he know her?

"Aren't you Clark Kent?" she asked.

He slowly stepped closer. "Yes. Have we met?"

She shook her head slowly. "Just once in the last twelve years or so. Think red carpet, big stack of presents, 'Clarkie,' my husband Robbie—"

The memory clicked into place. "Carolyn! You — you're Lana's mother!"

Her gaze slid to the front of the gravestone. "Yes. Carolyn McConnell, used to be Carolyn Lang before she got so stupid. I'm what's left of her, anyway."

He knelt down on the other side of the grave. "Mind telling me what you're planning to do with those pills?"

She lifted the bottle in her left hand and grunted. "Huh. I forgot I had them." She inhaled and sighed. "I was going to take all of these — they're Valium, twenty milligrams, and I think there are still about fifty in the bottle. And then I was going to drink as much of this ninety-proof whiskey as I could, lie down on the ground beside my daughter's grave, and die."

Clark sat back on his haunches and crossed his feet. "And now?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I haven't had a drink since the day after I found out my daughter was dead. When my husband Robbie told me, I went up to my room and emptied two bottles of vodka and did major damage to a quart of bourbon. I woke up next morning in the hospital with alcohol poisoning and they thought I wouldn't make it through the night." She chuckled and wiggled the bottle in her right hand. "I did, of

course. But I haven't touched a drop since. I wanted to make sure I was good and sober before I ended it all."

He reached out and gently took the whiskey bottle from her hand. "How long have you been here?"

She shrugged and let the pill bottle fall to the grass. "Since a little before noon. What time is it now?"

"It's about four thirty or so."

She nodded. "You know, this is the first time I've had the courage to visit my baby's grave, and I was going to kill myself. Wouldn't that have been stupid?"

"What changed your mind?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe it was that fact that this was my first visit. Maybe I'm scared of dying." She reached out and brushed the grass. "And maybe I just don't want to disappoint my little girl one last time."

"I don't think Lana was disappointed with you."

Her eyes flashed. "Don't lie to me, Clark!" she snapped. "I won't have it! Lana never trusted me from the day I left her in the driveway to wait for Dennis! And why would she? She was only nine years old! How could I have done something like that to my baby? How could I have tossed her away like that?"

He didn't answer.

She wiped unshed tears from her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, you're here to visit Lana, not comfort the self-centered dumb broad who abandoned her." She sniffed and reached out to steady herself. "Time for me to go anyway."

"Wait."

She paused in mid-lean. "What?"

"Wait, please. I'd like to hear some of your memories of Lana."

Carolyn stood and frowned at him. "Why? I never had the decency to visit the two of you. I signed the cards our servants picked out for birthdays and holidays. I don't even remember whether or not I put in the impersonal gift cards. So why do you want to hear anything I might have to say?"

He reached out and touched her wrist. "Because you loved her. Because I loved her. And maybe we can help each other."

She peered into his eyes. "Help — each other? You mean — you're still hurting?"

He nodded. "The pain doesn't cripple me anymore. It doesn't keep me from doing my job or from trying to build a life without her. But I don't think I'll ever forget her, not if I live a thousand years. She loved me, and sometimes I still wonder how I lived before I realized I was in love with her."

"Share memories, huh? Kind of like a therapy session, I guess." Carolyn dropped her head for a moment, then slowly sat down again and nodded. "Okay, I'll play along. Which of us goes first?"

"Why don't you start? Maybe something from her childhood?"

"Um." She chewed her lip for a moment, then sighed. "I wanted to ask you about Dennis first. I heard he got married again."

Clark nodded. "He did. He married a very nice lady scientist and as far as I can tell, they're deliriously happy working and living together."

She closed her eyes and waited a breath. "Thank you. I'm glad he's doing well. And I'm glad I didn't permanently ruin his life."

"You didn't. But we were going to talk about Lana, weren't we?"

"Right." Carolyn nodded once. "Let me think — oh, yeah! She asked us for an archaeologist's hat for her fifth birthday. We didn't understand what she meant until that movie trailer for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* played on TV and she jumped up and down and yelled, 'That's it! That's my hat!' We gave it to her the morning of her birthday, and for the next few months she was

‘Indiana Lana’ from the time she got up until bedtime.”

He smiled and took her hand across the grass in front of the headstone. “Thank you. I never knew that about her, but I can see her at that age, running around with that hat on, trying to find the treasure under the couch.”

“Oh, no, it was under the refrigerator. She told us so. She made her father move it so she could dig underneath.”

This time they both laughed softly. Then she said, “You know, I was a little — um — I’d had a bit to drink before we came to the reception Dennis threw for the two of you, so I don’t remember it very clearly. Was Lana wearing a white dress with flowers on it?”

“Yes. She even had tiny yellow flowers woven into her hair.” He sighed deeply. “She was so very beautiful that night.”

She squeezed his hand. “Thank you. I’m glad I remembered that much.”

“You’re welcome. Your turn again.”

“Actually — I’d like to ask you something.”

He nodded. “Go ahead. I’ll answer it if I can.”

“How much — I mean, did she — no. I just need to blurt it out.” Carolyn took in a deep breath, held it for a moment, then let it out. “I need to know — was Lana a good person?”

The question surprised Clark. “Uh — well, since she and I were married, I’m not sure I can give you an objective evaluation.”

“No — no, I guess you couldn’t. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I can tell you what my dad told her.”

“What was that?”

“He told her that if they’d adopted a girl, he couldn’t have been happier if she’d been like Lana.” Clark chuckled. “There were times when I thought he loved her more than he loved me. As far as he’s concerned, my mom hung the moon and Lana helped with the stars.”

Her eyes squeezed shut and she choked out, “Th-thank you. Thank you for saying that.”

“It’s true, too. You could ask him yourself.”

“Maybe I will someday.” She smiled openly for the first time and flicked moisture away from her cheeks. “My turn, right?” He nodded and she took a long breath. “Let’s see. How about Lana’s first day in kindergarten? One of her friends — I think it was Charlene — yes, it was! Charlene wouldn’t get out of her mother’s car that day no matter who said what to her. Finally Lana marched out to the car, opened the door, put her hands on her hips, and said, ‘Charlene, if you’re going to graduate from college, you have to start somewhere!’”

Clark laughed aloud with her. “I suppose Charlene went inside?”

“Oh, yes! If Lana wanted someone to do something, that person almost always did it.”

“That’s true. Did you know about the city water tower?”

“Water tower? No! What about it?”

“It was the spring of her junior year. She convinced five or six of her girlfriends to help her repaint Smallville’s main water tower fluorescent pink.”

Carolyn clapped her hands over her mouth in a vain attempt to stifle a laugh. “You’re kidding me!”

Clark lifted his hand. “No, ma’am, it’s the truth I’m telling you with my hand up! They might have gotten away with it, too, if they hadn’t gotten pink paint in their hair. Sheriff Harris held them overnight in the jail and released them to their parents after they promised Judge Smith that they’d get all that paint off and repaint the town name properly. And the judge specified that they use black paint to put it back like it was before they ‘fixed’ it.”

They both laughed this time.

They spent the rest of Clark’s free time exchanging Lana stories, most funny, some touching, and a few heart-rending. But before they left, they both knew that Carolyn McConnell would

not need her pills and whiskey cocktail. She’d always have regrets, but he could tell that she knew it was time for her to move on with her life and build something worth her time.

And Clark became fully aware of something he’d already known but hadn’t wanted to face just yet. It was time for him to move on with his life too.

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Jonathan leaned back and laid his hands on his ample belly. “Martha, that may have been the best meal you’ve ever made.”

She slapped his shoulder playfully as she gathered the spent dishes. “Oh, honey, you always say that! You’re just trying to butter me up again.” To Clark, she whispered, “He thinks if he praises my cooking I’ll be more likely to get frisky with him after you leave.”

“Mom! I really don’t need to know that, okay?”

She and her husband laughed aloud. “Oh, Clark, I was just teasing! You know that.”

“I don’t mind the teasing so much, but I do mind knowing — that other stuff.”

Jonathan leaned forward and put his hand on his son’s shoulder. “This is where most fathers say something like, ‘So where do you think you came from?’”

Clark put his head on the table and covered his ears with his hands. “Nah-nah-nah-nah-nah-I-can’t-hear-you-nah-nah-nah-nah—”

Martha pushed Jonathan’s hand away. “Leave the boy alone now! He has something important to say to us, don’t you, sweetie?”

Clark lifted his head and looked around as if checking for snipers. “Is it safe to come out now?”

The three of them shared a laugh as Martha refilled the tea glasses, then put the pitcher on the table. “Yes, son, it’s safe. Your father and I will behave. I promise.” She lifted her eyes to her husband and intoned, “Won’t we, Jonathan Kent?”

He put on his best innocent face. “Yes, dear, I will most certainly behave.”

Clark chuckled. “Thanks, you two.”

“For what, son?”

Clark put one hand on his father’s wrist and one on his mother’s. “For being the best parents a guy could ever have. I honestly don’t see how I could possibly love you two more than I do.”

Jonathan sensed that they were finally getting to the real reason for the visit. “Do you have something you want to tell us, son? Or is there something you want to ask us?”

Clark sighed. “Something I want — no, that I need to tell you.” He leaned back with another sigh. “Rebecca and I broke up today.”

Martha leaned over and enveloped him in her comfort. “Oh, honey, I’m sorry,” she said.

Jonathan squeezed Clark’s hand but didn’t say anything. He’d never been totally comfortable with Clark’s relationship with Rebecca, but he hadn’t said anything because he hadn’t been asked. He had loved Lana like a daughter, almost as much as Clark had loved her, but she was gone and his son had been behaving as if he’d considered marrying some other woman.

And to his own surprise, it was okay with Jonathan.

He hadn’t wanted it to be okay. He hadn’t wanted to let go of his feelings for Lana. He hadn’t wanted anyone to replace her, not now, not ever. But it was time for him to accept her death, to accept that she was never coming back, and to accept that his son was a man who — despite all his powers — needed to love a good woman and be loved by her. He just couldn’t see Rebecca in that role, though.

He could, however, see Lois Lane in that role.

And, once again, he knew he couldn’t say anything about her unless Clark — or, even less likely, Lois herself — asked his

opinion on the subject. It wasn't his place to dictate to his son who he should love or who he should marry. That was Clark's call all the way.

As Martha released Clark from the hug in which she'd enveloped him, Jonathan asked, "Is this a permanent breakup?"

Clark nodded. "Yes. Rebecca and I want different things from marriage. I want a home I can feel safe in and a wife who'll make me her top priority in this life, just like I'd make her my top priority in life. Rebecca and I have decided that we aren't going down the same road together, that we never will go down the same road together, and that we need to get out of each other's way."

Jonathan nodded. "But it still hurts, doesn't it?"

Clark exhaled. "Yes. It does. But not like I thought it would."

Jonathan nodded again. "That sounds like you've been thinking about ending it with Rebecca for a while now."

His son squinted and tilted his head to one side. "Huh. I hadn't thought about it like that, but I guess I have been."

Martha patted his hand again. "Honey, you just take all the time you need here tonight. You can spend the night if you want."

Now he frowned. "I wish I could, but there's a big story breaking back in Metropolis that I have to cover." Clark sat up straight and looked at both his parents in turn. "Lex Luthor was shot to death this afternoon by his ex-wife Arianna Carlin. And Lois is with the police now, answering questions."

"What!" barked Jonathan. "Why is Lois under arrest?"

"No, Dad, she hasn't been arrested. The story we're printing tomorrow morning is that Carlin shot and killed Lex before Lois got there, tried to shoot Lois but Lois fought her off, and Carlin was in turn killed by Lex' servant Asabi in self-defense. The police just need Asabi's and Lois' statements about what happened."

"Why — why would Lois need to fight her off? What happened to her powers?"

"I don't know exactly what happened, Dad. I assume that Carlin had some more of that green crystal, but I can't be sure until I talk to Lois, and besides, that's not something we're going to publish. I'll let you know more details when I get them."

Jonathan's mouth hung open and he couldn't think of anything else to say. He closed it with a snap and glanced at his wife, who was as pale with shock as he'd ever seen her. He reached over to touch her hand, and as soon as he did, she grabbed it and held on for all she was worth.

Clark stood. "Mom, Dad, I'm really sorry to drop this on you and fly off, but I have to go. I want to be available for Perry if he needs me. And I need to be available for Lois if she wants to talk to me."

Jonathan nodded. "I understand, son. But can't you just think at her? You know, talk mind to mind?"

"She's turned the connection off at her end, and I have to respect her privacy."

"Honey, I understand your discretion," Martha offered, "but Lois really needs a friend right now."

"I know. I plan to go over there tomorrow morning and talk to her, assuming I can get past the police, and assuming she's willing to talk."

Jonathan pulled in a breath through his nose and let it out slowly. "She will, Clark. You're her best friend. And it sounds to me like she really needs a friend."

Clark bent down and kissed his mother on the cheek, then stood tall and looked his father in the eye. "I hope you're right, Dad. I'm going to be available either way. And Superman is going to fly a few extra patrols near her apartment tonight."

Martha stood and gave her son a quick hug. "Go, Clark! Go be a good friend."

"Thanks, Mom, Dad. You two are the best." He took a step towards the back door, then stopped and half-turned toward them.

"Even if you do talk dirty in front of me."

He was gone by the time Jonathan's belly laugh escaped.

## Chapter Sixteen

Deputy Chief Roberta Jean Thompson had a strong sense of justice. Unlike some television law enforcement officers, she would never deliberately place a suspect in jeopardy, nor would she permit someone in her custody to be endangered so she could close a case. She believed very strongly that under the American justice system, the only place to establish guilt or innocence was a court of law. And the only body to mete out justice was that same court. She always went by the book and never bent the law to increase her conviction rate. She relied on law and proper procedure to guide her professional life, not some nebulous gut feeling or unreliable sixth sense.

But the book wasn't quite clear on what she was supposed to do with Lois Lane.

She leaned back in a desk chair in the squad room and thought about the case. On the one hand, the preliminary medical examiner's reports on both Dr. Carlin and Mr. Luthor supported the Lane woman's story of finding the dying man in his apartment and then defending herself against Dr. Carlin's attempts to kill her. There were a number of empty cartridges of the same caliber as the bullet which had slain Mr. Luthor, and of the four people in the apartment that evening, there was gunshot residue only on Dr. Carlin's hands. The twenty-five caliber pistol which had been fired into the furniture and the walls of the apartment also had only Dr. Carlin's fingerprints on it.

The damage to the victim's wrist and the fatal wound on her neck could only have been produced by someone skillfully wielding a long wooden stick or rod, and Asabi's escrima sticks fit the wounds. One even had blood and hair from Dr. Carlin on it. The medical examiner said that the other bruises and contusions on Dr. Carlin's body were inflicted on her immediately before she'd died, so the story of the fight with Lois seemed to check out, including the bruises on Lane's knuckles and the bandaged cut over her cheekbone. And even though Lois Lane had a long history with the Metro Police, she'd never done anything technically illegal without having a valid reason for it, nor had she ever been convicted of any crime. Having Bill Henderson in her corner didn't hurt her case either.

On the other hand, the crime scene investigation team hadn't found enough spent nine-millimeter bullets to match up with the number of casings scattered around. Lane's story was a little spotty about how she'd gotten the larger pistol away from Carlin and how it had fallen off the balcony to fall to the street below. Three other witnesses, the building's security officer at the front door and a couple walking past the entrance at the time, all substantiated Asabi's claim that he'd been on the street until the pistol had fallen through the limousine's windshield, so any thought of an ambush set up between Lane and Asabi was out of the picture. But Roberta was still puzzled as to the exact sequence of events.

The details of the story didn't quite fit together. And Roberta knew that details often tripped up the most innocent-looking criminal.

She pushed open the interview room door and sat down across from Lane. The other woman was obviously unhappy, but Roberta didn't sense that she was angry at the police, but rather that she was unhappy with the situation. And that actually made sense.

Maybe it was time to put all the cards on the table. Maybe Lane would reciprocate and ease Roberta's mind about the case.

Roberta pushed her glasses up on her nose. "Ms. Lane, I want to thank you for bein' so patient with us. And I want to say how very sorry we are about your loss."

Lois met Roberta's eyes for the first time. "Thank you," she whispered.

Roberta tilted her head sympathetically. “We just have a few more questions to ask, and then you can go. I know this has been a very difficult time for you.”

Lois nodded once but didn’t speak.

After a moment, Roberta continued, “As you know, Dr. Arianna Carlin died of a severed spinal cord after being struck with what appears to be an escrima stick. You ever study escrima, Ms. Lane?”

Lois shook her head. “Taekwondo, a little Wing Chun, a couple of judo lessons, but no escrima.”

“So Mr. Asabi struck Dr. Carlin and killed her?”

“Yes. But only because he knew she was trying to kill me.”

“And you’re absolutely certain of that?”

“That Asabi knew she was trying to kill me?”

“No. I meant, are you absolutely certain she was trying to kill you?”

Lois crossed her arms and frowned. “You ever play ‘Marco Polo’ in the swimming pool?”

“Yes. One person closes his eyes and calls out ‘Marco.’ Anybody who answers ‘Polo’ gets chased. It’s kind of like a game of water tag.”

“Uh-huh. Arianna Carlin was trying to tag me with her pistol. Permanently.”

“I see.”

Lois shuddered. “I doubt I’ll ever be able to hear any kids playing it without seeing her creep along with that little gun in her hand, calling out ‘Marco’ while she hunted for me to shoot me.”

“I totally understand, Ms. Lane.” Roberta took off her glasses and tilted her head sympathetically again. “That had to have been a very scary moment. And I understand if you can’t tell us why our crime scene technicians can’t find all the spent bullets from Dr. Carlin’s nine- millimeter pistol.”

“Tracking all those bullets really wasn’t my priority at the time, no.”

“Of course not. We just need to cross all of our I’s and dot all of our T’s before we close this case. You understand, I’m sure.”

“Cross your I’s and dot your T’s, huh?” The Lane woman stared straight into Roberta’s eyes. “I understand a lot, Chief Thompson. I understand that you’re at least twice as smart as you try to appear. And I understand that your sweet Southern accent combined with your charming smile and deliberate errors in speech disarm most people.” She leaned forward and spoke almost fiercely. “But I’m not most people. I didn’t kill Arianna Carlin. I’ve told you everything I can tell you about that night. And I’m ready to go home. Unless, of course, you want to arrest me for something.”

Roberta slowly put her glasses back on. So much for putting the cards on the table. Her bluff was called and she had no option but to watch this witness walk out. There was no legal basis for arresting her. And the woman didn’t feel like a criminal to Roberta.

“Very well, Ms. Lane, you’re free to go. I can arrange for a ride for you wherever you want to go. As long as it’s within the city, of course.”

“Of course. That would be nice, thank you.”

Roberta tried her most winning smile. “It’s absolutely no problem. There’s a ladies’ room around the corner to the right if you’d like to wash up before you leave. One of my detectives will be waiting for you right outside this room.”

“Sounds good to me.” Lois pushed back the chair and stood. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I hope I don’t see you any time soon, at least not about — about this case.”

Roberta stood and opened the door. “Of course not. I completely understand.” She led Lois out of the room and pointed toward the bathroom, then called out, “Sergeant Michaels? Please wait for Ms. Lane right here, and when she

comes back please take her wherever she wants to go.”

The tall, slender black man nodded. “Yes, ma’am. Anything else?”

Roberta turned to see that Lois was out of sight in the bathroom. “No. Just come on back as soon as you let her out wherever she wants to go. We still have a lot of paperwork to finish on this Luthor case.”

He nodded and moved to stand beside the conference room door.

Roberta walked back to her office, thinking about Lois Lane. The woman was under a lot of stress, of course, but she didn’t appear to be exhausted, just monumentally frustrated. And she wasn’t behaving like someone who’d just had the love of her life die in her arms. She was saddened and upset by the man’s death, but she wasn’t stricken. Of course, she might just be someone who didn’t believe in letting her grief out among strangers.

Or there might be a great deal more to the story than Roberta knew at the moment.

Whatever. She had dozens of open cases, and the city of Metropolis averaged more than two murders a day. There was more than enough work for her to do without going after a woman who was so obviously not guilty of killing anyone.

But she’d keep her eyes and ears open anyway. One never knew when one might learn something useful.

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It was well after dark when Lois unlocked her apartment door and turned to the officer who’d brought her home. “Thank you. I can take it from here.”

Sergeant Michaels flashed her a charming grin. “Yes, ma’am. Take care, now.”

She didn’t answer as she opened the door and stepped inside.

Lex was dead. Arianna was dead. Asabi was under investigation for Arianna’s death, although Lois didn’t think he’d be tried for any crime, and hopefully not even arrested. What would happen to LexCorp and the associated companies was too much to think about for the moment. If Lois were lucky, she wouldn’t be arrested either. And her powers weren’t anywhere near full strength yet, assuming they ever did come back all the way.

Asabi had placed Arianna’s lead kryptonite box up high on one of Lex’ bookshelves, positioned so that it looked like it belonged there. If her powers came back, she’d take the box and get rid of it permanently. If not, she’d ask Clark to do it.

This was a total, utter, complete train wreck of a day.

She leaned her forehead against the door and closed her eyes. She was so focused on herself that the sound of the locks being fastened didn’t rouse her for a moment.

But that meant that someone else was here. That meant that she could talk to that someone, maybe even cry on that someone’s shoulder. Maybe that someone was Clark.

Two thin arms embraced her around the shoulders and a young woman’s voice said, “Oh, Lois, I’m so sorry.”

She turned slowly to see Lucy’s tear-streaked face. For a brief moment she was furious that it wasn’t Clark holding her. She was angry at Clark for not being here. She was livid at Lucy for not being Clark.

Then she realized that he wouldn’t invade her home without her permission, and that he was probably working on the story of Lex’ death even now. And she also realized that Lucy was here, was willing to share her grief, and that she needed to let it out to someone she trusted.

She almost smiled when she realized she trusted her sister with her grief.

Lois let her head sink down on Lucy’s shoulder. Her arms went around the younger woman’s waist and she squeezed her eyes shut as the tears came again.

Lois cried for Lex, for the loss of a man she counted as a

good friend, for the loss of a man who had loved her even if she couldn't return that love, for the hole he'd leave in her life, and for the pain she knew Asabi felt and would feel for the rest of his life.

She sensed Lucy leading her to the couch, where they awkwardly flumped down with Lois all but falling into her sister's lap. After a long moment, Lois sat up and wiped her face with one hand.

Like a stage magician, Lucy pulled a clean dish towel out of a pocket in her slacks. "Here, Sis, use this. It's more absorbent than your skin."

Lois chuckled through her tears and took the towel. "I — \*sniff\* — I guess you know that from experience, huh?"

"Well, I have drowned a few of these in my time."

Lois didn't answer, but did utilize Lucy's thoughtfulness to dry her face. As she pulled the towel away, she realized that her makeup was now all over the towel. "Better here than on my clothes, I guess," she muttered.

Lucy stroked Lois' hair. "Can I get you anything, Sis? Are you hungry or thirsty?"

Lois sniffed again. "Not hungry, but a soda would be nice."

"Coming right up."

As Lois took the glass, she said, "I suppose the phone's been ringing off the wall nonstop."

"No. I turned off the ringer and turned down the volume on your answering machine. You've got about a gazillion messages from all sorts of people."

"What? But I—"

"No! You sit down right here. You can listen to the messages tomorrow, after you've had a good night's sleep."

Lois leaned back and sighed. "Okay, yeah, I am pretty wiped out right now."

"Good. I did take a message from Mr. White, and he told me to tell you to call him at the office on Monday whenever you got up and the two of you would figure out what to do from there. Oh, I also got a message from Clark Kent just before I turned off the ringer. He said that he's going to drop by in the morning after you get some sleep, and that he's available to talk or listen or skip rocks in the stream any time you want." Lucy frowned. "I didn't quite understand that last part, but I have to assume that you do, because you're almost smiling right now."

Lois shook her head. "Yeah, I understand. Clark's a really great guy."

"Ah. Well, maybe you — no, forget that."

"What?"

"Nothing. Forget I even breathed, okay?"

"Well — okay, if you—"

"Hey, I know you said you weren't hungry, but I was and I had a big pepperoni pizza delivered about an hour ago and I can heat it up if you want something to eat. Or I could run out to the video store and pick up a movie. The Three Stooges, maybe? Or a sci-fi movie? Or a romantic comedy, one where Hugh Grant courts the female lead and makes her fall in love with him even though he's a total jerk?"

Lois laughed softly. "No movie, no thanks. But a couple of slices of pizza actually sound good right now. You did get the deep dish crust, didn't you?"

"What? No way! That's just bread with sauce on it. Real pizza has thin, thin crust."

"Like a cracker with sauce on it? Come on, Luce, you need to learn to eat real Metropolis pizza."

They stood and walked into the kitchen together, still smiling at each other. "If I want a toasted open-faced pepperoni sandwich I'll make one myself," retorted Lucy.

"Yeah? Well, if I want a sixteen-inch Ritz cracker with tomato sauce and cheese on it I'll make it myself."

"Make it yourself? You can't boil water without burning it!"

"I'll have you know that I've learned to make a few meals since we lived together!"

"And they all come in plastic trays with microwave instructions on the box, too!"

Lois leaned back against the counter and laughed, then started crying again. Lucy ran to embrace her. "Oh, Sis, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean it, honest!"

Lois returned the hug. "No, Luce, it's okay. Really. I just — I've missed having you around and I didn't even realize it. I'm so glad you're here."

Lucy smiled and kissed her on the cheek. "Then I'm glad I'm here too. I'll just pop this pizza in the microwave and let it heat up, and while that's happening I'll refill your soda. Then we'll sit down and I'll tell you all about my classes and the crazy professors who teach them."

Lois stroked her sister's hair. "Sounds like a plan to me."

As Lucy bustled about the kitchen, Lois realized that as bad as the day had been, there were still thin beams of light shining through the dense clouds. Maybe not blindingly bright beams, but there was light. And maybe her life would go on after all.

Lucy was there for her. Sweet, crazy, unpredictable, unreliable Lucy had grown up while Lois wasn't looking. Somehow she'd morphed from a crazy teenager with no thought for the next day to a mature young woman who was someone Lois could rely on for help. It was totally unexpected, but welcome as cool water on a hot summer's day.

Lucy wasn't the only great person in her life, either. After all that had happened to her, Perry was still the best boss a woman could wish for, Jimmy was as much a little brother as she'd ever known, and Clark was still part of her world. Even if the closest relationship she'd ever have with him would be as best friends.

She wouldn't want it to be enough, she knew. But it was better than chasing him away or making him so uncomfortable around her that one of them would have to pull away.

She'd make sure it was enough. It was a small price to pay to keep him around.

## Chapter Seventeen

The following morning, Clark opened his eyes before his alarm woke him. He sat up and felt inside him for the link to Lois. He was surprised and pleased to find that it was open.

\*- Lois? \*- he sent.

\*- Yes, Clark? \*-

\*- I hope I didn't wake you. \*-

\*- No. I didn't sleep much last night. \*-

\*- I understand. Would it be okay if I dropped by this morning? \*-

He felt a smile come across the link. \*- That would be nice. Just try to get here soon. Our competitors are already gathering outside. \*-

\*- Okay. I'll start as soon as I get dressed. \*-

\*- I need to warn you about a couple of things. \*-

\*- Go ahead. \*-

\*- First, Lucy's here and she's even worse than I am when she doesn't get enough sleep. Second, there's a small lead box with some of that nasty green crystal in Lex' — in his apartment on a bookshelf. Carlin used it on me. \*-

\*- The crystal? Lois, are you okay? \*-

\*- I think so. All it does to me is take away my powers, remember? And one of us can take it and throw it in the sun when things calm down over there. Anyway, while I was normal again, she whacked me around pretty good, so I really look like I've been in a fight. I'm starting to feel a little more — super, I guess, but I'm not back yet, and I didn't want you to be upset when you saw how my face looks. \*-

\*- I'm just glad you're okay. \*-

\*- Thanks. I don't want to tell Lucy about our link right now, because she'll want to know why it's there, and then she'll start

thinking about my powers having come from Superman, and she's no dummy and she's liable to start thinking about who Superman is when he's not zipping around the skies. \*-

\*- I understand. Thanks for the warning. \*-

\*- I don't remember if I told you, but Lucy knows I'm Ultra Woman. \*-

\*- You told me. Amazing that she figured it out the way she did. \*-

\*- And I want to remind you that she doesn't know that you're Superman. If you want to tell her, that's up to you. I think she can handle it, but maybe today wouldn't be a good day. \*-

\*- Probably not. Maybe later. \*-

\*- Whoops, here comes Lucy now. She's going to try to feed me breakfast. See you when you get here. \*-

And with that, the link clicked shut from Lois' end.

Clark wasn't offended. Her exhaustion, both physical and mental, had leaked through, and he certainly didn't want to put any more pressure on her at this point. He'd go over, give her the option of dropping some of her burdens on him, and leave when it was time.

\*\*\*

Surprised at the small crowd of media reps on the street at six forty on Sunday morning, Clark shouldered his way past two dozen or more reporters from other outlets. Most of them were from what Perry would have called "birdcage liner" publications, but there was one from the *New York Standard* and a video crew from LNN. He ignored their shouted questions and stopped in front of the young female officer in front of Lois' apartment building entrance.

She raised her hand palm out. "I'm sorry, sir, but you can't come in the building unless you live here. Departmental orders."

"I understand. Maybe if I tell you my name?"

The short, dark-skinned woman wouldn't have slowed Clark down much even if he hadn't had powers, but that didn't mean that she didn't project a real aura of authority. "I doubt it would make a difference, sir."

"But I'm a coworker of Lois Lane. My name is Clark Kent."

Her eyes flickered and widened for an instant, then she nodded. "Of course, sir. I apologize for not recognizing you."

He shrugged. "No reason you should. I don't think we've ever met. You're Officer O'Brian?"

"Yes. I've read your work, Mr. Kent. You're very good."

"Thank you, Officer. Right now, though, I'm just a friend visiting a friend in need."

"Of course. Please, go right in."

"Thank you."

As he took the steps two at a time, he glanced back at the wolf pack of lampreys shouting at the officer and demanding the same access Clark had received. He was impressed by her calm but firm refusal to allow anyone to even climb the steps to the building, and when one tall blonde woman tried, the officer cut her off and herded her back to the pack without fuss or bother.

Satisfied that Lois' building was secure, he took the stairs up to Lois' apartment. He lowered his glasses and cautiously glanced inside, hoping to see only fully clothed people.

Lois was sitting at the breakfast table, wearing bunny slippers, a pair of sweatpants, and a pullover jersey from Metro U. A younger version of Lois was buttering several very dark slices of toast in the kitchen and muttering to herself about the lack of cooking skills in the Lane family.

He smiled. Here was something positive he could do for Lois.

His knock brought the younger woman to the door. She peered under the thick chain lock and looked at him closely. "Are you Clark Kent?" she demanded.

"Yes, I—"

The door slammed shut, the chain rattled, and the door flew open. She reached out and grabbed his arm and yanked him into

the room. "Get in here now, Kent!"

Surprised, Clark allowed her to push him toward the dining area. He heard her fasten the locks behind him.

Lois finally turned to look in his direction. "Hi, Clark. I'm glad you came."

He opened his mouth to speak, but the younger woman overrode him. "Can you cook breakfast, Kent?"

"Uh, yes, if you have—"

She shoved him in the kidneys and guided him toward the kitchenette. "Then go cook something! Lois is helpless in there and I'm not far behind her."

"Lucy, you're a pretty good cook," murmured Lois.

"Not today I'm not! I'm too frustrated and tired. And I've never been good with any breakfast more complicated than cereal and toast. Come on, Kent, get cracking in there."

He surrendered to the inevitable and began checking Lois' cabinets for ingredients. "Is there any pancake mix? And syrup?"

Lucy pointed to his left. "Mix in the corner cabinet, syrup in the fridge. We have milk and eggs in there, too, but I burned almost all the bread trying to make toast."

Clark turned and looked at her quizzically. "Toaster's busted," she explained. "It won't pop up when it's done and all I can smell is that it's burnt."

He refrained from laughing and nodded. "Give me fifteen minutes and we'll have pancakes and eggs. Is scrambled okay or do you want them over easy?"

"Scrambled is fine," Lucy said. "Just make them edible and don't try for anything fancy."

He nodded. "Nothing fancy. Got it."

He heard Lucy sit down at the table beside Lois, so he tried for some light conversation. "Perry went to pick up Jimmy and his buddies from the fishing shack this morning. I'd guess they're ready to come home."

"Yeah, you're probably right. I know Jimmy's not exactly a nature nut, and those other two seemed to be total city boys too."

He grinned at her. "Then they'll be glad to see asphalt again."

He waited for a moment, and when neither woman spoke, he said, "Have you looked outside this morning? The news is spreading."

Lois sighed. "I saw them from my bedroom window. I've never been this much a part of the story before, and I don't think I like it." She shook her head and stood. "I now have a lot more sympathy for the people I've interviewed over the years."

Clark paused and turned to face her. "You know it will get worse before it gets better, don't you?"

"Oh, thanks, Kent," snarled Lucy. "I just got her out of the bedroom a few minutes ago. Why don't you tell her something really encouraging, like how much time she's going to spend in jail?"

"Lucy!" cried Lois. "Clark is my friend and he came here to help me! You be nice to him! I mean it!"

"What? Sis, you can't—"

"Yes I can! You've done nothing but snap at him since he came in and I won't have it! You be nice or I'll — I'll give you a swirl!"

Lucy's mouth dropped open and her eyes bulged. After a long moment, she leaned back in the chair and looked at her older sister, then composed herself and turned to Clark. "Mr. Kent? I apologize for my behavior. I've been rude and inconsiderate, especially seeing that you're here so early on a Sunday morning." She crossed her arms and sighed. "I'm usually much nicer than this."

He nodded around his breakfast preparations. "No problem, Miss Lane. I know this hasn't been easy for either of you."

"It hasn't been, but that's no excuse. And please, call me Lucy."

He gave her a mega-watt smile. "Then you have to call me

Clark.”

She smiled. “I think I can do that. Hey, can I help with that? There must be something I can handle without burning it.”

Clark heard Lois chuckle but didn’t look at her. “How about you set the table? I’m pretty sure the silverware isn’t flammable.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Lois sat at the dining room table. Lucy collected plates, napkins, silverware, and drinking glasses as Clark stirred the pancake batter and whipped the eggs. He’d noticed the bruised swelling on Lois’ face but hadn’t mentioned it, thinking that she wouldn’t want to call attention to her injuries in front of Lucy.

Instead, he focused on cooking. A light brushing of butter on the already hot griddle followed by evenly sized and spaced discs of batter. Salt, pepper, a dash of paprika, a slight scattering of onion fragments and chopped-up bell pepper he’d found in the refrigerator’s produce drawer, stirred in lightly with the whipped eggs and folded several times to distribute the heat evenly. Flip the pancakes, drop a small dollop of butter on each one while still hot, scoop the eggs into a bowl and carry them to the table, then return in time to lift the pancakes from the griddle onto another plate. Carry them to the table and place them in front of Lucy and Lois with a slight flourish and—

“Voila!” he purred. “The breakfast, she is most ready for the eating, ladies.”

Lois softly smiled up at him. “There are three place settings, Clark. Sit, eat, and enjoy.”

He leaned closer to her and murmured, “I’ll eat if you will.”

He held her gaze for a long moment, then she nodded and said, “Sounds like a plan to me.”

As he sat, Lucy handed him a long-handled wooden spoon and gestured toward the eggs. “You cooked them, you taste them.”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“I don’t know you well enough to trust you.” Then her face and voice both softened. “But they smell heavenly, Clark, so this is a thank-you and not a poison test. Besides, Lois trusts you with her life and with her heart, so you can’t be all bad.”

He stifled the chuckle but not the smile. “I appreciate the ringing endorsement.”

Her eyes turned impish. “Oh, no. Ringing endorsements will have to wait until after the rock skipping is complete.”

The remark baffled him for a second, then he remembered his message from the day before. Instead of speaking, he took the spoon and scooped out a small portion of the eggs, then tasted them. Then, after chewing and swallowing, he frowned slightly, tilted his head back and forth, and ran his tongue around his mouth as if searching for something inside.

Finally, Lucy could take no more. “Well?” she blurted. “How are they?”

He looked at her with mild surprise as if he’d forgotten she was there. He swallowed again and grudgingly surrendered his opinion.

“Oh. Um — they’re good.”

A snort to one side drew their attention. Lois sat back with her eyes closed, holding one hand over her mouth with the other wrapped around her shoulder, shaking. She shifted to one side as if about to leap out of her chair.

“Sis? Are you okay?”

Lois nodded sharply and snorted again. Lucy reached out and took her sister’s free hand in hers. “Lois? I’m sorry.”

Clark put his fork down. “I’m sorry too, Lois. If I’d thought —”

“Bwahahahahaha!”

The explosion caught both of them by surprise. Lucy jumped back and knocked her orange juice off the table onto the floor. Clark scooted his chair back almost a foot and paused half-in, half-out of it. Lois responded by pounding her feet on the floor

and laughing like a white-faced green-haired criminal. If Lucy hadn’t slid her chair closer and grabbed her sister’s shoulder, Lois might have fallen to the floor.

Clark relaxed as he watched the sisters laugh and hold on to each other to remain upright. By the time they’d wound down, he’d cleaned up Lucy’s spilled juice, made a significant dent in his eggs, and shortened his stack of pancakes by half.

Lois wiped her eyes and shook her head. “You two have no idea how hysterical that was.”

Clark smiled back. “It’s good to hear you laugh. I just never knew you snorted like that.”

Lucy snorted at his remark, and Lois echoed it, which set both of them off once again.

This time Lucy stopped first. “Feel better now, Sis?”

Lois nodded. “Yes. A little, anyway.”

“That’s good.”

“You know, I lied to Lex.”

The comment stunned both of the others. After a long moment, Lucy said, “Well, that was certainly a bullseye of a buzzkill.”

“Sorry. But it’s true. I needed to say it.” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I just didn’t know how much I needed to say it.”

Then Lois began eating breakfast. Lucy and Clark exchanged puzzled looks, then Lucy shrugged, loaded up her own plate, and dug in.

As Lois wiped her mouth and stood to carry her dishes to the kitchen, Lucy took them from her. “I’ll get that. You sit down and explain to Clark what you meant.”

“What I meant about what?”

“About lying to Lex,” came Lucy’s voice from the kitchen. “I don’t know what you were talking about, but if you needed to say it to us, you also need to explain it to us. So start talking.”

Clark leaned closer to Lois. “Is she always this bossy?”

Lois shook her head. “Of course not. She’s usually much worse.”

“Heard that!”

Clark and Lois laughed softly, then Clark took her hand. “I do think she’s right, though. You need to tell us what you meant about lying to Lex.”

Lois curled her hand around Clark’s and gripped tightly. It felt right, it felt good, and it felt natural to him. He wished he could hold her hand forever.

Then she spoke. “When the elevator door opened I smelled the cordite, then I smelled the blood. I found Lex in the library, bleeding to death on the floor. He — he wouldn’t let me take him to the hospital. He said even Superman couldn’t — couldn’t help him.”

She paused and sniffed once. “Carlin said that she’d shot him in the liver, and that there was no way to save him, none at all.

Lex agreed with her. Then he told me he’d planned to propose to me and he wanted — he wondered what I would have told him.”

Her fingers tightened on his. He could tell that her powers weren’t back yet, but since her grip was strong enough to injure a normal human, he was glad it was his hand in hers and not Lucy’s.

She looked up at him as if pleading a case she knew she’d lose. “He was dying! What was I supposed to do? I couldn’t tell him ‘no’ at that point! So I — I told him that I would’ve said ‘yes’ and he smiled and he died and — and then I almost killed Carlin.”

Lucy moved behind her sister and wrapped her arms around Lois’ shoulders. “You did good, Sis. You let him leave with a smile on his face and you didn’t kill anyone.”

Lois dropped her gaze. “You don’t understand! I lied to him! If Carlin hadn’t shot him I would’ve said ‘no’ and told him I loved someone else! And I would have killed Carlin if I’d had the

chance! I told her that — that she needed to make her last words good ones.” Her eyes slammed shut again. “I was going to kill her! I really was!”

Lucy rocked her sister from side to side. “But you didn’t kill her. And you know you could have. Lois, if you had really wanted Carlin dead, Mr. Asabi would have found her body in that apartment. He never would’ve needed to hit her at all. She brought all this on herself and you didn’t do anything you shouldn’t have done.”

“But I—”

“Shhh, Sis, shhh. It’s okay. You did good, honest. You didn’t do anything wrong.” Lucy’s eyes sought and found Clark’s. “Tell her, Clark. Tell her what you think. She knows you won’t lie to her.”

He slid his chair closer to Lois. “Lucy’s right. Everything she said was right. You told Lex what you had to tell him to ease his passing, and that was a good thing. You could have broken Carlin’s neck instead of Asabi doing it, but you didn’t. I know that you would have taken her into custody if she’d given you the chance.”

Lois’ face slowly rose. “Do — do you mean that? Really? You think — you don’t think I did wrong?”

He shook his head. “I can’t see where you did anything wrong, Lois. If you had made a different choice, Carlin might be alive and in jail this morning. Or she might be out of the country by now and your dead body might have been found on that apartment floor. There’s no way to know what might have happened. But I do know that you did nothing wrong.”

Lois’ mouth quivered and she leaned toward Clark. He caught her as she slipped from the chair to her knees and wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed. Her tears burst out once again and she all but melted against him, wailing in grief.

Lucy waved her hand until she caught his eye, then made gestures toward Lois’ bedroom. Clark nodded shortly and watched her leave to make and then turn down Lois’ bed.

He held her close and almost wept himself.

He wondered who she loved if she hadn’t been in love with Lex Luthor. Who had she been thinking of when she’d decided she wouldn’t marry him? Certainly not someone at work, or Clark would have picked up on it. Maybe it was someone from one of her therapy groups, the same ones Dr. Friskin had suggested to Clark. Maybe there was a man there who had captured Lois’ heart, a man who was upright and honest and available, a man whom Lois respected enough to trust with her life.

The lucky stiff.

That had to be it. She’d met someone there who would walk through life beside her and treat her right. Of course, mistreating Ultra Woman was chancy at best and downright stupid at its worst, but her current situation confirmed to Clark that she was still just as human as anyone else on the planet.

Except for him, of course.

He waited until she’d wound down, then he reached down under her knees with one hand and lifted her up. She tightened her grip around his neck for an instant, then relaxed as he stood and carried her to her bed. He laid her down and tried to let go, but she grabbed both his hands and refused to release them.

“No!” she cried. “Please stay! Don’t leave me!”

Lucy smiled at him and pulled the covers up to her sister’s shoulders. “Clark’s not going anywhere, Lois. He’s going to stay right here until you go to sleep.”

“That’s right, Lois,” he said. “I’ll stay right here with you as long as you’re awake.”

“Right here?”

His heart almost broke for her. “Right here beside you.”

“Promise?”

It was all he could do not to sweep her into his arms and tell

her he loved her, but he knew he couldn’t. “I promise. I’ll be right here until you go to sleep.”

Her voice softened and lost its frightened little girl tone.

“Thank you, Clark. You’re such a wonderful friend to me.”

“And you’re a good friend to me, Lois. Sleep now, okay?”

“No.” She lurched up from the bed and grabbed his shoulders. “You have to know! You have to — Lana.”

The name stunned him for a moment, then he recovered.

“What about Lana, Lois?”

“I — I did it. I didn’t do it like I thought I would, but I did it.”

Lucy sat down on the other side of the bed. “Lois, what are you talking about?”

Lois took one hand off Clark’s shoulder and grabbed Lucy’s upper arm. “I made myself a promise that I’d find whoever killed Lana and make them pay. Carlin was the one running those guns, even if Nigel was making money from it. He probably stole from her like he stole from Lex. But Nigel St. John and Arianna Carlin are both dead now.” She turned to Clark and tried to smile. “And Lana can rest easy. Her killer has met justice.”

Clark couldn’t move or speak for a moment, but that was all the time it took for Lucy to gently press Lois back down to the pillow. “Okay, Lois, Lana can rest easy. You did good. Now it’s your turn. Lie down and go to sleep. Clark will stay here with you.”

“Thank you, Punky.” She took Clark’s hands in hers again.

“And thank you, Clark. You’re the best friend anyone could ever have.”

“You’re welcome, Lois. Now go to sleep, okay?”

She nodded once, closed her eyes, and nestled her head into the pillow. He worked one hand loose from hers and softly stroked her hair. She sniffled a couple of times, then her breathing settled into an even rhythm. Her hands slowly released the one of his she still held, and her face lost its tension. He sensed Lucy leaving the room without a word or gesture to him.

After a few minutes, Clark slid his hand away and sat back. Lois didn’t react, so he padded to the bedroom door and closed it behind him.

Lucy was at the table, working on another plate of food. “You know, Clark, this really is good. Next time I’ll get seconds before I have to microwave it to reheat it.”

He smiled. “Thanks. Will you two be okay now?”

She held up her hand in a ‘wait’ gesture and took a long swig of milk. “No.”

“What? No?”

She paused and sighed. “Look, one of the reasons Lois passed out so easily just now is that neither of us got any real sleep last night. If nothing wakes her, she’ll probably stay right there until her kidneys start screaming. And I don’t plan to stay up and wait for that, so you’re elected.”

“I’m elected? Don’t I get a vote?”

“Not if you care for her like I think you do, no.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it and nodded once. “Busted.”

Lucy scraped together the scrambled egg fragments from her plate and scooped them into her mouth. “Mmm! Really good eggs.” She swallowed. “It wasn’t hard to figure out. I was watching you in there with her. You might as well have it tattooed on your face. And you should hear the way she talks about you. When I said she trusts you with her life, that’s exactly what I meant. I think she would’ve revealed that thing about Luthor last night if you’d been here.”

“I was a little busy.”

“Whoa! That was absolutely not an accusation, Kent! I’m sure whatever you were doing was something you had to do. All I’m saying is that you’re important to her. Your good opinion of her is important to her. And your trust in her is important to her. I



don't think you understand just how she feels about you."

He looked away. "I've always tried to be a good friend to her."

"And you've been a wonderful friend. But now it's time to step up and swing at the next pitch."

"Huh?"

"You need to tell her how you feel about her."

He frowned. "I know I'm repeating myself, but once again, huh?"

Instead of answering, Lucy just stared at him. "Clark, are you in love with — oh, what's her name, the redhead? Rebecca! Are you in love with her?"

"What do you know about Rebecca?"

"Just what Lois has told me. Are you?"

He grinned ruefully. "No. She'd rather hang around with penguins than with me."

That stopped Lucy for a moment. "Wow. That's an insult I've never heard before. Talk about your slice-and-dice."

He chuckled. "Sorry. I meant that she'd rather study Antarctic wildlife than set up housekeeping with me. We broke up permanently. And it's something she and I both agreed on."

"Ah. Mind telling me when the two of you experienced this epiphany?"

"Yesterday afternoon." Clark's face darkened. "Probably about the time Lois was heading to Lex' apartment."

Lucy exhaled noisily. "And how long have you known how you felt about my sister?"

He blinked a couple of times. That wasn't something he wanted to confess to anyone. "I'd rather not discuss that."

"A couple of days? A few weeks? Several months?" He looked away and Lucy said, "I'm tired to the bone, Clark, but I'm not letting this go. How long?"

He grimaced. "I guess — about six months."

A yawn split her face and she leaned forward. "And I'm guessing you didn't want to say anything to Lois because you didn't want to get between her and Luthor, and you stayed with Rebecca out of a sense of guilt or obligation of some kind."

One eyebrow quirked at her. "You're pretty good at this."

"I've had plenty of practice. So, when are you talking to Lois?"

"I'm not."

"Oh." She paused, then said, "Why not?"

"You heard what she said. Lois lied to Lex because she loves someone else. And I'm not about to get between her and whoever he is."

Lucy stared at him for a long moment, then said, "You know, I think it must be something in the water that makes people in Metropolis so stupid when it comes to personal relationships."

"Huh?"

"You're repeating yourself yet again. Isn't that redundantly redundant?"

"No. I mean, yes, it is, but what did you mean?"

Lucy grinned impishly again. "Nothing. I'm going to brush my teeth and hit the hay, and you'd better still be here when Lois wakes up."

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

"Oh, but I'm sure it is. Give me your word that you'll stay all day."

"Lucy—"

"Your word, Kent. Or I'll get Lois to call your parents for me and I'll tell them you left a friend in the lurch who really needed you."

Her words stopped him. He really hadn't considered the situation in that light, but he could see Lucy's point.

"That's blackmail, Lucy."

"You'll never get a conviction on that charge, copper."

He grinned and nodded. "You have my word. May I go out

for a moment and pick up a few things for lunch and dinner first?"

She reached into her pocket and tossed a key ring at him. "Lock up when you leave and come back quick. If Lois wakes up and you aren't here, I'll never let you live it down. You understand, Kemosabe?"

"The Lone Ranger understands, Tonto. I will be here." He stood. "I may even get back before you go to sleep."

"In that case I'll wait up for you, Prince Charming. You know where Lois' Jeep is?"

"If it's in the usual place, yes."

"Good. Keep the receipts and I'll reimburse you. Now get going so I can get some sleep, okay?"

Lucy sure was bossy, he thought as he locked the door behind him. And she already had a dizzying array of nicknames for him.

He crushed the thought that one of them should be brother-in-law. It was too painful to contemplate something that could never be.

## Chapter Eighteen

Lucy opened her eyes and looked at her bedroom window. The nearly horizontal sunbeams throwing shadows on the far wall told her that it was late afternoon, probably close to dinner time.

She tested the air for any scent of cooking but detected nothing. Maybe Clark had chickened out and left despite her threat to call his parents. Maybe he was waiting for the sisters to wake up and stumble into the front room before cooking dinner. Or perhaps Lois had awakened early and cajoled him into taking her out.

That would be fine with Lucy. Her sister sure had a soft spot for that Kent guy.

She quietly slipped into the hall and padded to the bathroom. Coming back, she noted that Clark, to her surprise, was sitting on the couch watching TV, but with the sound turned so low she couldn't hear it.

"Clark?" she called. "Is Lois up yet?"

He turned his head but didn't look directly at her. "Not yet. She was still asleep last time I peeked in about three hours ago. Are you going back to bed?"

Her hand muffled a yawn, then pulled itself through her hair. "No. I have a paper due at ten tomorrow morning, and I still have to review it for grammar and clarity. That was going to be today's project, so I'll have to finish it tonight."

"Are you hungry? I can make a quick but tasty dinner."

"Sure. Hey, you didn't happen to bring back any spaghetti, did you?"

"Yes, along with the makings for my mother's special sauce, a garlic loaf, iced tea, and parmesan cheese. And not the kind you shake out of a can, either."

She gave him a lopsided smile. "Sounds great. Give me about five minutes to make myself presentable and I'll come help you."

"If you want to. Or you could check on your sister. She may be ready to wake up now."

Lucy yawned again. "Yeah, you're probably right. You cook and I'll check on Lois."

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Clark frowned at Lucy as she leaned back and patted her stomach. "Are you sure you woke her up?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "Positive. She said she needed to finish a dream and turned over and started snoring very lightly. She'll be fine. Now quit being a worrywart and help me finish this bread. I think it's the best garlic bread I've ever tasted. You've got to teach me how to get this flavor without making it drip grease."

"Thank you." He glanced at his watch, then frowned. "But that will have to be some other time. I really need to get going. I have some errands of my own to take care of." He stood and

gathered the empty dishes in his hands. “I’ll leave the spaghetti and bread on the oven over burners set on low. If Lois doesn’t want to eat, please make sure you turn them off so nothing catches fire.”

She decided to poke him a little and see what leaked out. “Ooh, thanks, Clark. I never would have thought of that.”

He smiled and frowned at her at the same time. “You and Lois are certainly sisters. That sounds like something she’d throw at me.”

“Well, it’s not like you didn’t insult me just a little bit with that crack about the stove. I’m not completely helpless in the kitchen.”

“I know. And I’m sorry. It’s just—” He sighed. “I’m worried about her.”

Lucy rose and followed him into the kitchen. “I am too, but probably for a different reason.”

Clark put the dishes in the sink and said, “What reason might that be?”

She shook her head. “Uh-uh. If you two can’t figure it out on your own, I’m not getting in the middle of it.”

He shook his head and turned to rinse the dishes. “That makes no sense to me, but I suppose you know what you mean.”

“I do. Now you go run your errands and let me finish the dishes. I do know where the dishwasher is.”

Clark grinned and stepped away from the sink. “When I was growing up, my parents had a dishwasher, but its name was Clark and I had to scrub plates and silverware almost every night.”

“Thank goodness for modern conveniences, huh?”

“Absolutely.” He turned to leave the kitchen, then stopped. “Lucy? Thanks for letting me stay. I’m glad you and Lois got some rest.”

She turned and smiled. “No, Clark, thank you. I’m very glad you were here. Lois trusts you, and you’ve more than validated that trust today.” She tapped him on the outside of his shoulder with one balled fist. “Ya done good today, hombre.”

“It’s no less than she’s done for me in the past.”

“That’s good to hear. I like two-way streets in relationships. Reduces head-on collisions.”

He gave her another mega-watt smile. She felt as if he were bathing her with gentle warmth and silken kindness. “Tell Lois I hope she feels better soon,” he said.

“I will. Thanks again, for dinner and for staying today.”

“You’re welcome. Oh, I almost forgot. You have the makings for a great deli selection in the refrigerator. In case either of you gets hungry later.”

“Great. I like a good self-serve deli, especially when I don’t have to pay for it.”

“I left the receipts in a bag taped to the meat tray. I expect your check to be in the mail this week.”

“Rats. You’re quicker than I thought you were.”

She noted that his smile still worked even as he was walking out the door and glancing over his shoulder at her. The guy was really something.

Then he was gone and she felt a wave of sadness at his absence. If Lois doesn’t want him, she thought, maybe he’s available for another Lane sister.

She shook her head. They were both too hung up on each other for her to have any kind of chance with him. She had no shot and she knew it. It was just too bad for them that neither one seemed to see how the other really felt.

She pulled open the refrigerator door and gasped at the selection before her. If she’d known what was in there, maybe spaghetti wouldn’t have been her first choice. She wouldn’t go hungry while writing tonight. Or, she thought, for several days afterward.

Lucy licked her lips and refilled her tea glass. She didn’t know why it tasted so good, she just wanted to sip it again and

delight in the flavor. She figured it was some arcane Kansas brewing technique.

Just as she sat down on the couch and picked up the TV remote, she heard the other bedroom door open. “Hey, Luce,” drawled Lois. “Did I hear Clark just a minute ago?”

“Yep. Sorry, but he just left. He did, however, make some of the best spaghetti, sauce and garlic bread this side of Italy.”

“So — he’s gone?”

“Yes. He was here all day, Sis, and he said he had some errands to run.”

“Terrific,” Lois grumbled. “Just like Clark to not be here when I want him to be.”

“The food he cooked is still here. It’s still warming on the stove if you’re hungry.”

“Thanks,” yawned Lois. “Not what I hoped to wake up to.”

“Actually, it’s warming on the stove whether you’re hungry or not.”

“Huh? Oh, right. Like ‘Hi, I’m your waitress for tonight, and if you want anything my name’s Gertrude.’ ‘Really? What’s your name if we don’t want anything?’ Which declaration is usually followed by a blank stare or a puzzled frown or both.”

Lucy stood and faced her sister. “Wow, you woke up verbose.” She took a closer look at Lois’ garments. “You also woke up R-rated. That top doesn’t cover your boobs very well.” She pointed at Lois’ torso. “You look like an advertisement for an adult film. When did you get changed?”

“Had to go to the bathroom during the day and I just wanted to wear something else. Why?” Lois looked down at her low cleavage line. “Oh. Right. I guess it’s a good thing Clark isn’t here, then. He might have tripped over his gentle Kansas sensibilities.”

Lucy walked around the couch and stood almost in Lois’ face. “What’s with you? This morning you threatened to soak my head if I wasn’t nice to Clark, and now you’re ripping holes in him. What’s going on?”

Lois pulled her thin robe around her chest and sniffed. “Oh, I don’t know! I just know that Clark isn’t here and I really wish he’d stayed around.”

“Well, he did spend over fourteen hours here today. I’m guessing he went grocery shopping for himself before it got too late.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. And I know he was here all day. I just — never mind.” She turned back to her bedroom. “I’m going to get dressed and take a shower and then eat. I just realized how hungry I am.”

“Okay, Sis. You know, I bet Clark would still be here if he thought you’d be expecting to see him when you woke up.”

“He was here when you woke up, though, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, and long enough to cook dinner and eat with me.”

“Then that’s okay. He finished his errand of mercy and now he’s got other places to go, people to see, things to do.”

Lucy reached out and stopped her with a touch. “Sis, you should talk to Clark. I mean, really, really talk to him. You might learn something.”

Lois sighed deeply. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Punky. Let’s just leave it at that, okay?”

Lucy shrugged. “Okay, if that’s how you really feel. That’s your choice. But I think you should move to Florida.”

“Do what?”

She reached up and patted Lois on top of her head. “Move to Florida, Sis. Where it’s sunny and warm almost all the time. Maybe your brain will thaw out and start working again.”

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It was Friday already and Lois was mildly frustrated. Between the media attention and continued interviews with the police, she hadn’t been able to do any serious reporting all week. And because of the continued public scrutiny, she wouldn’t have

been able to patrol as Ultra Woman even if she'd felt up to it. Her powers were coming back, but slowly, and she didn't want to risk a mistake that might cost someone's life.

She was glad that Superman was still available for rescues and other super needs. But because those duties took him away from her presence, her frustration combined with an ineffable sadness she couldn't quite explain to anyone. She understood, of course, that her heart missed his wonderful presence in her life, but there was no way she could tell anyone else that. Especially him. And even though she knew Clark would stand by her no matter what, she wasn't sure just how close to her he wanted to be. The pain from the breakup with Rebecca still showed on his face and in his voice on the few occasions when she did speak with him.

And Asabi's call that morning had added to her frustration. He'd all but demanded — quite politely and gently, of course — that she come to visit him at the LexCorp main office that afternoon after normal business hours. And he'd dodged every attempt she'd made to find out why he wanted to see her.

Resigned to her fate, Lois pushed into the main lobby and found a strange young woman sitting in the chair Rebecca had occupied for so long. "Hello," she said. "I'm Lois Lane. I have an appointment with Mr. Asabi."

The girl smiled almost vacantly back at her. "Oh, sure. He's expecting you. You know which elevator to take, ma'am?"

"Yes. I've been here before."

The girl nodded quickly. "Course you know! You need anything, Ms. Lane, you just call the switchboard and ask for Carly."

"Thank you, Carly." Lois looked around. "Um — where's Rebecca Connors?"

"Becca? She turned in her notice this past Monday, soon as she came in that morning. The HR people told her to clear out her stuff and just go home, that they'd pay her for the two weeks and she didn't have to come back in unless she wanted to 'cept to turn in her security badge when she was ready." Carly shrugged. "She's gonna hang around penguins or something down around the South Pole for a while and work on finishing her doctor degree. Gonna miss that girl. She was lots of fun."

"I agree, she's lots of fun. Excuse me, but I need to go up now."

"Sure! I'll be here when you come back down."

"Oh, you don't have to wait for me, Carly."

"Actually, I do. You won't be able to get out 'less I let you out, so you take your time up there. I'm getting time-and-a-half for staying late, I got some magazines and a little TV and some snacks and a soda machine around the corner, so don't you worry about me. You just get your business done and don't rush on my account."

Lois smiled at her. "Thank you, Carly. That's very kind of you."

Carly tilted her head to one side. "I guess you missed the part about me getting time-and-a-half, huh?"

Lois laughed and strode to the elevator. She kept her smile all the way to the executive floor.

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Asabi leaped up from Lex' desk as Lois walked in. "Miss Lane! I am so very glad you are here. Would you do me a great, great favor and close the door, please? There is something which I must discuss with you, something of massive importance."

"O-kay, shutting the door," Lois replied. "Now what's so massively important that you couldn't tell me about it over the phone?"

"Please, sit down. I trust you are well — in all aspects of your life. Would you like a beverage, or perhaps a fresh pastry? I have discovered that I am permitted to ask the secretary for either of those items for myself or for a guest."

"Uh, no, nothing for me. And yes, I'm feeling more super, compared to how I felt a week ago, but I'm not quite back to what passes for normal with me."

"Good. That is, I am pleased to learn that you are progressing well in your recovery. And I thank you for coming to my — to this office after working hours on a Friday afternoon. The young lady secretary was very kind to stay with me, although she mentioned something about time-and-a-half." He sat down and spoke in a low voice. "Please forgive me if I ask an indelicate question, Miss Lane, but have you had an opportunity to — to deal with the events in Mr. Luthor's penthouse this past weekend?"

Lois frowned. "I sat down with my therapist and talked, if that's what you mean."

"Again, I have no wish to pry, nor to ask questions which you are not comfortable answering. But I hope that you have — not put it behind you, but allowed yourself to — oh, what is the phrase?"

"Move forward?"

"Yes! That is it, exactly. Have you — or, perhaps the better phrasing would be, are you allowing yourself to move forward?"

Lois sighed. "I will miss Lex a great deal, Asabi. His death has left a hole in my life. But I was not in love with him. I told him I would've married him, but that was just — just to comfort a good man as he was dying. If Arianna hadn't shot him, my answer would have been a soft and gentle but definite 'no.'"

"I see. Thank you for sharing such personal information with me. I assure you that I will respect your privacy. No one will learn of this from me."

She smiled slightly. "If I thought you were going to spread it around, I wouldn't have said anything. You have more than earned my trust, my friend."

"Thank you." He rose and paced behind the desk. "I do not ask this out of morbid curiosity. I am truly interested in your well-being — for the obvious personal reasons and for one — one which is more than personal."

Lois rose and caught him in mid-pace. "Asabi. Please. Sit down and relax. You're making me dizzy." He smiled slightly and complied. "Okay, now tell me whatever it is that is of 'massive importance' that you couldn't tell me on the phone and that couldn't wait for Monday morning."

He sighed. "You have not heard the terms of Mr. Luthor's will, have you?"

"No one has. The reading is scheduled for Tuesday morning. Why?"

He sighed again. "There are some — rather surprising terms. Mr. Luthor's attorney contacted me, pursuant to those terms, two days ago. He explained that I was to be informed of certain — aspects of the will prior to its being made public."

Lois frowned in thought. "Well, if you're trying to get me interested, you've succeeded. What terms are you talking about?"

"I must ask you not to reveal this information prematurely. It is has the potential to explode and I do not wish that."

"Potential to — oh, you mean it's explosive? That it might cause trouble for some people?"

"Yes, of course, that is the phrase. Despite having lived in the country for many years, many American colloquialisms continue to evade my grasp. But that is neither here nor somewhere else."

Lois grinned. "Don't worry, I won't spill the beans."

He paused as if considering asking what she meant for a moment, then lifted his hands and gestured at the office. Lex' old office. "Part of the explosive thing which I must share with you is that I have inherited — or, will inherit — twenty percent of Mr. Luthor's estate, including the chairmanship of the Board of Directors of LexCorp Industries."

Lois blinked twice, then smiled a little. "That's wonderful, Asabi. I'm sure you'll do a terrific job, too. It couldn't happen to

a nicer person.”

“Actually, Miss Lane, it not only could happen to a nicer person, it has. Or, it will happen, once the will is read and executed.”

“Oh, really? Who’s the poor schlub who’s — wait, why are you looking at — you can’t mean that I — don’t stare at — will you please say something?”

He stood and bowed, seemingly as serious as a speeding ticket in a school zone. “Congratulations, Miss Lane.”

As he straightened out of the bow, Lois caught the twinkle in his eye as she fell boneless against the side of the desk. “What — you mean — that sneaky — he really — but why—”

Asabi grabbed her hands and guided her back into one of the chairs. “You now — or will, after Tuesday — control approximately forty-five percent of LexCorp Industries. The remaining thirty-five percent is to be ceded to various members of the Board of Directors, but with your forty-five percent combined with my twenty percent, you and I would have complete control over the whole of LexCorp. We can, therefore, guide the company into far greater profitability than before at the expense of our own consciences, sell it off piece by piece to other greedy capitalist bloodsuckers and destroy it while engorging our own wallets, or we can guide it into more honorable dealings with the city, the state, the many businesses which engage in commerce with it, and honor the many people who depend on this company to pay their bills and feed and clothe their families.”

“But — but I don’t know anything about running a company like this! I couldn’t make a profit with a hot dog stand! I don’t know how!”

“You are a brilliant and dedicated woman. You have the capability of learning how.”

“You’re nuts! I’d run it into the ground inside a year!”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. I confess that this was a great shock to me as well. But I do not accept your assertion that you cannot be who Mr. Luthor believed you could become.”

Her hands fluttered in front of her and she shook her head. “No way! I’ll turn it down flat! I won’t accept it!”

“That is your prerogative, of course. But I must inform you that if you decline this inheritance, control of the entire company reverts to the current Board of Directors. I would lose my share as well.”

“What? That’s not fair! They can’t do that to you!”

“It was Mr. Luthor’s wish, Miss Lane. The attorneys have no say in this matter.”

Her mouth worked like a trout out of water for a few seconds, then her eyes cleared. “You’re saying that either you and I both take over the company or we get nothing.”

“Not exactly nothing. There would still be a monetary bequest for each of us, but one far smaller than the value of the respective shares in the company itself.”

“But I can’t turn down my — what, forty percent?”

“Forty-five.”

“Not without costing you your twenty?”

“That is correct.”

“How long would I have to keep it before I can sell it to you? At low monthly installments?”

Asabi threw back his head and laughed. “You are indeed a formidable thinker, Miss Lane. The attorneys are fortunate that you have a journalism degree and not a license to practice law.”

“Thank you. How long?”

“Forty-two months from the time you accept your bequest.”

She shook her head and smiled. “That conniving, sneaky, underhanded rat! He knew I’d hate this. And he probably figured I’d have to accept it to keep you from losing your share.” She stood and slowly ambled around the room. “And he knew that I knew about some of the board members being in Arianna’s

pocket, so this would give me an added incentive to clean up the company. Nice of him to give me three and a half years to do it.”

“I agree with your analysis, Miss Lane. Oh, there is one more stipulation pertaining to you.”

“What’s that?”

“Should you marry while you are heading the company—”

“I know, I know,” she grumbled. “I’ll lose the whole kit and caboodle. I understand, Asabi. You don’t have to tell me.”

He frowned. “The whole kit of — what?”

“It means I’d end up with nothing.”

“Oh. Actually, the opposite is true. Should you choose to marry, there will be no changes in the terms of the bequest. In that, Mr. Luthor was quite specific. The attorneys wanted you to be fully cognizant of this aspect of the bequest also.”

She stopped and stared at Asabi with liquid brown eyes.

“Why — that — that — wonderful, wonderful man. That was very kind of him.” She dabbed at her eyes with her hands and walked toward the desk. “Of course, that’s not likely to come up any time soon. Besides, I’d be too busy with the company to carry on any relationship with any guy.”

“One never knows about such things, Miss Lane. At any rate, it is far too soon to make such a decision. And I do not wish for you to make any decision about the company while considering my circumstances. Please understand that I will accept any decision you make.”

“Yeah, you old softie,” she chuckled. “You just wanted to throw me off-kilter today.”

“I did not wish for you to be caught with your blind side down.”

This time she laughed aloud. “Oh, thank you, Asabi! Don’t worry, I’ll be very convincing when they ‘surprise’ me with my ownership of LexCorp on Tuesday. And I won’t breathe a word of this to anyone before then.”

“I never believed that you would. Now that we have dealt with our business, might I offer you a cup of coffee?”

She laughed again. “Sure. Let’s see if Little Debbie Sunshine out there is really that eager to serve you.”

“I am sorry. I thought the young lady’s name was Vera.”

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The Tuesday evening edition of the *Daily Planet* listed Clark Kent’s byline on the story of Luthor’s bequest. Of course, every other media outlet in the city got the story on the same day since the will became public record once it was read to all the beneficiaries, but the *Daily Planet* was the only news organization with one-on-one interviews with both Asabi and Lois. And they were the only paper with a personal interview with Lex’ attorney, who personally guaranteed that the will was both ironclad and unbreakable.

The chairman of the board of LexCorp, Paul Castle, was quoted in the *Metro Times* as insisting that “this will cannot and will not stand! No judge worth his gavel would allow it to remain as it is. The terms are unconscionable!” Ed Myerson of the *Planet*, however, interviewed New Troy’s senior appellate court justice Benjamin Moskovich, who replied that although he hadn’t officially reviewed the will, he had read it in the court record, and on first reading he saw no basis for disallowing its stock distribution provisions. The learned justice emphasized that his opinion was not a legally binding ruling. Justice Moskovich also declined to speculate on Lois Lane’s suitability or capability to run such a far-reaching company as LexCorp.

The radio and TV talking heads repeated the same bits of information until even they were sick of hearing about it.

LexCorp’s stock price experienced a nine percent overall decline the next trading day, but by the following Friday afternoon the stock had recovered more than half its losses and was trending upward again. The joint announcement from Lois and Asabi that they would continue the direction of the company

Lex had set helped tremendously, and the announcement that Paul Castle would resign from the board rather than contest Asabi for the position bounced the futures price yet again. Castle's replacement as a board member was not immediately announced, but a number of names were floated over the weekend as possible "victims," as the *Gotham Post* characterized the position. That paper and a few other scandal rags predicted the financial demise of Luthor's various businesses within eight months.

Saturday morning, Lois Lane announced that she would regretfully step down from her position at the *Daily Planet* and temporarily assume the co-chairpersonship of the board with Asabi. The announcement assured everyone that business as usual would be conducted from that point on. The announcement also revealed that the corporation would begin a top-down review of all its operations, beginning with the Board of Directors and ending with the administrative and maintenance staff. Every person, every position would be put under the microscope, both to determine the position holder's fitness for that position and to determine if the position itself was necessary. The flurry of managerial resumes sent out via email and regular mail by the following Monday would have made Lex chuckle.

Perry White, editor of the *Daily Planet*, followed every peep in the news about his star reporter. He hadn't been surprised that she'd resigned, and he would have all but insisted she do so if she hadn't made the decision on her own. Now all she needed to do was take care of herself and learn how to do all that funky financial stuff the suits upstairs at the *Planet* took care of for him.

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On Saturday afternoon, just after four thirty, Lois announced to Asabi that she needed a break for the rest of the weekend.

"I understand your frustration, Miss Lane, but we—"

"Asabi, I've told you a dozen times, I want you to call me Lois when we're in private! If you call me Miss Lane there had better be half a dozen reporters or stockholders around."

He smiled. "Of course, Lois. When would you like to return to this mountain of paperwork?"

She stood and threw up her hands. "How about the twelfth of never?"

He smiled wider and nodded. "I sympathize with your vexation, but perhaps a date somewhat closer to the present would be more appropriate."

"Yeah, well, okay. Is Monday morning at nine early enough?"

"As long as we are both on time, I believe it will suffice."

"Good. Because I'm going to visit some friends and decompress."

She snatched up her purse before he could respond and stalked out the office door. She passed Asabi's secretary Vera and nodded to the frazzled young woman without speaking.

She tapped her foot while waiting for the express elevator to the ground floor, knowing that it was one of the fastest in the city and had needed a special waiver from the city inspector to allow it to move so quickly. Her powers, which were close enough to a hundred percent restored so as to make no real difference, would have had her at her destination by the time the door opened. But she couldn't use them openly here any more than she could use them at the Planet.

Drat Clark and his power transfer!

She almost knocked the inner door open before Carly could push the exit button, and she barely restrained herself from punching through the outer door. But that wouldn't have relieved her irritation, and it would have surely revealed her powers to anyone standing too close. And if Ultra Woman was going to have any impact at all going forward, she still needed to safeguard her dual identity.

She hailed a cab and gave the Planet's address. As she did so, she realized that she could have called for a company car and driver to take her anywhere she wanted without paying for it. She

sighed and told herself she'd do that next time.

She spun through the Planet's front door and sprinted up the stairs to the roof, then knelt down and took a deep breath. A quick look around assured her that no one was watching as she leaped into the air and spun into costume on the fly. It was a trick she'd practiced several times, but because it involved her being totally undressed for a few nanoseconds, she hadn't told Clark about it. That was something he didn't need to see. She didn't want him to hurt himself laughing.

Her flight took her halfway across the country to a small farm in central Kansas. As she descended near Clark's Fortress, she reversed her clothing change and landed wearing a sleeveless print shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes. She looked up at the platform above her head and smiled, knowing that in a few moments she'd be sitting up there relaxing in the cool afternoon breeze.

The short walk took her to the Kent's back door, where she knocked four times. Martha's smile as she opened the door enveloped her with warmth and love, just as it always had.

"Lois, dear, come on in! Jonathan is still out fixing fences, so I do hope you'll stay long enough to let him hug you! He was telling me just yesterday how much he missed seeing you around. Here, sit down and let me get you a glass of tea. I just finished mixing it a little while ago."

"Thanks, Martha. I just wanted to let you know I was going to sit up in Clark's Fortress for a while. Ah, you have been keeping up with what's been going on in Metropolis, haven't you?"

Martha set two glasses down on the table and joined her guest. "Of course we have. I think it's wonderful that Mr. Luthor trusted you enough to allow you to take over his companies."

"Well, I didn't really take them over. In fact, I really should be working on more of those papers Asabi has for me." She took a long swig and sighed contentedly. "Ahhh, that's excellent. I just needed some time to sit and breathe and pretend I was just a regular person for a while."

Martha smiled and patted Lois' hand. "You know, Lois, I wondered why you'd leave your job so easily. You seemed to love it so."

"Oh, I do. But Perry and Asabi both pointed out to me that turning down this bequest would allow some of Arianna Carlin's associates to keep doing what they had been doing for years. Lex' companies should have been at least fifteen percent more profitable over the past four years, maybe more. There was no way Nigel St. John was skimming all that money by himself."

"I see. Is that the only reason, Lois?"

She sat back and closed her eyes. "It's the main one. But part of it is that Lex died way too early and didn't have a chance to train me to do this crazy job. Of course, I don't know what he might have done if I'd turned down his proposal like I planned."

Lois noticed Martha's eyes bulge out and she grinned. "I guess Clark didn't tell you that part of it."

Martha sat back and stared at her friend. "No, he didn't. He told us all about Mr. Luthor's murder and how you were almost arrested and how you were going to inherit all that money and stock in the company, but he never mentioned that."

"I see. Then he's not only a very good friend, he's a good and faithful friend. I wouldn't have minded if he'd told you and Jonathan, but I never gave him permission to, so he didn't. And I know that wasn't in any of the news coverage." She ducked her head and smiled again. "Clark is such a great guy."

Martha put her hand on Lois' shoulder. "You should tell him that."

Lois shook her head. "He doesn't need that complication in his life. He's just about over losing Lana but he can't be over losing Rebecca yet and he doesn't need a distracted girlfriend who doesn't even know her own heart." She took another long gulp of tea. "I know you have our best interests at heart, Martha,

but I can't do that to him."

"That's very noble, Lois. I admire a woman with spunk and determination."

Lois frowned slightly. "If I didn't know better, I might think that was just a little bit sarcastic."

Martha stood and patted her arm. "Then it's a good thing you know better, isn't it?" She looked out the window. "It's coming on winter before too much longer and the sun will be down soon. You should take as much time as you need at the Fortress."

"Thank you for the tea." Lois stood and hugged the older woman. "I'll come back around dark and touch base with Jonathan."

Martha held the hug longer than Lois would have expected. "Oh, Lois, you know we all love you, don't you?"

"Well — yes, of course I do."

"Good." Martha patted Lois' back, then released her. "Have a nice contemplation, dear."

### Chapter Nineteen

Jonathan drove the four-wheeled all-terrain vehicle along the fence line, checking for any breaks or weak points he'd missed before. "This part of the fence look good to you, Clark?" he called behind him.

"It wouldn't hurt to replace the posts," Clark called back from his perch on the back of the ATV, "but I wouldn't do it unless you don't have anything else to do. They should last another year, at least."

Jonathan laughed. "There's no such thing as downtime on a farm, son. You know that."

"I do. And if you'll park the ATV, I'll put away the tools and spare supplies. I'm ready for some of Mom's apple pie."

"I'm glad you were here to help me. Would've taken me another three hours if I'd been out there alone the whole time."

"Many hands make light work," Clark quoted.

"And super hands make it even lighter."

They shared a chortle as Jonathan steered the ATV into the barn and switched off the motor. Clark jumped down from the back and unhooked the small trailer while his father drew the tarpaulin over the ATV, then both of them stowed the tools in their proper places. Jonathan clapped his hand on his son's shoulder and smiled. "Let's go get some of the best cooking in the state of Kansas."

"I'm ready for it," Clark grinned back.

As Jonathan opened the back door, he smiled at his wife. "Martha, look what the cat dragged in."

He stepped aside to reveal their son. Martha looked startled for a moment, then did something neither man expected.

She broke out in gales of uncontrolled laughter.

Father and son gazed at the unexpected apparition for several long moments before Jonathan leaned over to Clark and whispered, "Son, are my pants unzipped?"

"No. How about mine?"

"No."

"Then what's so funny?"

"She's your mother. You ask her."

"I'm not sure it's safe."

Martha apparently heard the last part of their exchange and clapped her hands twice, then walked over to Clark and put her hands on his shoulders. "You need — ha-ha-ha — you need to go and — ho-ho-ho — go sit in your Fortress — he-he-he — for two minutes — ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Uh, Mom? Are you okay?"

Martha got herself under enough control to smile at her son. "I'd tell you why, but I promised I wouldn't. Besides, you're both too hard-headed!"

"Hey, wait a minute!" Jonathan protested. "What did I do?"

His wife stepped into his enveloping embrace and shook with laughter once again. "Nothing, dear, nothing at all! I wasn't

talking about you!"

Jonathan and Clark exchanged a questioning look, but since neither of them had any answers for the other, Clark shrugged his shoulders and took a step toward the back door. "I assume that I will receive some kind of wisdom while I'm there?"

Martha jerked out of her husband's arms and pointed her right index finger at Clark's face. "Promise me you'll stay there for at least two minutes."

"Why two minutes?"

"I can't tell you! But you have to promise me!"

Clark appeared to think about it for a moment, then nodded. "Okay. A minimum of two whole minutes, not one second less."

"Good. Now go before you lose your light!"

"Mom, I can see in the dark like—"

"Go!"

Without another word — but with concern for his mother's mental state scribbled all over his visage — Clark spun and opened the door.

Martha pulled back the curtain and looked out the door. Jonathan bent down close to her and whispered, "Is he gone?"

Martha all but jumped up and down in place. "Yes. Yes! Oh, yes! And Jonathan, just you wait till he comes back!"

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As he walked across the field to his Fortress of Solitude, Clark tried to figure out what his mother might have intended by extracting that promise. Was she making something special for him for dinner? No, she hadn't known he was on the farm today, and two minutes at the Fortress plus the time he spent walking in-between wasn't enough to whip up anything. Had she planned to surprise him with some present and had decided on the spur of the moment to give it to him today? Possibly, but he couldn't link the Fortress to anything she might have planned at the house.

He decided to climb the wooden ladder instead of floating up to the platform. Was there something hidden up there, something she planned to surprise him with? Also possible, but what could she hide up here that would be safe from animals and the weather that he—

"Clark?"

He froze in place, his head and shoulders barely above the level of the platform. He looked in the direction of the unexpected voice. "Lois?"

Together, they said, "What are you doing here?"

She laughed and waved at him to continue. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you were in Smallville." She rolled to a crouch and made as if she were about to take off. "I'll get out of your way."

"No! I mean, that's not necessary. I'm just here because my mother told me to come here."

"What?" Lois frowned. "She let me come up here knowing you were home?"

"No. I mean, she didn't know I was here until I walked in the house with my dad. We were repairing fence line on the west side."

"Oh." Lois' frown faded. "I see. In that case, just let me get out of your way so you—"

"My mom made me come here."

"What?"

He finally pulled himself onto the platform and sat on a crate near the ladder. "She made me promise to come out here and spend a minimum of two minutes before I went back to the house."

Lois' frown returned. "What for?"

Clark shrugged. "She wouldn't tell me. All I do know is that she was laughing her head off when she did it."

A smile slowly replaced Lois' frown. "Oh, I see. I'm pretty sure she sent you out here so we could talk."

"Well, yeah, I guess so. Or we can sit up here and stare at each other for another ninety-six seconds."

She stood up and sighed. “Not that looking at you is all that stressful an activity for me, Clark, I doubt that’s what she wanted us to do.”

“I don’t know what she expected, Lois. But since we’re here, and since there’s no one else around, I’m sure there’s something you’d like to talk about.”

“All right. What’s the subject?”

“Um — the weather? It’s been a bit warm this fall, don’t you think? Not too much, and not enough to hurt the harvest—”

She crossed her arms. “Not the weather, Clark.”

He nodded. “Okay. How about, uh, how you and Asabi are getting along at the office?”

“We’re getting along fine and that can’t be it either.”

He bit his lip and stood. “Fine. I think she wanted us to talk about our — our shared losses.”

Lois’ arms dropped to her sides and she turned away from him. “That’s — I already have a therapist. But thanks.”

He nodded again, then realized she couldn’t see behind her head any more than he could. “I know. Maybe she wanted me to talk to you about that guy in your therapy group.”

She turned halfway and gave him a stunned look. “Who?”

“That guy in your group?”

“What guy in what group?”

“The guy you were talking about the other day.”

She took a step toward him and gave him a puzzled frown. “What other day?”

“When you told Lucy and me that you — that Lex wasn’t the guy for you.”

“He wasn’t. But what does that have to do with my therapy group?”

Surely that relationship hadn’t vanished already! “Oh, Lois, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“What didn’t you know?”

“That you and the guy in your therapy group had broken up.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” she snapped. “Will you please make some sense? What guy in what therapy group?”

He lifted his hands in confusion. “The guy you said you loved instead of Lex. I knew it wasn’t anybody at work, so I figured it had to be someone I hadn’t met. I’m sure he’s a wonderful person or you wouldn’t — feel that way about him.”

He took a step back because Lois was leaning closer and looking a little scary. Very slowly she enunciated, “Who told you I was in love with someone in a therapy group?”

“You did!”

“I never!”

“You did! You sat at your dining table and told me and Lucy that you lied to Lex about wanting to marry him because you were in love with someone else!”

“And you got ‘therapy group guy’ from that?” she snarled.

“Who else could it be?”

“It’s you, you big lunkhead!”

Clark could almost feel his brain grind to a halt and his body lock up like the Tin Man before Dorothy squirted him with oil. This wasn’t just the last thing he’d expected, it was the last thing on a list of infinite possibilities. Lois loved him? Could she have actually said that?

During the moment he stood rooted to the platform, Lois’ face paled and she gasped. She turned and stumbled to the edge of the platform and jumped off, then rocketed almost straight up.

Clark knew that even if he could catch her, he couldn’t force her to listen to anything he might say.

So he sent it.

-\* Lois, please come back. \*-

-\* No! \*-

-\* Please? I have something very important to tell you. \*-

-\* Oh, Clark, I swore I’d never say that to you! I’m so sorry! I never wanted to put any pressure on you or try to force you into

anything or complicate your life or get in your way and now I’ve gone and done exactly what I didn’t want to do! Please forgive me! \*-

-\* There’s nothing to forgive. Please come back. \*-

-\* No! You’ll be reasonable and nice and forgiving and you’ll tell me how much I mean to you as a friend and how much you value our teamwork both in the office and in the field and I don’t think I could take that! \*-

Amazing, he thought to himself. Even speaking mentally, she could put out the babble like no one else in the world. \*- I promise you, Lois, that’s not what I want to say. \*-

-\* Then just send it to me! Please, Clark, I’m mortified! \*-

-\* You shouldn’t be. And I want to say this to your face. \*-

-\* No! My face couldn’t take it either! \*-

He sighed. \*- Okay. Do you remember what Bob told us about the link? \*-

-\* He told us a lot of things and at the moment I’m not in the right frame of mind to list them in any kind of order. \*-

-\* He said we couldn’t lie to each other over the link. Remember that part? \*-

-\* Of course I do. That’s why I haven’t been leaving it open because I was trying to avoid this whole conversation. \*-

-\* Then remember that now. \*- He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then sent, \*- I love you, Lois. \*-

Nothing.

He could tell the link was open, but she wasn’t sending to him. \*- Lois? \*-

He waited for a moment, then — there! He felt something. He couldn’t tell just what it was, but he knew he’d felt it.

He looked up into the sky and saw a tiny speck quickly grow into a woman’s shape. A beautiful woman’s shape, he thought.

A heartbeat later, Lois stood in front of him, breathing deeply, her clothes and hair and skin speckled with frost. She’d really gained some altitude in a hurry, he mused.

But it wasn’t her strength or speed that came across to him at that moment.

Despite her strength, despite her speed, despite her other powers, she reminded him of a piece of ancient pottery he’d seen years before in a Middle Eastern museum. It was a carafe with a long fluted spout which had lost part of its handle. The display case was made of thick Plexiglas mounted on an earthquake-resistant base. The interior was a total vacuum to prevent the piece from shattering due to temperature changes or oxidation due to exposure to atmosphere. The room was darkened, and visitors had to wear infrared lenses to see the pottery so that the light wouldn’t fade the markings on it. The guide told the visitors that it was the most fragile piece in the entire complex, and a person could damage it just by breathing on it.

Compared to Lois at that moment, that pottery shard would have appeared as permanent as a mountain and solid as a battleship.

She took a trembling step forward and lifted her hand. “You’d better not be kidding me, Kent, or I’ll find a way to hurt you.”

He stepped closer and touched her raised right hand with his left. With his other hand, he wiped away the melting fragments of tears from her cheeks. “I’m not kidding you, Lois. I love you.”

He thought she was going to grab him around the neck, but she stopped herself. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Because you were dating another guy and I didn’t want to break that up. You and Lex seemed to get along so well, it would have been — I don’t know, unethical or something for me to try to horn in on what you two had going for you.”

She nodded. “How long have you felt this way about me?”

He frowned slightly. “What’s with the third degree? Don’t you believe me?”

Her voice wavered and cracked. “Please, Clark. I — I need to

know.”

He nodded. “Okay. I guess, well, it must have been about the time you and he got back together after you had that big fight and he broke up with you. He was a total dummy about that, by the way.”

One side of her mouth quirked as if she were holding back a smile. “That far back, huh? Even before the boat trip on the *Miss Emily*?”

“Yep.”

She took a shallow breath. “Do you remember our last conversation up here, the one we had right here on this platform? Right after that terrible day with the home invaders?”

His voice softened. “I remember.”

“I almost told you I loved you that day, Clark. I was leaning back in your arms and you felt so very good and so very natural and so very right that I almost told you then but I was afraid to because I didn’t think you felt anything for me but friendship.”

He laughed and shook his head. “I almost told you that day, too. I was close — closer than we are now — to saying those three wonderful words but I didn’t. I was afraid of damaging our friendship too.”

“Just — I need to ask one more question.”

He nodded. “Anything.”

“Do you — does this have anything to do with Lana?”

He blinked with surprise. “Lana? No. Of all the questions you might have asked me, that one wasn’t on my radar.”

“So you don’t — you aren’t just making it easy for me to take care of you? Like Lana asked me to?”

He thought for a moment, then smiled. “You know, I’d completely forgotten you told me that. No, I’m not trying to make things ‘easy’ for you! Lana has nothing to do with—” He paused. “Please tell me that your feelings aren’t tied up with Lana asking you to take care of me.”

She almost smiled. “No. If all I was doing was taking care of you, I would have gone to Rebecca to try to fix whatever went wrong between you.” The smile won out. “And I’m not about to do that.”

He sighed with relief. “Good. I don’t want you to do that. Not ever.”

She laughed and sobbed and put her head on his chest and wrapped her arms around him. “So where do we go from here? You’re still working at the *Planet* and I’m a sudden multi-millionaire who can’t remember that I don’t have to call a cab.”

“You don’t what?”

“Never mind, I’ll explain it later. But what do we do now?”

He squeezed her against his wide chest and chuckled. “I need to go back to the house.”

She pulled her head back and looked up at him. “What?”

“My two minutes are up.”

She loosened her grip. “Clark, I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“I need to go back to the house and have dinner with my folks.” He bent down and kissed her on the forehead. “And I’d like for you to go back with me. I think my mother has some gloating to do.”

She smiled and embraced him again. “Oh! I thought — I don’t know what I thought!” She laughed into his shirt. “I know your mother wants to gloat at me. She’s been telling me to have this talk with you for months.”

“Really? Well, your sister all but read me the riot act that Sunday I was there because I wouldn’t talk to you.”

She laughed. “How come they knew and we didn’t?”

He shook his head and smiled. “Maybe because we’re not as smart as they are?”

Lois laughed again, this time with Clark. She picked him up and swirled him around, then they both levitated and kissed.

It was a soft kiss but a long one. And it didn’t end until Lois

bumped her head on a tree limb.

They laughed together again. “Guess I still need a couple of flying lessons, huh?”

He shook his head. “I think you’re just fine the way you are.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Well, with one possible exception.”

Her eyes sparkled, reflecting the sun hanging low in the western sky. “And what might that exception be, Mr. Kent?”

“Your marital status.” He knelt in mid-air and took her hands in his. “Lois Lane, will you marry me?”

She floated down until her face was level with his. “Yes, Clark Kent, I will marry you.”

“Ha!” he blurted out. “Thank you! I love you!”

He kissed her again, but this one was interrupted by their laughter. But neither one seemed to care.

“Oh, Clark! I feel so — I can’t tell you how I feel! It’s like I was carrying a burden as big as the moon that I didn’t know I had but now it’s gone and I could fly to Jupiter and back without any extra air!”

“I know. I feel the same way.” He guided them back to the platform. “You know, Rebecca’s the one who broke up with me.”

“Really? But why? I know how she felt about you.”

He sighed. “We went to that new water park on the other side of Hobbs Bay a couple of weeks ago, and after she changed her clothes and dried her hair she came out of my bathroom and asked me to marry her.”

Lois put the palms of her hands on Clark’s chest and seemed to pull him to her. “What did you say?”

“I didn’t shout for joy and yell ‘Yes!’ so she told me we shouldn’t ever get married because I didn’t love her enough and she really didn’t love me enough either.”

“And you left it at that?”

“I wrote her a letter telling her how sorry I was that it ended the way it did, and that I hoped she would be successful in the Antarctic. She wrote back—”

“Whoa.” Lois waved one hand from side to side. “Wait a minute. Go back a little and explain that part about the Antarctic.”

“Sorry, I forgot you might not know. She’s joining an expedition near the South Pole to study penguins for at least a year, maybe longer. The work she’ll do will count toward her doctorate, and the papers she’ll publish will put her on the academic map.”

“Of course. That’s what Carly meant.” Lois paused, then said, “I’m guessing she made these plans without consulting you. Am I right?”

He sighed. “You are. That was one of the things that convinced her that we shouldn’t be together. She would always put her career first, and she knew I wanted a wife who would make me the most important person in her life. I think she’s is a very nice person, but Rebecca Connors is always going to be the most important person in Rebecca Connors’s life.”

She kissed him gently. “I’m sorry, Clark. That had to hurt.”

“No, not really. It was as much a relief as it was anything else. I just — I never really wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. But I felt responsible for her getting shot and I wanted her to be as happy as I could make her.”

She smiled. “You are such a Boy Scout. You know you won’t be responsible for making me happy, don’t you?”

That surprised him. “I won’t? Are you sure about that?”

“I’m sure. I’ve learned that my happiness is my responsibility. But if we’re going to be married—”

“And we are!”

“Glad to know you haven’t changed your mind in the last three minutes. Anyway, when we’re married, you’ll be responsible for loving me and supporting me and being faithful to your family, but you can’t be responsible for making me happy.



That's my job and you can't do it, any more than I can make you happy."

He narrowed his eyes. "Not sure I grasp the concept."

She took two steps back. "Are you just the tiniest bit less happy than you were ten seconds ago? I am. But you can't spend every second of every day fulfilling every momentary whim or desire I might whip up. Even you have to sleep some time. And there will be times when your needs and desires will be more important than mine. On top of that, sometimes your duties will take you away from me, just like my duties will take me away from you. All you can do — all you're supposed to do — is make me the most important person in your life as long as we both live." She blew him a kiss. "If you do that, you'll never make me unhappy. I make that promise to you here and now."

He nodded slowly. "I think I see what you mean. I may have to have Dr. Friskin explain it to me again, though."

"I won't mind. She'll do a better job than I can anyway." She returned to her previous position inside his personal space. "Now, Mr. Kent, don't we have some parents to talk to?"

"Yours or mine?"

Her eyes bulged. "Oh, no! My parents! When will we tell them? What will we say?"

He grinned. "How about we tell them after we tell my parents?"

Her face relaxed. "I hope your dad is as enthusiastic about me as your mom will be."

He wrapped her in his arms again. "Don't worry. My dad thinks very highly of you nowadays."

"I hope he still thinks so highly of me when we tell him I want to marry his son."

"He will, Lois. I promise." He picked her up and held her close. "I'm still going to try to make your life as pleasant as I can, even if I can't make you happy."

She laughed. "Oh, Clark, you still don't understand. I can't make you responsible for my happiness, but I do expect you to try very hard." She kissed him again. "I know I'm going to try hard to make you happy."

He thought his smile might split his face. "Too late. You already have."

"Me too. You know, we will have to sit down and talk about our future before too much longer."

"That's true," he said. "What do you think will happen?"

"You mean after we talk?"

He brushed her cheek again with his thumb, then kissed it. "Yes. After that."

"It will take some time to work out the timing and logistics of a wedding," she said slowly, "but I think that I will give you my heart — to keep — forever and ever."

He moved back and took both of her hands in his. "That's a huge responsibility."

"I know. But I also know that you're up to it." She kissed his hands. "Just like I know that you love me."

-\* I do love you, \*- he sent.

-\* And we will love each other for a long, long time. \*-

He didn't have to answer. He knew she was right.

Epilogue

"Tango Whiskey Zulu seven-three-seven base calling Remote Two. Over."

Raoul picked up the mic in the snow tractor's cab, then winked playfully at his companion and titular boss. "Cut out the fancy radio chatter, Sergei! We're the only ones on this frequency and you know it."

"Base is merely observing proper communications protocol, Remote Two. Over."

"Sergei, would you think back over the eight months we've been on station here and tell me when was the last time you heard anyone else on this frequency?"

"Um... never, actually."

"So if you want to talk to me, just pick up the microphone and call me by name, okay?"

"As you wish, smart pants."

Rebecca's amused snort didn't deflect Raoul's attention from their verbal sparring. "The term is 'smarty pants' and I'm not one. And just so you'll quit mangling your English, Rebecca and I are about a mile or so from base. How's the weather in your neck of the woods?"

"There are no woods in Antarctica, oh great white wizard Gandalf."

"Sergei, I've told you a hundred times not—"

"My sincere apologies, my dangerous friend Raoul. Be that as it may, there are still no woods on this entire continent."

"Fine! How's the weather in your neck of the ice shelf?"

"It is cold."

Raoul rolled his eyes and sighed. Before he could compose a scathing retort, Rebecca reached for the microphone and took it. "Sergei, this is Dr. Connors. Please give us a report on the current meteorological conditions at your location and the immediate forecast. And use the units you'd use if you were a meteorologist in Kansas."

Sergei's voice turned more formal. "Of course, Dr. Connors. The current temperature here is twenty-seven degrees Fahrenheit and trending downward to a predicted low of eleven degrees below zero by local midnight. The wind is fairly steady at an average of thirty-two miles per hour with occasional gusts reaching fifty-one miles per hour. Sundown is scheduled for nine seventeen this evening, which is one hour and thirty-one minutes from now. Be advised that there is a severe storm predicted to begin tonight and which is forecast to persist well into tomorrow. Details are posted on the whiteboard in the common area."

"Thank you, Sergei." She released the mic button, again grateful that the man didn't care that she hadn't quite received her official doctorate yet. "What's our ETA, Raoul?"

He glanced at the instruments and peered ahead into the white gloom. "Assuming we don't find any new cracks or holes in the ice, we should be back in the relative warmth of the shelter in ten minutes or so."

"Good." She thumbed the mic again. "Remote Two on course, estimated arrival at the shelter garage in no more than ten minutes."

"We copy your message, Remote Two. The hearth fire is lit and the brandy is exhaling on the mantle."

Raoul shook his head and took back the mic. "The brandy is breathing, Sergei, not exhaling, and I'm not even sure it should be doing that."

"Then I will perform mouth-to-glass resuscitation on it as soon as I complete this pointless and time-consuming radio call."

Raoul and Rebecca shared a laugh as he keyed the mic again. "I'll let you go — wait, did the supply chopper make it in today?"

"Yes," Sergei replied. "They have restocked our larder and provided fresh cleaning supplies, toothpaste, a number of new toothbrushes, a container of movies to replace the ones they took back with them, a few specialty food items, and a case of Raoul's favorite bath soap. And before you ask, I will also tell you that they sent us reading material in the form of news and sports magazines, a number of professional journals for those few among us who can comprehend words of more than three syllables, and an outsized bound stack of newspapers."

Rebecca took the mic again. "Sergei? Can you tell what newspapers are in the stack?"

"I will look." For several long moments, the only sounds came from the whine of the wind, the rumble of the tracks against the ice, and Raoul shifting gears once to traverse a small ice ridge. Then Sergei's voice returned. "It appears that most of them are issues of the *Daily Planet*, of Metropolis, New Troy. Mixed in

with those are a few from the *London Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and at least one from the *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, of all places.”

“Thanks, Sergei. Just to whet my appetite, what’s the lead story on the top paper in the stack?”

Another moment passed. “According to the *Daily Planet*, dated nine days ago, it appears that a Mr. Clark Kent and a Ms. Lois Lane have married. Without reading the accompanying article, I cannot tell you why this event merits being on the front page of the newspaper.”

Rebecca and Raoul exchanged knowing looks. He took the microphone from her slack hand. “Roger, base. Remote Two out.”

He hung up the mic and drove in silence for a moment.

“Becca?” he finally ventured. “Are you okay with this?”

She took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes. At least, I think I am.”

He waited another few moments. “Any regrets?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. A few, I guess.”

“Then again, too few to mention, right?”

She turned sad but dry eyes to him. “Do you want me to break into Sinatra’s ‘My Way’ right here in the tractor?”

Raoul chuckled. “No, let’s save it for karaoke night. I just wanted to know if this was going to make you miss the Monopoly tournament tonight. The Dangerous Boys — that’s me and Harry Potter, aka Philip Knowles — are going to kick yours and Laurie’s butts all over the board.”

“The Dangerous Boys against the Dangerous Girls. It’ll be an epic struggle.”

“An epic massacre, more likely.”

She lifted an eyebrow at him. “Them’s fightin’ words, hombre.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he drawled. “But I ain’t no pilgrim, see? I can handle a shootin’ iron or a Community Chest card with anyone on this continent.”

Rebecca snorted a laugh. “I hope the supply chopper brought some movies that aren’t bad Westerns. We could all use a dash of Marx Brothers or even some sloppy romance.”

“Speak for yourself, little lady. I always get a kick out o’ the hero savin’ the girl and kissin’ his horse just before galloping off into the sunset at the end.”

“At the end or on the end?”

“As long as it’s a horse, who cares?”

She shook her head in mock exasperation. “Even after all these years, I still don’t understand you sometimes.”

“It’s a guy thing, Becca. You’re not supposed to understand.” The tractor slowed to the left around a huge ice boulder. “There’s the shelter. Ah, home sweet home.”

She sighed. “About time. I’m getting hungry.”

“Well, that’s a good sign. They tell me that women who pine over lost loves don’t eat very well.”

She slapped him on the arm, an assault made completely ineffective by the amount of insulated clothing both were wearing. “Smart panties.”

He gave her a mock glare. “Oh, no, don’t do that! Sometimes I think Sergei mangles his English on purpose just to hear you quote it back to him.”

“Maybe he does. But I’m still hungry.”

Raoul maneuvered the tractor past the enclosed snow shed and into the garage and honked the horn. A face appeared in the window at the far end of the structure and waved, then the overhead lights came on and the outside door began sliding down. Rebecca picked up her data storage module and unlocked the cabin door as Raoul shut down the tractor’s motor.

Laurie Culpepper, the expedition’s mechanical genius, leaned her head into the garage. “Hey, guys, how’d she run?”

Rebecca jumped to the metal garage floor with practiced

ease. “Pretty well. The transmission seemed fine when I drove it, and Raoul didn’t complain. But now there’s a funny noise in the right track, a loose link, I think. You can take a look at it first thing tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” queried Laurie. “Why not tonight?”

Raoul stepped out, secured the cab door, and leaped down behind Rebecca. “Because you’ll miss the Monopoly tournament, that’s why.”

Rebecca added, “And because Sergei says there’s a storm coming in tonight. We’re probably going to be socked in for a couple of days, so unless the storm breaks early we’re going to spend the time analyzing the new data we’ve collected and reading the material the chopper brought in. There’s not that much more for eight people to do when we’re weather-locked into a shelter not that far north of absolute South.”

“The rest of them can always watch the women clobber the men at Monopoly,” responded Laurie. “That should me leave plenty of time to figure out what this thumb-fingered monkey broke on my tractor.”

“The problem with the track isn’t too serious, Laurie. It probably won’t take you an hour to fix it, even if you have to change out one of the links.”

“I’m glad you have such a high opinion of my skill level, Raoul.” Laurie put a gloved hand on the offending track as if reassuring the vehicle that she wasn’t angry with it. “I don’t suppose you can tell me which link it is, can you?”

Raoul lifted his head in mock aggravation. “Do I have to do all your work for you? All I can tell is that it’s on the right-hand track and that it only happened when half of the track was on the ground.”

“Which half?”

“The half with the bad link, of course.”

Laurie crossed her arms and leaned against the tractor. “Boy, I’m sure glad I didn’t take the offer to maintain boats and scuba gear for that expedition off the Bahamas. I’m sure I would’ve gotten bored with all that sun and warmth and intelligent conversation.”

“Like you’d know an intelligent conversation if it licked you on the nose.”

“I know what dumb sounds like. You’re so apt in demonstrating it.”

Rebecca left them tossing friendly barbs at each other and headed to her quarters. After she changed into lighter clothing and took care of the physical necessities, she went to the common room and found the bound stack of newspapers untouched.

Her knife made quick work of the cords securing the papers and she picked up the issue on top. The photo on the front page showed a very handsome Clark Kent in a very modern tuxedo and a beautiful Lois Lane in a white wedding dress smiling at each other as they left a church building. The photo included a number of other people in the background. Rebecca picked out Jimmy Olsen, himself quite elegant in a tux, standing beside a short, attractive black woman with a narrow waist and shoulders like a linebacker. She thought she recognized Lois’ sister Lucy dressed as the maid of honor, too. And she spotted Clark’s parents at the top of the steps to the church, arm in arm and glowing with two of the brightest smiles in the shot. She could only assume that the older couple stepping down in front of them were Lois’ parents.

She didn’t recognize the rest of the faces in the picture, guessing that they were probably there for social or professional reasons. She mused that the value of their combined wardrobe might have funded her current expedition for half a year. But there was no reason to complain. Digger Enterprises, the company started by the late Lana Lang-Kent to funnel money to scientific endeavors, was footing half the bill for their twelve-month sojourn at the bottom of the world. Clark didn’t know that

she knew he was the one who'd made the decision to release the funds, and she renewed her decision not to tell him. She didn't want him to think that she believed that he would be playing favorites.

She lifted the paper again and looked closer. They look great, she thought. And they look like they're really in love.

Rebecca thought about Raoul's question. Did she have any regrets? Did she believe that not marrying Clark was a huge mistake? She could have been Superman's wife, yet she'd walked away from that opportunity to finish her doctorate and kick-start what she believed would be a brilliant career as a world-renowned marine biologist.

She thought about it for several moments, then decided about her regrets. She regretted leading Clark on. She regretted not breaking off the relationship sooner. She regretted hanging on to the fantasy of having Superman at her beck and call.

And she regretted being so committed to her career that she didn't think she had the time to marry any man for love.

She sighed and folded the paper under her arm, then set off for her quarters to hide it under her pillow. They wouldn't miss one newspaper when there were dozens more to read. And she'd bring it back tomorrow. Raoul — also known as Gandalf of the Dangerous Boys — would understand. Philip — also known as Harry Potter — had some idea of her relationship with Clark, and Raoul would further explain it to him if necessary.

And how did she feel about Lois, the woman who'd married the super man Rebecca had given up?

After a long moment of contemplation, she decided that she was happy for Lois. After Mr. Luthor was killed by his ex-wife — the woman who'd sent the man who'd almost killed them on that boat — Rebecca had been afraid that Lois would blame herself. But she hadn't, or at least she had come to terms with her part in his death. And now, it seemed, she'd finally found real love.

Rebecca began composing her congratulatory letter in her head. She'd apologize for not writing sooner and hope they understood that Antarctica didn't have any good gossip periodicals. She'd tell them both how happy she was for them, how much she hoped that they'd have a good life together, and how she hoped that she could meet their kids someday. She didn't have to tell them that she owed her life to them. They knew it, but they never acted as if it was important or that she owed them anything.

Of course, she did owe them, and it was very important to her. It was just as important to her as her continued friendship with each of them, even more important than Clark's financial support of the expedition, and by extension, her continued professional success.

She looked as deeply into her heart as she dared and decided that yes, she really was glad that Clark and Lois were husband and wife. They truly deserved each other. They had overcome shared tragedies and heartaches to become fast friends, and now they had extended their love beyond that point. And she knew she could never have been the wife Clark deserved. She was too wedded to her career. It was fitting that he marry Lois, in more ways than one.

She sighed as she closed the door to her quarters. If she didn't make it to dinner, Raoul would make some excuse for her. Tonight she wanted — no, she needed — to spend some time alone. And some of that time would be spent reading about the very newsworthy wedding of Clark Kent and Lois Lane.

The sense of loss she'd felt when she'd walked out of Clark's apartment for the last time came back, but not as powerfully as she'd expected. Maybe she really did believe what she was telling herself.

Even if she didn't truly believe it, she knew that she wished only happiness for Clark Kent and Lois Lane-Kent. The author of

the piece obviously didn't know about Clark's comparatively modest wealth, but he'd nailed Lois' economic status. She and Mr. Asabi were the joint heirs of Mr. Luthor's wealth, and they were busily cleaning up the Luthor empire. Apparently that task was what had delayed the couple's wedding for over half a year, else they would have married about the time Rebecca had left for Antarctica.

A sudden tear surprised her. It wasn't envy, she decided as she wiped it away, nor was it sadness for her own loss. It was a tear of melancholy happiness for two of her best friends, for the joy that they felt that she might never experience.

Then again, neither of them could cajole a male emperor penguin to let them examine the egg his mate had entrusted to his care. And she was sure neither of them had watched a solitary penguin outwit a hungry leopard seal. She had done both of those things a number of times, had indeed done many more such things, and the thought gave her a warm sense of accomplishment.

The strains of Bonnie Raitt's *Greatest Hits* wafted along the corridor. She wondered if Raoul knew the association she'd make with a couple of those songs, then decided that it didn't matter. Her life was fine, Clark's life was wonderful, and Lois' life was fantastic. Life in general was as it should be.

Hunger made its existence known to her once again and begged to be taken seriously. She folded the paper and slid it under her pillow. The she stood and stretched. It was almost time for supper, and she hoped that Laurie wasn't cooking again. As brilliant as she was with machinery, she was equally inept in food preparation. Philip was by far the best cook in the outfit, although Rebecca herself was no slouch.

But it didn't matter. Tonight, Rebecca would eat whatever was placed before her. And she'd enjoy the time with her friends and coworkers, do her best to clean the boys' clocks in the Monopoly tournament, and then go to bed and sleep the sleep of the exhausted. Tomorrow — well, tomorrow she'd go back to work.

It was a good life, one that was all hers. And it would be enough.

THE END

"I Can't Make You Love Me" © 1991 by Mike Reid and Allan Shamblin — recorded by Bonnie Raitt on the album *Luck of the Draw*

See it here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nW9Cu6GYqxo>