

HEROES INCORPORATED

By

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Chapter One

Wednesday, 10:47 p.m.

Three days, one hour, thirteen minutes, and counting...

Oh, man. It was his lucky day. An original 1951 Action Comics #158, The Kid from Krypton, shimmered before his eyes, thirteen minutes from closing on eBay.

Yes! Clark Kendall raised both arms in a two-fisted salute to the superhero gods. He'd lusted after this particular Superman comic book for ages. Now it was as good as his.

He typed in his bid the old-fashioned way. On his laptop keyboard. It launched into cyberspace just as the telephone shrilled.

He snagged the receiver. "Heroes Incorporated. Yeah, we deliver. Go ahead."

He shifted the phone to one shoulder as he watched the eBay screen refresh. "One roast beef hero sandwich, no onions. One Italian hero, hold the mayo. Drinks with that? Two Cokes. Your address? Right. Got it. Twenty minutes."

He cut the connection, wondering how long it would be before the hungry customers figured out their

dinner wasn't coming. Amazing. Even with absolutely no advertising, the fake New York-style sub shop four levels above his head still managed to attract business. Almost made him want to open a strip mall take-out restaurant in Newark, New Jersey for real.

Almost, but not quite.

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and squinted at the laptop screen. Damn. Someone had topped his bid. He typed in a counteroffer and sent it scurrying across the broadband connection.

"Hey, Clark."

He swiveled his desk chair toward the door, swallowing hard. Diana Price had come looking for him? More luck. That only happened in his dreams.

He watched as the shapely Amazonian princess sashayed into the Heroes Incorporated control room, forty-four-and-a-half double D's all but exploding out of her skimpy costume. When she leaned over the back of his chair and brushed her chest against his shoulders, he nearly passed out.

"What are you doing?" she asked, peering at the computer screen.

Trying desperately to breathe, Clark thought, but masculine pride prevented him from cluing Diana in on that little bit of information.

"I'm on eBay," he told her. "I put in a bid on a Superman comic book."

"Think you'll get it?"

He craned his neck to get a better look at her boobs without being too obvious. Did he think he'd get it? God, he hoped so.

"Clark? You okay?"

He gave himself a mental shake. "Yeah, fine. Listen," he said, forcing a casual tone. "My shift's almost done. You want to go out for a drink afterward?"

Diana's red lips quirked knowingly at him. Too knowingly. He knew he was toast even before she started laughing.

"I can't." She presented him a smile reserved for children, puppies, and guys who were about to get the shaft. "I've got a date with Bruce."

Clark's fist closed on his mouse so tightly it was a wonder the thing didn't let out a squeal. Bruce Wynn, superhero. Scratch that. Superjerk.

"He's just using you for the sex, you know."

Diana only laughed. "That's what makes it fun." She gave him a little hug. "Aw, Clark, are you jealous? That's so sweet."

He felt his cheeks heat. Sweet. Yeah, that's what every superhero aspired to be.

As if on cue, Bruce appeared at the door, arms crossed over his steroid-enhanced chest. Muscles bulged under his gray spandex shirt and black tights. He wasn't wearing his cape, but Clark could almost see the shiny black fabric flapping in an imaginary breeze.

Bruce nodded toward Diana. "Babe." His moody gaze shifted the tiniest bit to the right. "Clark."

Diana gushed a reply, making Clark slightly nauseous. Sure, Bruce was something to look at--and if you believed half the rumors, a veritable god in bed--but was that all a woman wanted in a guy? You'd think the ripped physique, perfect profile, and gloomy angst would get old after a while.

Bruce and Diana melded into a liplock. Clark pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and turned back to eBay. Only two minutes left, and he'd been knocked off the top again. Hell. He upped his bid into four figures and sent it flying. No way was he going to let this one go.

The phone rang again.

"Heroes Incorporated," Clark droned, then snapped to attention when Captain Marvelous' radio-announcer voice crackled across the line.

"Clark, round up the troops. We've got a situation."

"A situation, Captain?"

From the corner of his eye, he saw Bruce and Diana disengage.

"Can't say any more on an unsecured line, son, but I can tell you it's not good. Tell every hero we've got on the books to report to my ready room in one hour."

Damn. Clark couldn't remember the last time the Captain had ordered a full HI assembly. This was major. Another threat to life as they all knew it, most likely.

His gaze drifted back to eBay. His mysterious opponent had posted a winning bid two seconds before the countdown expired.

It looked like Clark's luck had run out.

* * * *

Wednesday, 11:00 p.m.

Three days, one hour, and counting...

Yes!

Blossom Breeze sprang to her feet and did a little victory dance around her chair. That last minute bidder had come out of nowhere. She'd practically broken out in a cold sweat, but somehow she managed to squeak in under the wire to win the eBay bid for Action Comics #158, The Kid from Krypton. She'd only been looking for that particular issue forever. After it was framed, she'd hang it on her wall right between her signed portraits of Christopher Reeve and Dean Cain.

She collapsed in her chair and beamed at the screen. Life was perfect.

A nanosecond later, an Instant Message from Bernie popped up on her screen.

<Hey, Blossom>

Okay, well maybe not so perfect.

<Hey, Bernie> she typed back. If there were an emoticon for rolling eyes, she would have added it. Bernie was sitting on the other side of the cubicle partition on her left, less than five feet away.

Another geek occupied the cubicle to her right. Oh, sure, she could put a positive spin on things and say she spent every night surrounded by single men under thirty, but where would that get her? She'd still be right here in the computer lab at Megalopolis Polytechnic Institute.

She sighed as a series of numbers materialized in her IM window. Another one of Bernie's freaking mathematical cryptograms. A second later, his head popped up over the partition, all bright eyes and big ears.

"Well, what do you say?"

Blossom squinted at Bernie's coded message, but late as it was, the numbers could have spelled out "Do you want to get naked?" and she wouldn't have even known it.

She blinked at the screen.

Hey. Wait a minute.

Do you want to... A sudden vision of a naked Bernie appeared in her brain, nearly shorting out the major synapses. Oh, please. No. Anything but that. Bernie weighed all of one hundred and thirty pounds, soaking wet. Naked or clothed, he wasn't a feast for the eyes.

She steeled herself to decipher the rest of the coded sentence. ...go to the Star Trek convention tomorrow?

Her breath left in a rush. Thank you, God.

"So? Do you?" Bernie's goofy grin stretched from ear to ear, his tongue lolling out of his mouth, puppy-dog style. No doubt he thought encrypted IM propositioning a very clever way to procure female companionship.

"James Doohan's going to be there," he said in a wheedling tone.

Blossom gave him a thin smile. "I'd love to, Bernie. I really would. But tomorrow's not good for me." I have to feed my goldfish. And wash my hair. And visit my gynecologist. "Maybe some other time."

"Geez, that's too bad. A bunch of us are going to my place afterwards for a TOS marathon." TOS, Blossom knew only too well, was Geekspeak for Star Trek, The Original Series. As in Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock.

"Sorry. I'll have to pass."

"Your loss," Bernie said, and ducked back into his cell.

Sighing, Blossom logged off and shut down. Bernie wasn't a bad guy, really. You could even make the case that his brain made up for what he lacked in physique. Of course, that was pretty much true of all the guys lurking in the bowels of the MPI computer department.

Call her shallow, but Blossom just couldn't seem to get past appearances when it came to men. She liked

them with muscles. Lots of muscles, bulging out all over. She drooled over sculpted pecs and corded biceps. She spun elaborate fantasies starring men who looked like the superheroes on her apartment walls.

Which could only be termed an ironic twist of fate, since Blossom's off-the-charts IQ had dumped her squarely into geekdom. In her world, men who fit the superhero mold were very few and far between.

Life was a bitch sometimes.

Chapter Two

Thursday, 12:13 a.m.

Two days, twenty-three hours, forty-seven minutes, and counting...

Clark couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Captain Marvelous looking so grim.

In his long and illustrious career as CEO of Heroes Incorporated, the Captain had faced down more no-win situations than a marriage counselor. He excelled at snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. His keen mind and unerring instinct invariably chose just the right superhero to neutralize each dire threat that came across the hotline.

Clark shifted in his seat, trying to catch the faint breeze wafting from the overhead vent. When you crammed twenty-seven muscle-bound superheroes--and a few superheroines--into a small conference room, you tended to overload the air conditioning system. Too bad the ready room was three levels underground. Clark would have emptied his bank account for an open window. A little air freshener wouldn't come amiss, either.

Bruce Wynn sat right up front, of course, shooting the room's testosterone level right off the scale. As far as Clark was concerned, the guy didn't even belong in HI. Bruce didn't have any real superpowers. He was all cash, flash, and gadgets. Without his fortune and his technology, he'd be just another pretty face in the unemployment line.

Clark unzipped his laptop case and eased open his computer. He was HI's official secretary, partly because he was the only superhero in the organization capable of stringing words into coherent sentences, and partly because his specialized psychic superpowers made it easy for him to take notes. He sent a burst of mental energy into the computer, causing the hard disk to whirl in response. Bruce looked over, as if the sound irritated him.

Captain Marvelous took his position at the podium. Clark sat up straighter in his seat and gave HI's fearless leader his full attention.

"Thank you all for arriving at such short notice," the Captain said. "I won't beat around the bush, because frankly, we haven't much time. Our operatives in the field have just uncovered a DP of massive proportions."

Clark and the entire assembly of superheroes gave a collective gasp. DP was superhero slang for "Diabolical Plot." DP's were perpetrated by EMG's, or "Evil Maniacal Geniuses." Clark shook his head. You just never knew when an EMG would snap. When one did, it wasn't pretty.

Captain Marvelous cleared his throat. "According to my sources, Lex Loser's tenuous hold on sanity has finally crumbled. He's retreated to a secret underground lair to detonate a computerized neutron bomb. He intends to kill the entire population of Earth--without damaging its resources. After the explosion, he'll live in luxury, attended by an army of robotic servants." The Captain exhaled heavily. "The bomb is set to go off Saturday at midnight."

A buzz of horror zapped back and forth across the room. Lex Loser was an EMG capable of perpetrating the worst atrocities, but this DP far surpassed any evil he'd previously conceived. Clark concentrated on thought-streaming his notes onto the computer even as his blood turned to ice in his veins.

Back in the last row, young Peter Parkington jumped up so quickly he almost dropped his camera. "I volunteer to take Lex down, Captain!"

Captain Marvelous shook his head at the kid. "I'm sorry, Peter. Superhuman speed and arachnid reflexes are not going to help with this one."

Dr. Banning stood up next, already looking a little green around the edges. "I'll rip him limb from limb," he growled. His chest expanded, snapping the buttons off his shirt.

"Uh, I surely do appreciate the offer, Doctor," the Captain said. "But I'm afraid superhuman anger's not the answer, either." He held up one hand to stop the verbal onslaught coming at him from every corner of the room. "In fact, no physical superpower will solve this dilemma. According to our latest intelligence, the computerized detonation device is so sensitive the slightest touch will set it off. We need someone with psychic skills to defuse it."

Clark looked up from his laptop to find every eye in the room on him. Psychic skills? Hot damn! That was his department. Finally, he'd get a chance to prove brains beat brawn any day of the week.

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "I'll be happy to take on the assignment, Captain."

"That's good of you, Clark, but not quite good enough, I'm afraid."

"But sir-- I can psychically defuse any computerized bomb. All I have to do is get within ten feet of it."

"Yes, well, that's just our problem. Lex Loser's lair is three hundred feet underground, and it's impenetrable."

Bruce Wynn stood. "Nothing's impenetrable. I'll blast my way in."

"Oh right," Clark said, not even trying to hide his sarcasm. "Blow up the bomb. That'll work."

A collective twitter swept through the room. Bruce's face turned scarlet. Luckily, looks couldn't kill, or Clark would be writhing on the floor, gasping for air.

The rich playboy turned on him. "What do you suggest, Geek Man? That we just beam over? Like on Star Trek?"

Captain Marvelous cleared his throat. "Now, now, boys. Petty rivalry won't save the day. I'm not exaggerating when I say the situation is bleak and getting worse by the second. The bomb is set to detonate in two days, twenty-three hours..." He checked his watch. "...and sixteen minutes."

That quieted everyone down in a hurry.

"Unless we can come up with a plan of action," the Captain said, "life as we know it..."

will ... cease ... to ... exist, Clark mentally typed into the meeting minutes. Bingo. The superhero buzz phrase set off a renewed wave of furious whispers.

Clark frowned as he considered the various superpowers currently claimed by HI personnel. There were the mundane powers of strength, speed, and flight, and the rarer ones of x-ray vision, magnetic levitation, and setting oneself on fire with no untoward consequences.

And then there was teleportation...

Clark blinked. That's it. If he could beam into Lex Loser's hideout, he could defuse the bomb. Well, what do you know? For once in his life, Bruce the feeble-brained superjerk had said something intelligent.

Teleportation wasn't a common superhero skill. In fact, it was the rarest. Currently, no one in HI claimed it. The last teleporting superhero, The Disappearing Man, had died twenty-four years ago while trying to teleport onto a stolen nuclear submarine. He'd accidentally materialized underwater and drowned.

That embarrassing incident was rarely spoken of. But recently Clark had uncovered an interesting addendum to the story.

Using his laptop for a launching pad, he shot his mind through the wireless link to the HI mainframe, racing along a complex web of pathways. He ricocheted into the database, plunging deep until he'd found the snippet of information he sought.

When he had it, he stood and waved one arm at The Captain.

"Yes, Clark?"

Clark pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Sir, I believe I have our answer."

* * * *

Thursday, 1:02 a.m.

Two days, twenty-two hours, fifty-eight minutes, and counting...

When it's too late for dinner and too early for breakfast, the only possible meal is ice cream.

Blossom snagged a quart of mint chocolate chip from the freezer. Tucking her feet beneath her on the couch, she hit the play button on the remote and settled in. The familiar intro music crooned. She dug her spoon into the cold, sweet cream and sighed with pleasure.

Faster than a speeding bullet... More powerful than a locomotive...

She looked over at the aquarium. Lois and Jimmy, the twin goldfish she'd won at the MPI Spring Fair, waved their fins at her. As if to say "Get a life."

Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound...

Okay, maybe it was pathetic to spend the wee hours of the morning curled up on the couch watching 1950s Superman TV episodes, but hey, everyone had to have a hobby, right?

Look, there in the sky... It's a bird... It's a plane...

Blossom spooned the ice cream into her mouth and let it melt on her tongue. Aaaah.

It's Superman!

The episode was one of her favorites--#24, Crime Wave, in which Superman fights a mysterious rash of crime sweeping Metropolis, only to be nearly done in by atomic rays. So, okay, it was a bit corny, but satisfying nonetheless. Superman rocked.

He graced her walls in endless poses, both animated and via the actors lucky enough to portray the Man of Steel in TV and film. Superman's chiseled jaw, bulging biceps, and cute forehead curl greeted her at every turn. She'd spent literally thousands of dollars on Superman collectibles.

She refused to apologize for what some people might term an obsession. So what if she had to eat spaghetti every night for a month to afford her latest purchase?

When you spent your life surrounded by wimpy geeks, you did what you could to survive.

* * * *

Thursday, 1:32 a.m.

Two days, twenty-two hours, twenty-eight minutes, and counting...

"She's what?" Captain Marvelous asked.

"Half-human, half-superheroine," Clark explained patiently.

"Then why don't we know about her?" Bruce demanded. "Every superhero offspring is supposed to be evaluated for superpowers at puberty."

"Well, usually that's true, but this is a special case," Clark said. "Blossom Breeze was born after The Disappearing Man's fatal accident. With all the confusion and embarrassment following that event, she was never registered in the HI database. I only stumbled across her birth records last month, when I hacked into Megalopolis General during the Dr. Squid incident. I made a note to check it out, but we've been so busy lately, I forgot."

"You forgot," Bruce sneered. "Isn't that special. What if I'd forgotten to stop city bus #64 from plowing

into that Girl Scout troop last week?"

The Captain shot Bruce a quelling look. "Are you sure The Disappearing Man is Blossom's father?" he asked Clark.

"Positive," Clark said. "His name is on her birth certificate. If she's inherited his teleportation powers, it would be a snap for her to get me into Lex's lair in time to defuse the bomb."

He called up a picture of Blossom on his computer. Bruce, Diana, and the Captain all crowded around the laptop for a better look.

"Nice," said Bruce, letting a low whistle escape between his perfect teeth. "Very nice."

Diana elbowed him in the side.

"But not my type," he added hastily. "Too girl next door."

Clark looked at the picture. "Girl next door" described Blossom perfectly. No one would call her beautiful--not by a long shot. She was cute, with short red hair and lots of freckles dancing across her nose. Her lips quirked, as if smiling at some secret joke. He found himself wondering if she was as fun to be with as she looked.

Diana flipped a strand of long, bouncy hair over one bare shoulder. "She's twenty-four years old. Superpowers appear at puberty. If she could teleport, we would know."

"Not necessarily," Clark said. "Not if she kept the talent to herself. Remember, she knows nothing about us. She's a Ph.D. candidate at Megalopolis Polytech."

"We must investigate at once," said Captain Marvelous. "The fate of the world depends upon it." He scanned the room. "I'll need one HI operative to travel to Megalopolis to assess the situation."

Of course, Bruce volunteered first. "I'll do it."

Like hell he would. Clark had been itching for an excuse to get out of Newark for months. He sent another glance toward Blossom's picture. No way was he going to let Bruce muscle in on this assignment.

"This one's mine," he said quietly. "After all, Lex Loser is my nemesis."

Bruce started to protest, but The Captain held up one hand. "I agree Clark's the hero for the job, Bruce, and not only because of Lex. Blossom Breeze, despite her parentage, is living an average life as an average human woman. She could very well faint dead away if a magnificent, larger-than-life superhero showed up on her doorstep." He stroked the cleft in his chiseled chin.

"But Clark should do just fine."

Thursday, 2:46 p.m.

Two days, nine hours, fourteen minutes, and counting...

"Mind if I sit here?"

Blossom looked up from her book, only to find that the geeks of Megalopolis were not confined to the boundaries of the MPI computer lab. Apparently, they frequented the library, too. Geez. Where did the guy get those black horn rimmed glasses--the family planning aisle of the drug store? She was pretty sure their effectiveness as birth control surpassed The Pill.

"Suit yourself," she said, and returned to her book, *The Science of Superheroes*.

The geek set his laptop case on the floor and took the seat across the table from her. He opened a large tome and started reading. Blossom turned her shoulder a little, in case he had any ideas about talking to her. It wasn't vanity on her part. His book, *An Annotated History of Welding*, was upside down.

Unfortunately, her subtle hint didn't work. Subtle never worked with geeks.

"That looks like an interesting book," he said.

"Hmm." She turned a little more, taking *The Science of Superheroes* with her.

"Is there any special reason why you're reading it?"

She looked over at him. "I like superheroes."

For some reason, that seemed to encourage him. "Do you believe they're real?" His dark eyes regarded her seriously from behind Coke bottle lenses. He probably wouldn't look too bad if he got contacts, she decided.

"Do you?" he said again.

"Do I what?"

"Think superheroes are real?"

"Yeah, right," she said, and went back to reading.

The geek slipped off his chair, rounded the table, and took the seat to her right. Someone should really tell this guy that the top button on a button-down shirt was meant to be left open. Not her, though.

"I mean it," he said, drawing her attention back to him with a low, rich voice that seemed totally at odds with his persona. She closed her eyes and let it wash over her.

"Did you ever imagine what it would be like if superheroes really existed?" he asked.

Did she ever. She thought about it every night in bed. But those kinds of thoughts weren't something a girl shared with a cute, geeky stranger. Or even a best girlfriend, for that matter.

"I guess there'd be less crime," she said.

"Maybe there is less crime."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He took a deep breath. A springy lock of dark hair fell onto his forehead.

Cute, she thought. Then she remembered the laptop. Geeky.

"Maybe there would be more crime if there weren't superheroes," he said.

Say again? "Yeah," she said. "Maybe." Not.

"I know you've always felt different," he said.

She gave him her best frown. What was this guy talking about? He looked harmless enough, but... She scooted her chair a couple inches back from the table, just in case she had to make a run for it.

"It can be frightening to discover you have a superpower. Especially if you're just a teenager, and there's no one around to guide you."

Yep. Certifiable. Did she know how to attract them, or what? She closed *The Science of Superheroes* with a thud.

"Oh, would you look at the time," she said. "I've got to go."

His hand settled on her arm. "You don't have to pretend with me."

She jumped back, nearly knocking her chair over in her haste. The librarian sent her a disapproving glare.

"Look," she whispered to the geek. "I don't know who you are or what you think you know about me, but I'm warning you. Stay away from me or next time I'll call the cops."

* * * *

Thursday, 2:55 p.m.

Two days, nine hours, five minutes, and counting...

Well, that didn't go over quite the way he'd planned.

Clark stared morosely at the door through which Blossom Breeze had fled. Smooth one, Geek Man. He gave a heavy sigh. Either Blossom was hiding her superpower, or her human genes had proved dominant and she was just your everyday, average, appealing-as-all-hell woman.

He let his mind wander a bit on that one. Blossom didn't have Diana's curves or cup size, but when she'd blinked up at him with those big blue eyes he'd felt it like a sucker punch to the gut. He'd experienced a sudden urge to sift his fingers through her sassy red hair and plant a kiss on her lush pink lips.

She said she liked superheroes, right?

Well, he was a superhero, wasn't he?

Of course, she'd never guess it. Which was exactly why the Captain had sent him on this mission. A mission he might have already blown with his bungling attempt at contact. Clark gave an inward groan. Bruce would have come up with a suave opening line. Bruce would have been on his way home with Blossom right now.

He stared at her vacated chair. Something caught his eye, and he leaned forward. A single strand of red hair clung to the chair's upholstered back. He lifted it carefully.

Just what he needed to determine whether this trip to Megalopolis was humanity's best hope for survival or a complete waste of time.

Returning to his original seat, he shoved *An Annotated History of Welding* to one side and hefted his laptop case onto the desk. In a few moments, he'd powered up his computer and enabled the genetic testing program. He attached the sensor wand to the USB port. Then he ran the tip over Blossom's fiery strand of hair.

He watched as the string of genetic code scrolled up the screen faster than the human eye could read. Clark, thanks to his psychic computer superpowers, had no trouble following the analysis. As the lines of coded numbers streamed by, his excitement built. Blossom's super genes were no match for her human mother's contribution to her DNA.

She was most definitely a superheroine.

Yes!

"Young man, keep it down!" The librarian looked ready to kill.

Clark gave her a guilty glance. Had he shouted out loud? "Yes, ma'am." He took a calming breath and sank his mind into the readout.

Wait one minute. Something wasn't quite right. Yes, Blossom carried the gene for teleportation, but for some reason it didn't seem active. Currently, she couldn't change locations with a thought, taking whomever she touched with her.

Stomach churning, Clark launched another sequence of programs, further refining the genetic investigation.

Two-point-seven minutes later, he broke out in a cold sweat. According to his analysis, Blossom carried a rare genetic mutation that had prevented her superpower from manifesting with the first influx of puberty hormones, as was typical with super offspring. In her case, a more specialized hormone surge was needed to trigger the transformation.

Clark looked at his watch. Noon. Two days, twelve hours, and counting. Time to check in with HI headquarters. He opened a Velcro pocket on his laptop case and pulled out his cell. He punched in the Captain's private number.

"What's the word, Clark? Can humanity be saved?"

Briefly, Clark summarized his unexpected discovery. "All we have to do is initiate the specialized hormone flux and Blossom's superpower will manifest."

"How do we do that?"

Was it getting hot in here? Clark inserted his index finger into the collar of his shirt and tugged. "Well, Captain, the only way the precise combination of hormones can be released is..." He paused to take a deep breath.

"Go on."

"The only way to trigger the transformation is for Blossom ... uh, I mean Ms. Breeze, to..." Clark swallowed hard.

"Spit it out, boy. I don't have all day."

"Yes, sir." He felt his face flame. "The only way for Blossom to become a superheroine is for her to have a..." He glanced toward the librarian and lowered his voice. "...a sexual encounter. But not just any sexual encounter. It has to be off the charts. She has to experience toe-curling, mind-blowing, deep-muscle-contracting ecstasy."

For about ten seconds, dead silence poured across the cellular phone waves.

Then Captain Marvelous cleared his throat. "Well, Clark, what are you waiting for? The fate of humanity is at stake. Get right on it."

Chapter Four

Friday, 5:29 a.m.

One day, eighteen hours, thirty-one minutes, and counting...

Blossom shielded her eyes from the rising sun as she scurried from the MPI Math Center to her beat-up Volkswagen Jetta. Another all-nighter--one that hadn't included a single alcoholic beverage or grope in the dark with a muscle-bound stranger, unfortunately. She slung her backpack off her shoulder and fished around in it for her car keys.

Lois and Jimmy were right. She was pathetic.

"Hey," a deep voice said, right in her ear.

She nearly jumped a mile.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

It was the crazy geek from the library, dressed in another short sleeve button-up-to-the-neck shirt--plaid, no less. His black flood pants were at least two inches too short. To complete the picture of pure geekiness, he held an enormous laptop case in one hand.

"No problem," she told him. "I love being scared out of my wits. The adrenaline rush will help get me home without falling asleep."

He smiled. "Up all night?"

"Yes. Had a bug it took a while to find."

"I get like that, too," he said. "Time flies when you're writing code." He plucked the keys from her hand. Before Blossom realized what was happening, he'd guided her around to the passenger's side, unlocked the door, and helped her in.

"Wait a minute," she said. "What do you think you're doing?"

"You're dead on your feet," he said. "I can't let you drive home."

"That's the worst pick up line I've ever heard," she told him. She climbed out of the car. "Do you really think I'd let some stranger drive me home? You could be an ax murderer or something."

"Do I look dangerous enough?" the geek asked. His eyes seemed hopeful.

"Looks aren't everything," Blossom said.

"I agree," he said. "But in my case you have nothing to worry about. I would never hurt you." He smiled.

He was kind of cute when his dimples were showing. But... "I don't know," she said. "You have to admit, you were a little over the top at the library yesterday. All that talk of superheroes being real--"

"A joke," he said quickly. "I have a ... um ... unique sense of humor." He dangled the keys. "I'll just drive you home. No funny stuff. I promise."

"No. Give me back my keys."

"Forget it. If you won't let me drive, I'm calling a cab."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know." He un-Velcroed a pocket on his laptop case and dug out a cell phone.

Twenty minutes later, the cab still hadn't come. "Megalopolis cab service sucks," he grumbled.

"I could have told you that," Blossom said. "Now can I have my keys? I really need to get some sleep."

He sighed. "All right. But I'm going to follow you home. Just to make sure you get there okay."

Great. Just great.

"One-sixteen Oakland, right?" he asked, handing the keys over.

She froze. "How did you know that?"

"Your backpack," he said, pointing.

Yep, there it was. Right on the tag, under her name, for any and all potential perverts to see. Lovely. She might as well have recorded her bra size, too.

She glared at him. He grinned back.

"Who are you?" she asked irritably. "And why are you following me around?"

He held out his hand. "Dr. Clark Kendall. I'm ... new at MPI. I'm here for a special research project."

She stared at him for a beat, then started to laugh. "That's good," she said. "A bit corny, but good."

"What?" he said, looking genuinely puzzled.

"Your name. Clark Kendall. Almost like Superman."

"Yeah," he said. "Almost."

She got in the car and grabbed the inside door handle. He leaned in, one hand on the roof and the other on the window frame, keeping her from shutting the door. "Listen," he said. "After I tail you home and you catch some sleep, how about going to dinner with me?"

"You don't give up easy, do you?"

He smiled again, a lopsided grin that showed twin dimples, one in each cheek. A thick shank of dark hair fell across his forehead. She looked up, trying to see his eyes, but with the sun striking just so on his glasses, all she could see was her own reflection.

"Come on," he said. "I'll take you to the Italian restaurant over on Broad Street. What's it called?"

"Luigi's," she said. "But you're kidding, right? That place is five star. It'll cost you a fortune."

"You're worth it."

"Why?" she asked. "Why are you doing this? You don't even know me."

He shrugged and looked away.

"You're really a visiting prof?" she asked. "What's your research project about?"

"Genetics," he said. "Hormone triggers in dominant and recessive DNA combinations."

"Wow," she said. "Sounds wild."

"You have no idea. So what do you say? Have dinner with me tonight?"

She hesitated, then sighed. Truth was, she loved authentic Italian food. She'd been dying to go to Luigi's ever since it opened last semester. But with no significant other in sight, she hadn't quite managed to get there. She might as well go with Dr. Clark Kendall. He was a geek, but hey, it wasn't like Superman was showing up at her door to ask her out any time soon.

"All right," she said.

He looked stunned. "Really?"

Her gaze drifted to his buttoned-up shirt, then further south to his where's-the-flood pants. She began to have second thoughts. "On one condition."

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "What's that?"

"Lose the geek clothes."

* * * *

Friday, 1:06 p.m.

One day, ten hours, fifty-four minutes, and counting...

Lose the geek clothes.

Right. No problem. He could do that.

Clark stared at the rack of MegaMart polyester dress suits and heaved a sigh. Give him an FBI mainframe to hack into, no problemmo. Tell him to dress up for a dinner date, and he was up shit creek without a toilet brush for a paddle.

What would Bruce wear? He winced. Now wouldn't that make a good bumper sticker.

"Need some help, hon?"

He turned to find a fifty-something, big-haired, gum-snapping saleslady hovering at his elbow. She outweighed him by a good seventy pounds. He squinted at her nametag. Lorna Jean.

He stepped back so quickly, he nearly fell over his laptop case. "I'm not sure."

"Well, then, honey, I'm your dream come true. I know all there is to know about dressing men."

"Do you, now?" Clark said faintly.

"Damn tootin' I do. Got seven boys of my own, you know."

"That's amazing," Clark said.

She cocked her head to one side. "What you getting all gussied up for?"

"A dinner date," he told her. "At Luigi's."

Lorna Jean pursed her alarmingly red lips and whistled. "Fancy shmancy. You'll need the works."

"What do you suggest?" Clark asked, not at all sure he wanted to know, but seeing no way to politely back off from the conversation.

"The Seventies look is right popular these days," Lorna Jean told him. She fished through the rack and reeled in a blindingly white suit, with lapels wider than Clark's hand. She flung the pants and jacket over one substantial shoulder, then grabbed Clark's upper arm and manhandled him over to the shirts, where she slithered a slippery black one off a hanger.

Clark guessed the material was supposed to look like silk, but a glance at the price tag told him the garment was made of pure petroleum by-products.

"I'm not sure I--"

"Sure you are," Lorna Jean said, shoving him into the dressing room. "Didn't you see Saturday Night Fever?"

"No, actually I--"

The louvered door slammed. "Don't make me come in there and dress you myself," she called.

The threat was enough to scare Clark right out of his boxers. With a sigh of resignation, he set down his laptop case and got to work. He emerged a few minutes later, shaking his head. "I don't know..." He looked into the full-length mirror. "Are bellbottoms really back in style?"

"Honey," Lorna Jean said, "if you don't know the answer to that, you ain't got a fashion bone in your body. Them pants are just the thing. Your gal's gonna love you." She draped a heavy gold chain around his neck and winked. "Trust me."

* * * *

Friday, 6:41 p.m.

One day, five hours, nineteen minutes, and counting...

Perhaps his trust had been a little misplaced, Clark thought as he tried to catch Blossom's gaze across the intimate table for two at Luigi's. His date didn't seem too taken with his new clothes. Her gaze kept roaming, as if it were painful to look at him.

She, on the other hand, looked great. She was wearing a sleek, rust-colored, off-the-shoulder dress. It dipped a bit in the front, showing the slightest bit of cleavage. Classy, but not flashy.

Clark tugged at the collar of his faux-silk shirt. Was it getting hot in here? He wished he had a few days to ease into this assignment--feel his way around, so to speak.

But he didn't. Lex Loser's bomb was set to go off--he glanced at his watch--in twenty-nine hours, seventeen minutes, six seconds, and counting. It was do or die, Geek Man.

Literally.

"How's your ossobucco?" he asked.

Blossom's gaze focused. "What? Oh, fine. Very good. How's your calamari?"

He gulped down some Pinot Grigio. "Interesting."

"You've never had it before?"

"No." And he'd ordered it before reading the fine print on the menu. Squid. Ugh.

Manfully, he forked another dangling, suction-cup covered tentacle into his mouth. He swallowed without chewing, then washed the whole disgusting mess down his throat with more wine. Damn if it wasn't

getting hotter in here by the minute. And he had an itch on his ankle. Surreptitiously, he inched his foot to one side until it came into contact with his laptop case. He rubbed it up and down. The relief was fleeting.

"So how long are you in town for?" Blossom asked.

"Uh, not too long," Clark said.

"Where did you move from?"

"Newark."

"Oh."

If the conversation went downhill from there, at least it hadn't had far to fall, Clark thought as he walked Blossom home. Trouble was, he'd never in his life asked a woman out with the goal of getting her into bed. Well, not on the first night, at least. It just didn't seem respectful. He believed in the getting-to-know-you stage. Which led to the falling-in-love stage. Which led to the hot monkey sex stage.

Not that he'd ever had hot monkey sex personally, but he'd seen pictures of it on the Internet. And he'd be more than willing to give it a try with Blossom. He sidled a glance in her direction. She was walking a step in front of him, her head up, high heels clicking on the sidewalk. Her cute round bottom swayed back and forth enticingly.

Don't panic, he told himself. He could do it. He had to. After all, the fate of the world hung in the balance. He was going to have to make a move. Tonight.

They reached Blossom's apartment door. "Can I come in?" Clark asked, shifting his laptop case from his right hand to his left. "I'd like a glass of water." Ah, hell. Another smooth line. He was full of them tonight. He wasn't kidding about the water, though. He was parched. And damn if his back didn't itch like crazy. He shifted his shoulders, trying to get some relief without being too obvious.

Blossom hesitated. "Well, okay. For a minute."

She fished her house key from her purse. It dangled from a Superman key chain.

Cool, Clark thought. He rocked back on his heels as she unlocked the door, then followed her over the threshold. She flicked the light switch.

He blinked, sure his eyes were playing tricks on him. He put down the laptop, took off his glasses, checked them for smudges, and put them back on again. No, he wasn't hallucinating. The keychain was the least of it.

Blossom's apartment was a veritable shrine to Superman.

Every square millimeter of wall space was dedicated to the Man of Steel, in all his various comic, TV, and movie incarnations. Vintage comic books, professionally framed and mounted, hung above the sofa. Posters of George Reeve, Dean Cain, Christopher Reeves, and Tom Welling marched along the opposite wall. A Superman lunchbox perched on a shelf in the kitchen. A revolving Daily Planet desk lamp adorned the table near the door.

Incredible.

"You got a thing for Superman?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said, giving him a sheepish grin. "Pretty weird, huh?"

"Not at all," Clark said quickly. "I think it's great. I'm a Superman fan myself."

"You are?"

"Yeah. Because of my name." He resisted scratching a fierce itch on the inside of his elbow. "I collect Superman comic books, mostly. I have a complete set of Golden Age Action Comics from 1947 through 1956." He frowned. "Well, except for #158. I tried to buy that one on eBay Wednesday night, but someone snatched it right out from under my nose."

Blossom's blue eyes went round. "You ran up that bid? You jerk! You cost me five hundred dollars!"

She was the mystery bidder? "You didn't have to go so high," Clark told her. "You could have dropped out."

"No way was I going to wimp out. I've been looking for that issue for a year."

"So have I," Clark said, then laughed. "But if I had to lose, I'm glad it was to you."

Blossom smiled. "Really?"

"Yes," said Clark, resisting the urge to claw the niggling itch on his thigh. He moved close, daring to brush his fingers over the freckles on Blossom's cheek. She didn't move away. His heart tripped up a beat, then settled in double time.

He started to sweat. Should he try to kiss her now? God, it was hot in here. Didn't she have air conditioning? His gaze dropped to her lips. They were full and lush, a little pouty. An itch hit him on the neck. He ignored it and leaned closer, until their lips were only inches apart.

Her eyes closed.

Was it his imagination, or was she swaying toward him? Emboldened, he framed her face in his hands, threaded his fingers through her hair. His heart beat so loudly in his chest it sounded like a car alarm.

Their lips touched. Clark felt the contact all the way to his toes, and in a few strategic places in between. He angled his head a little, to get his glasses out of the way of the kiss. He really should have thought to take them off earlier.

Blossom trembled a bit. Her hands came to rest on his arms. His thigh itched again, distracting him. He shook off the intrusion and kissed her again, a little harder and longer this time.

Was it too early for tongues?

Maybe, but he really didn't have time to waste. He decided to go for it.

He wrapped Blossom in his arms, urging her closer as he stroked her lower lip with the tip of his tongue. She sighed, opening her mouth and going all soft in his arms. An invitation? He hoped so. His tongue slid inside. Stroked in and out.

Oh, yeah. This was it. His little Man of Steel was so ready to save the world.

But the back of his neck itched like hell.

He moved one hand around Blossom's torso, toward her breast. Easy... Easy... He didn't want to scare

her. After all, he knew for a fact she'd never had a memorable sexual experience. She was probably shy about things like this.

His fingers found their goal. Closed on soft, quivering flesh...

Blossom swatted his hand away. He tried an evasive maneuver. She attempted a block. He circumvented it.

She knocked him on his ass.

He lay flat on his back on the carpet, staring up at her. "Wha...?"

"Self defense class," she said, looking startled, yet satisfied.

"Jeez." Who would have thought?

"You have some nerve," she continued, hands on hips. "Trying to cop a feel on a first date."

He sat up, rubbing the back of his head. "Sorry."

Blossom pointed toward the door. "Out."

"Hey," he said, jumping to his feet. "Don't you think that's a little hasty?"

"No," she said. "I mean, it's not like I'm going to see you again or anything."

"Not see me--" Hell, that didn't sound at all encouraging. He wriggled to evade a sudden itch on his hip. "Why not? I thought we were getting along great."

"We were," Blossom said, "but that's not the point."

Even if he lived out the average superhero lifespan of two hundred and three, Clark would never, ever get the hang of female logic. "All right. I'll bite. What is the point?"

"The point is you look like John Travolta's scrawnier brother," she said. "I couldn't possibly go out with you again."

"I don't even like this outfit," Clark said, ignoring the negative comment about his physique. "A saleslady picked it out."

"And you let her," Blossom muttered. "That's even worse. Look, I spend all day and most nights surrounded by geeks like you. No offense, but I don't think I can go twenty-four seven with it. It's too hard on the eyes."

Clark eyed the collage of superhero muscle on her walls, his heart sinking. He had a pretty good idea what Blossom was looking for in a lover. No matter how you sliced and diced it, he didn't have it.

Still, he couldn't give up. Not with Lex's bomb set to blow.

He tried to reason with her. "Looks aren't everything. Didn't you say that yesterday?"

"Did I?" Blossom said. "I must have been out of my mind. Looks are huge. Ninety percent of the information humans receive from their environment is visual. For me it's probably more like a hundred and one percent." She sighed. "Look, I'm sorry, Clark. I just can't help how I am. You're a great guy and all, but--"

But. Clark hated when a woman said that word. In his experience it was usually followed by...

"--can't we just be friends?"

"Of course," he said, going for his standard reply.

The itch on his neck grew unbearable. Weighted down by Blossom's rejection, he finally cracked. He gave in and scratched.

The itch darted to his solar plexus. His fingers followed it. After that, it split, attacking both shoulders at once. Then it reached flashpoint, racing across his chest, down his arms and legs, up over his face...

"Are you okay?" Blossom asked. "Because, you know, you don't look so good."

Clark dropped to his knees, knocking over his laptop case on the way down. He tried desperately to reach a spot right in the middle of his back. But the itching was the least of his problems. It was getting hard to breathe. Little red spots swirled into his vision.

"Call 911," he gasped, just before he blacked out.

Chapter Five

Friday, 11:22 p.m.

One day, thirty-eight minutes, and counting...

"Hives and anaphylaxis," Clark told Blossom when he emerged from the emergency room cubicle, looking beat. "The doctor thinks it was the calamari."

She jumped to her feet. "You scared me half to death. I'm still shaking. You could have died."

"Look on the bright side," Clark said. "If I get bored tonight, I can play dot to dot on my chest."

She giggled. Then sobered as her gaze dropped. The top two buttons on Clark's shirt were, for once, unbuttoned. Angry red welts covered his skin, looking horribly uncomfortable.

"Does it itch bad?" she asked.

He grimaced. "Bad enough."

She clucked in sympathy, and looked at his chest some more. It might not be superhero material, but it wasn't really that scrawny. Suddenly, she felt a little ashamed at how she had treated him during their

date.

"I'm sorry about what I said earlier," she told him.

"Which time?" he asked. But he was smiling when he said it. He had a nice smile. And he was so at ease poking fun at himself. There was something very appealing about that.

"When I said you were scrawny," she said.

"Oh, that." He glanced down at his chest. "No apology needed for the truth." He caught her gaze and held it. "I'm the one who should be apologizing. My behavior was less than gentlemanly."

"Forget about it," Blossom said, coloring. "No offense taken." The truth was, she'd enjoyed kissing Clark. Too much. That, more than anything else, had caused her to back off. She just couldn't bear the thought of a geek boyfriend.

"The doctor gave me a shot," Clark was saying. "It'll take a few hours to work." He gave a half laugh. "I don't think I'll get much sleep tonight."

"I'm a night owl myself," Blossom said. "You know..." She stopped herself, suddenly uncertain.

Just friends, she reminded herself.

"What?" he asked.

Why did it seem so hard to breathe all of a sudden? "As long as we're both going to be up," she said, "I was thinking maybe you'd like to come back to my place. We could..." She hesitated. No guy she'd ever dated had wanted to do what she was about to propose. Would Clark be shocked? Dismayed? Worse, would he laugh?

She drew a deep breath. There was only one way to find out.

"...watch some 1950s Superman TV episodes. I have a pretty big collection on video."

"Cool," said Clark without hesitating a beat. "Do you have the one where an asteroid gives Superman amnesia?"

Blossom's heart gave a funny little jump. "Episode #38. Panic in the Sky. Yep, I have it."

"Great," said Clark. "That's my favorite."

* * * *

Saturday, 5:59 a.m.

Eighteen hours, one minute, and counting...

Clark woke up slowly, every muscle protesting. Somehow he'd twisted himself into a pretzel on a couch that was way too soft to offer much support to his back. He blinked up at the wall and frowned at the four-color hammered tin image of a vintage Superman, chest muscles bulging as he tore apart a heavy

chain with his bare hands.

Where the hell was he?

Oh yeah. Blossom's living room.

They'd had a great night, despite the residual itching from the calamari. They'd watched episode after episode of classic Superman, laughing over the cheesy special effects, but loving the stories all the same. Blossom had changed from her dress into a comfortable oversized T-shirt and men's boxers. She'd made popcorn and poured soda, and they stayed up until four a.m.

But he hadn't touched her once.

Groaning, Clark rolled over and eyed the door to her bedroom. The firmly closed door to her bedroom. Bruce would have been in there by now, he reflected bleakly. Bruce's physique would have blinded Blossom to his less-than-superheroic emotional traits, providing him quick and easy access to her bed. And once there, Bruce would have wasted no time in plying his legendary bedroom skills to give Blossom the sexual fulfillment she needed to trigger her own powers.

Still, things could be worse. At least he and Blossom shared the basics for a good friendship. They liked the same jokes, and she loved superheroes and everything about them. Plus, she seemed to be comfortable around him.

He grimaced. As long as she didn't look at him, that is. But he had spent the night at her apartment. She could have kicked him out, but she hadn't. That counted for something, right? Given enough time...

Except he didn't have enough time.

Shit.

He should have been expecting Captain Marvelous' wake-up call, but the cell phone chirp still took him by surprise.

He grabbed his glasses with one hand and his laptop case with the other. He tore open the Velcro and pulled out his cell. "Kendall here."

"What's the report, Clark? Are you in yet?"

Clark winced at the Captain's choice of words. "Uh, not exactly, sir."

"Not good enough, Clark, you know that. Time's running out."

Clark gave a surreptitious glance toward Blossom's door. "I'm working on it. I spent the night in her apartment."

The Captain perked up. "In her bedroom?"

"Uh, no," Clark said. "On the couch."

A brief silence ensued, then the Captain heaved a sigh. "Clark, much as I hate to admit it, I'm beginning to think I made a mistake sending you to Megalopolis."

Clark struggled to right himself on the understuffed couch cushion. "Not at all, Captain. I can do this. I just need a little more time."

"Unfortunately, that's something I don't have to give," the Captain said. "Lex's bomb is set to go off in..."

"...seventeen hours and fifty-eight minutes," Clark finished for him. "Believe me, I know."

"Then you understand I've got no choice, son. I'm sending in backup."

Clark's stomach abruptly knotted. "Who?"

"Why, Bruce Wynn, of course. Who else?"

* * * *

Saturday, 6:15 a.m.

Seventeen hours, forty-five minutes, and counting...

Blossom was dressing when she heard Clark's phone ring. Who would call him at this hour?

A girlfriend?

The thought made her stomach lurch, though she couldn't quite imagine why. It's not like she wanted him for herself or anything. Even though she'd had more fun last night in ... heck, she didn't know how long. Clark was really the nicest guy. She revised her theory about the girlfriend caller. It just didn't seem in Clark's character to cheat on an unsuspecting significant other. Not that any cheating had gone on, mind you. The whole night had been totally innocent.

Blossom zipped up her jeans and wriggled into a green and gold MPI tee shirt. She and Clark had watched TV for hours, but he hadn't tried to kiss her again. She felt a little conflicted about that. On one hand, he'd had plenty of opportunity. She should be insulted he hadn't taken advantage of it. On the other hand, who could blame him if he hadn't? When he'd tried it the first time, she'd decked him.

She eased open the door. "Clark? Are you up?" She wouldn't want him to think she was eavesdropping.

He snapped his phone closed and shoved it into his laptop case. "Yeah," he said, getting to his feet.

His white pants were a bit ruffled, but at least his black shirt was all the way unbuttoned now, and hanging loose. His feet were bare. Somehow, that seemed unsettling.

She made it halfway across the room before her legs refused to take her any further. "Your chest looks a lot better," she said. Inanely. "I mean, the hives and all."

"The itching's gone," he replied, not moving.

She changed direction, heading for the kitchen. "Want some coffee? I usually pick it up on my way to the lab, but I can--"

"No thanks," he said. "Let's go out to breakfast."

"Can't. I have a meeting with my Ph.D. advisor at seven."

"On a Saturday morning?"

"Yeah. Graduate students don't exactly keep corporate hours."

"Meet me after, then."

"I have a ton of work to do."

His tone turned desperate. "Lunch, then. You have to eat, right?"

"I guess. How 'bout the Burger Shack? It's a couple blocks down the street, on Main. At eleven forty-five?"

"It'll have to do," said Clark. "See you then."

* * * *

Saturday, 8:48 a.m.

Fifteen hours, twelve minutes, and counting...

Clark leaned on the stand up counter at the local coffeehouse and took a bracing gulp of his caramel latte. He had to do something about Blossom. The "just friends" thing was all very well and good, but with time ticking by like--well, like a neutron bomb ready to explode--he couldn't afford to kick back and wait for favorable developments. He had to come up with a viable plan for her seduction. One that would take Blossom's mind off her narrow visual focus and let her concentrate on her feelings. He knew she liked him a little. If she harbored even one one-hundredth of the attraction he felt for her, he would succeed.

After years of fantasizing about Diana Price, it was odd he should feel this way. Diana was every man's dream. The kind of woman you saw in a centerfold. Tall. Voluptuous. Gorgeous. Self-confident. Hot. And if Diana had a brain, it wasn't immediately apparent.

Blossom couldn't begin to compete. Sure, she was cute, especially with all those freckles on her upturned nose, but no one would have handed her first place in a beauty contest. Her breasts were barely a B cup, and her legs weren't long and shapely. Her hair frizzed a little. But she was smart. And fun, once you got past her I-hate-geeks façade. She had a great sense of humor, and to Clark, that counted for a lot.

She was a little unsure of herself, in an endearing kind of way. Maybe that was why she obsessed so much about Superman. Maybe subconsciously, she wanted to set her standard so high no man could reach it. So she wouldn't get hurt.

I wouldn't hurt her, Clark thought. If she wanted him, he'd be hers in three seconds flat. After he triggered Blossom's superpowers and saved the world, they could hook up for good. He took a long sip of coffee, spinning that fantasy for a while. They could get married, buy a house in the suburbs not too far from HI headquarters, have two-point-three kids and a dog...

But he had to get her into bed first. Before Bruce arrived on the scene. When that happened, Blossom

would take one look at Bruce's steroid-enhanced pectorals and melt into a gooey puddle on the sidewalk. All the women did.

A hot rush of anger surged through him. No way could he let Bruce Wynn, Superjerk, hurt Blossom. Clark would face down a whole freezer full of calamari before he'd let that happen.

If only he could get Blossom's mind off the visual...

He straightened abruptly. That was it. Get Blossom's mind off the visual.

Could he do it?

Chapter Six

Saturday, 12:15 p.m.

Eleven hours, forty-five minutes, and counting...

Blossom dumped three packs of sugar into her iced tea, all the while keeping one eye on the door. Clark was late. He wouldn't stand her up, would he? A little twitch of fear wiggled in her stomach. Maybe he'd decided she was too geeky for him. He wouldn't be the first guy to decide that.

"Hey, babe. Got a minute?"

The speaker was a man. A beautiful man. Blossom looked behind her, but she didn't see anyone he might have been speaking to.

She turned back. "You mean me?"

"Yeah, babe. You."

She drank him in. Over six feet tall, with dark hair, dark eyes, and chiseled features. And dressed all in delicious black. A T-shirt stretched so tight across his unbelievable chest it was in danger of coming apart at the seams. Leather pants hugged lean hips and long muscular legs with just the right amount of loving cling. Blossom's eyes widened. The incredible bulge between his thighs was definitely superhero material.

Her stomach executed an Olympic grade back flip. This guy outshone every last poster on her wall. God, he was hot. Scorching. Just touching him would probably give her third degree burns.

"Did you want me for something?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah." He let the words hang there in the air between them until she blushed. "Can I join you?"

"Me?" He had to be kidding. No man in his league had ever even blinked in her direction.

His gaze drifted over her, sending little tingles zapping all over her skin. "I saw you sitting here," he said. "And I thought, what a crime such a beautiful girl has to eat lunch alone. I'll buy you lunch, babe."

She stared at him for a good five seconds before she realized he was waiting for some kind of reply. "Sure," she said, waving toward the empty booth seat opposite.

Oh, wait. What about Clark? She gave another glance toward the door. Well, heck. He was late. It would serve him right to find her with another man. Not that it mattered. After all, it wasn't as if she and Clark had anything going on.

She swallowed a little pang of guilt as the hottie's perfect butt slid across the vinyl bench seat.

She shoved a menu at him. "What would you like?"

He held her gaze. "I'm looking at it, babe."

"Oh," squeaked Blossom, her throat suddenly dry. She licked her lips. His incredible eyes darkened.

Oh, God.

"What did you say your name was?" she asked.

* * * *

Saturday, 12:31 p.m.

Eleven hours, twenty-nine minutes, and counting...

The key to success in any venture, Clark decided as he hurried to his lunch date with Blossom, lay in careful research and meticulous planning. Of course, promptness didn't hurt either. He checked his watch and winced. He was late, late, late. He hoped Blossom didn't think he'd stood her up.

He clutched his laptop case in one hand, thinking of the extra items it held. Items he'd purchased, then promptly hidden in the zippered and Velcroed pockets. The store he'd visited was the kind that didn't open until noon, and it had taken a little time--after he'd recovered from pure shock--to sort through its offerings. After all, the fate of the world depended on his choices.

He hurried the last few steps to the Burger Shack and shoved open the door.

And stopped dead in his tracks.

Shit.

Bruce Wynn was in town.

Clark plowed through the knot of customers at the door. He'd known Bruce was coming to hit on Blossom, but the fact hadn't registered until now. His stomach lurched as Bruce's manicured hand crept across the table to stroke Blossom's fingers. He said something. She laughed.

No way was this happening, Clark thought darkly. Blossom was much too nice a girl to get caught by a

predator like Bruce. Clark pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and squared his shoulders. His grip tightened on the handle of his laptop case.

He marched to Blossom's rescue.

"Clark," Blossom said, not quite meeting his gaze.

"I thought we had a lunch date," Clark said tersely.

Bruce lounged back, draping one arm over the back of the booth seat, an amused smile playing on his lips.

Blossom's eyes sparked with annoyance. "You were late, Clark, but luckily I got another invitation for lunch." She waved a hand across the table. "This is Bruce."

"Pleased to meet you," Bruce said.

"Bruce thought it would be a shame if I had to eat alone," Blossom said.

"I'm sure," said Clark dryly.

"A word of advice," Bruce said, talking to Clark but keeping his gaze trained on Blossom. "Never leave a beautiful woman waiting."

Blossom giggled, soaking it up. Puh-lease, thought Clark. How could an intelligent girl like Blossom not see through Bruce's act? It was incomprehensible.

Clark shifted his laptop to his other hand. "I'm sorry I'm late," he said to Blossom. "But I really couldn't help it. Come on. Tell this joker to get lost."

"I can't," said Blossom. "We've already ordered. Maybe you and I could get together some other time."

"Fine," said Clark. "I'll wait until you're done lunch and walk you back to campus."

"Oh," said Blossom, looking nonplussed. "That won't work. Bruce said he'd drive me."

"Dinner, then?"

"I'm working late."

"I'll pick you up."

She shook her head. "No. Bruce and I--"

"Forget it," Clark cut in. "Just forget it."

He turned on his heel and strode off, seething.

"Clark..." Blossom called.

He paused, hopeful, not daring to turn.

"Let him go, babe," Bruce said. "He'll cool off."

"I guess you're right," he heard Blossom say.

Clark trudged on, toward the rear of the restaurant. He couldn't afford to leave the building, not with Bruce drooling over Blossom like a condemned man over his last slice of cheesecake. He banged into the men's room, deep in thought. He needed help, and fast. But who...

That's it. He tore open a pocket on his laptop case and slid out his cell phone. No signal. Well, it freaking figured, didn't it? He just couldn't catch a break on this assignment.

He climbed up on a sink and held the phone near the single window, high up on the wall, trying to catch a satellite beam.

The door creaked open, admitting an elderly man. He gave Clark a startled glance, then shuffled over to a urinal and unzipped his pants.

The phone beeped. Yes! Clark punched in a number and waited grimly for an answer.

"Hello?"

He didn't beat around the bush. "Diana. You've got to help me."

"Clark? Is that you?" Diana's breathless little laugh wafted over the wireless connection. "I thought you were on assignment."

"I am. And it was going fine. But now Bruce is in town and he's going to blow it for me. He's going to have Blossom in bed before dinner."

The old codger at the urinals looked up from his business and shot Clark an interested glance.

Clark lowered his voice, trying to keep his footing on the edge of the sink. "You've got to help me, Diana."

He could almost see her inspecting her long, red fingernails for flaws. "I don't know, Clark..."

He wasn't in the mood for her games. "Come on. You know you owe me."

The old man zipped up.

"Owe you? For what?"

"Programming your DVD player, for one thing. Updating the virus protection on your PC. And what about last spring when I reset every clock in your house for Daylight Savings Time? What are you going to do in October when you have to set them all back again?"

A long silence, broken only by the flush of the urinal.

"Diana..."

She gave a little sigh. "Oh, all right. I guess I can help you out, if it doesn't take too long. I'm in the middle of something."

"What?"

"Shopping. In downtown Megalopolis. And you know how hard it is for a superheroine to get a free afternoon."

"Megalopolis?" Clark laughed out loud. Finally, a break. "Perfect. How far are you from MPI?"

"About ten minutes," Diana said. "Why? What do you want me to do?"

The old man shuffled up to the sink next to Clark's and cocked his eyebrows.

"Get lost," Clark told him. "No, not you, Diana."

"Hmph," Diana said.

Clark waited while the old man dried his hands and creaked out the door.

"Clark? Are you still there? I haven't got all day, you know. I have a facial at four."

"You'll be done way before then," Clark assured her, and proceeded to outline his plan.

* * * *

Saturday, 12:57 p.m.

Eleven hours, three minutes, and counting...

Clark had to admit, Diana really had a flair for the dramatic. And she showed up right on cue, just as the Burger Shack waitress brought Bruce the check. She'd outdone herself with the costume. Clark barely recognized her.

He watched as Diana, garbed in a shapeless, colorless housecoat, waddled through the restaurant. He wasn't sure what she'd stuffed under her dress to simulate an eight-and-a-half month pregnancy, but from his position at the door to the men's room, her round stomach looked pretty damn convincing. Pink foam rollers stuck out all over her head and fuzzy pink slippers encased her feet.

Clark had lusted after Diana for years, but in all that time, he'd never seen her without makeup. Amazingly, without cosmetic assistance, Diana's looks hovered around average. Blossom's fresh, unadorned complexion was much more appealing. Clark mused over the discovery. Who would have guessed it?

Diana, clearly enjoying herself, waltzed halfway down the aisle. She stopped, made a big show of spotting Bruce and Blossom, and let out an earsplitting shriek.

Every head in the place turned.

"You!" she cried, marching up to Bruce and jabbing him on the shoulder with one finger. "You ... you ... worthless, low-life, two-timing excuse for a man!"

"Diana?" Bruce said.

Clark chuckled. Old Bruce was pretty slow on the uptake. He didn't even have the presence of mind to pretend ignorance.

Blossom gasped. "You know this woman?"

"Know me?" Diana yelled. She smoothed her hands over her impressive girth, arching her back and

thrusting her belly in Bruce's face. "I'd say my husband knows me pretty damn well, wouldn't you?"

A purple-haired lady at the next table looked up from her lemon meringue pie. "I'd say so, honey."

Bruce's eyes bugged out. "What the hell--"

"Oh. My. God." Blossom scooted down to the end of booth seat. "You're married?"

"No," said Bruce, grabbing her wrist. "I'm not. Don't go. I don't have anything to do with this." He glared at Diana. "It's a set up."

"Don't you believe him, girlfriend," the lady with the purple hair advised.

"Right. Whatever." Blossom slapped Bruce's arm with her backpack. "Let me go."

Shit. Clark grabbed his laptop and jogged up the aisle. He hadn't counted on Bruce getting physical.

"Blossom, I--" Bruce started.

Clark staggered to a stop at the table and whipped out his cell phone. "You better do what she says," he puffed. "Or I'm calling the cops."

"Clark--" Blossom said.

"You," Bruce said, sending Clark a look that could vaporize. "I should have known. Go to hell. She's mine."

"See what I have to put up with?" Diana complained to the gathering crowd.

"What an asshole." The purple haired lady climbed onto her seat, straining for a better view. "Honey," she said to Blossom. "Get out while the getting's good. Guys like him are no damn picnic. They boink you once and think they own you."

"No," Bruce said, re-anchoring his grip on Blossom's wrist. "It's not like that. I can explain."

"Let ... me ... go," repeated Blossom, landing three more backpack blows to Bruce's arm.

Clark grabbed hold of Bruce's arm and pulled, using his laptop for leverage. He didn't move the hard muscles an inch. "You heard her," he said. "Let go."

"Not until she listens to me." He winced as Blossom's backpack whacked him upside the head. "What have you got in that thing?"

"You can forget me ever listening to you," Blossom said, angling for another blow. "Let me go!"

"No, I--"

Clark looped his arm around Bruce's neck and yanked as hard as he could. Nothing.

"That's it." Diana reached through the tangle of arms and put the supersqueeze on Bruce's wrist. "You're a sexist clod, Bruce. I don't know what I ever saw in you. We're through."

"Aaaaahh--" Bruce clawed at Diana's fingers with one hand. The other arm fended off Blossom's next attack.

Diana gave him an elbow under the chin.

"Ooof." Bruce fell back on the booth seat.

"You go, girlfriend," the purple-haired woman yelled.

The crowd pressed forward. "Come on," Clark said, tugging Blossom out of Bruce's limp grasp. "Let's get out of here."

"Nooooo!" cried Bruce, lunging after them.

Diana crossed her wrists in front of her chest. She spun around once, fake stomach bouncing, and kicked out a leg. Bruce tried to vault it, aimed too low, and landed face first in the aisle.

Diana scooped up the purple-haired woman's lemon meringue pie and dumped it on Bruce's head. Bruce heaved himself to his knees. Diana jumped him.

"Ooof!" Bruce's lungs deflated.

They went down, limbs flailing, rolling down the aisle. The crowd parted. Someone called for the cops. The waitress shoved her way to the register and grabbed a phone. The lady with the purple hair jumped up on her booth table and shouted a play-by-play.

Clark grabbed Blossom around the waist. He shoved her through the crowd, angling for the back door. His laptop banged against his leg as they scurried around a smelly dumpster, up an alley, and across Main Street. They veered right on Broad. Sirens sounded in the distance.

They didn't stop until they reached Blossom's apartment. Clark doubled over in front of the door, trying to catch his breath. A sharp pain sliced through his right side. He was out of shape, no doubt about it. Too many damn hours in front of the computer. He really should do something about that. Take up jogging, maybe.

Beside him, Blossom was shaking. Ah, hell. Bruce's cave man tactics must have traumatized her. Anger surged into Clark's veins. He'd get Bruce back for this one. The next time Bruce Wynn, Superjerk, tried to log onto his HI user account, he'd better be prepared for a fight.

His network connection was going down, down, down.

Blossom shuddered again. Her hands covered her face and her shoulders heaved. Clark shifted uneasily, passing his laptop from one hand to the other. Hell. He'd rather confront twenty Evil Maniacal Geniuses than face a single feminine tear. He didn't know the first thing about pulling a hysterical woman together.

He reached out and put a timid hand on Blossom's shoulder. "It's ... uh ... all right."

Her shoulders only shook harder. He took a deep breath and stepped a little closer, patting her awkwardly on the arm. "Blossom. Please don't..."

She looked up and laughed in his face.

Clark gaped at her. "You're not crying."

"Crying?" she gasped. "God, no." She dissolved in a fit of giggles. "I've never ... seen anything ... so funny." She doubled over again, fighting for breath. "As when that guy hit the ground." She hiccupped.

Clark let out a relieved snort. "Me neither." He sobered a little. "I'm sorry I was late. The whole thing was my fault."

"No it wasn't," Blossom said quickly. "It was mine. I should have waited for you. I should have known things wouldn't work out with Bruce."

"Why not?"

She sighed. "He was too good to be true."

"He's not good at all," Clark pointed out. "He's a jerk. A totally ripped, phenomenally handsome jerk, but still."

"You're right," Blossom said. "I know you are. And I really try to like regular guys. I do. But the truth is, they just don't turn me on. I mean, take you for example."

Clark winced.

"You're great. You're smart, nice, and you have a good sense of humor. You really seem to like me--"

"I do," Clark put in.

"--but I just can't get excited about you. It would make life a whole heck of a lot easier if I could." Her voice rose, trembling dangerously. "I'm an idiot." She started blinking furiously.

Damn. Looked like those tears might materialize after all.

"Uh, Blossom--"

"I'm a loser, Clark. A geeky loser."

"No, you're not," he said. "You're just--"

"Don't tell me what I am."

"Uh, okay. Listen, Blossom--"

"Do you want to hear something really pathetic?" She couldn't seem to meet his gaze.

"No, I--"

"I've never had an orgasm."

"I know. That's why--"

Blossom's head snapped up. "You know? How the hell could you know? I just met you two days ago."

"Uh, I mean, I guessed," Clark said, backpedaling as fast as he could. "I can tell you're a woman who..."

"Who what?"

"Um... You're somebody that wouldn't..."

"Wouldn't what?"

"Sleep around," Clark finished feebly.

"Sleep around? I don't sleep around! Heck, I'm practically a virgin! How can you say that?"

"I didn't," Clark pointed out swiftly. "I was just trying to say--"

"I'm a mess." Blossom's eyes filled with tears.

"No," Clark said. He put down his laptop, inched closer, and draped one arm over her shoulders. "You're great. Fantastic. And very sexy."

"I'm frigid."

"You're not. I'm sure you'll have an orgasm when the right man comes along."

She sniffed. "You really think so?"

"Yes," Clark said. "All you have to do is close your eyes."

"Close my eyes?"

"Yeah. Close your eyes and listen to your heart."

Blossom sighed. "That's easier said than done. I'm a very visually oriented person, in case you hadn't noticed."

"I had," Clark said dryly. He maneuvered his free hand into his laptop zipper compartment. "But you know, if you're willing, I could help you overcome that."

Blossom's brows drew together. "How?"

He lifted a narrow swath of black satin. A blindfold. One of the purchases he'd made an hour ago. He dangled it in front of her.

"First," he said, "you tie this over your eyes."

Blossom stared at the thing. "You want me to put on a blindfold?"

"Yes," Clark said. "I do." She closed her eyes, as if imagining it. He felt a little shudder race through her.

He started getting hard.

She opened her eyes. "First I put on the blindfold," she repeated. She frowned a little. "And then what happens?"

"Then," Clark said, "you trust me."

Chapter Seven

Saturday, 1:39 p.m.

Ten hours, twenty-one minutes, and counting...

Clark's blindfold was black, soft, and utterly tantalizing. Blossom closed her eyes and tried to imagine how it would feel draped over her face. Blocking her vision. The bottom glided out of her belly and a soft tingling sprang to life between her thighs.

Clark's low, rich voice washed over her, sending little ripples of pleasure across her skin. "What do you say?"

Silence stretched between them for one heartbeat, two, three. "I don't know," Blossom said finally.

He ran the blindfold down her bare arm. It was cool, soft, and oh-so-smooth. "Just try it. I'll stop whenever you say."

She believed him. He was too nice of a guy to lie to her.

She took the long swath of material in her hands. The center was wide, and double thickness. The ends narrowed into long ties. She held it up to her eyes, pressing the fabric flat, trying to see through it.

Nothing.

Only inky darkness.

She jumped when Clark's warm hand descended on her nape. "Put it on," he whispered. His breath was moist on her neck. The tingling between her thighs started up again, more urgent this time. "Go on."

With shaking hands, she smoothed the blindfold over her eyes and crossed the laces behind her head.

"Here," Clark said, easing the ties from her fingers. "Let me help you." With swift, sure strokes, he secured the blindfold.

When she reached up to touch it, he trapped her hands in his. "Just relax."

"All right. I'll try." It was a blatant lie. Having her sight taken away had started her heart jack-hammering in her chest. No way could she relax.

She felt Clark shift behind her. He bent, as if retrieving something from the ground. His laptop, she thought, a little smile touching her lips. He was such a geek. But for the first time, the thought didn't disturb her.

He turned her, exerting a gentle pressure with his hand at the small of her back.

"Wait," she said. "First I want to know what else you've got in that bag."

He gave a low laugh. A rather sexy laugh, she thought. Funny how she hadn't noticed that about him before. She heard the scritch of a zipper. "You mean in here?"

"Yes."

"Just a few things I picked up on Spring Street."

"Spring Street?" she said. "But that's--"

"--a very, let's say, 'colorful' part of town." He laughed again. The sound made her want to lean back and melt into him. "I went shopping in a little store called Lavish Love."

She giggled. "It sounds like a porno flick."

"I think they shoot those in the back," Clark said. "In the front ... well, you'll just have to wait and see. I mean feel," he corrected himself.

He kissed her neck, just below the ear. She hadn't expected it, and the suddenness doubled the sweetness of the caress. He nipped his way up to her ear and swirled his tongue around the shell.

"Oh, God," she whispered. "That feels incredible."

"It's only the start," Clark whispered. He pushed her gently forward. "Now will you start walking?"

She nodded. He guided her to her apartment, pausing to extract the keys from her backpack. Then the door clicked shut behind them. His laptop case thudded to the floor.

Clark's arm dipped behind her knees. She clutched his shoulders as her feet left the ground. He carried her through black space. It was a strange feeling. Like being adrift on an endless sea. She heard him kick a door open.

Her bedroom. She tried to remember if she'd left the bed unmade. No. When she landed on the bed, it was on top of the comforter. It puffed around her like a cloud, with a little whoosh as it settled.

Clark came down on top of her, the weight of his lower body pressing her into the mattress, his upper body supported on rigid arms. She ran her hands up his arms, along his shoulder, across his chest. Funny. In darkness he seemed bigger, more muscular than she had thought. And so much more solid.

He smelled nice. A hint of aftershave overlying a scent of plain soap. She could hear his breathing--fast intakes of breath. She spread her palm over his heart. It was beating almost as fast as hers.

He kissed her. His lips were firm, mobile. They tasted of mint. They coaxed hers apart, and she sighed, letting him in. Who'd have thought that a geek would know how to kiss so well? It seemed Clark was full of surprises.

His tongue plunged and receded. She clung to him, enjoying the sensation. It ended too soon, but she didn't have time to miss it. Her attention snapped to his fingers, which were undoing the buttons on her blouse.

Sudden fear stabbed her. She couldn't see him, but he didn't have the same handicap. Would he like what he saw when he undressed her? How would she know what he thought if she couldn't look into his eyes?

Her hand rose to stop him, but her blouse was already undone. His fingers stroked along the edges of her bra, then found the front closure.

"Clark, I--"

"Shh..." he said. "Don't worry. Everything's fine."

"I don't know. I'm not sure I want you looking at me."

His hands paused. "Why not?"

"Because ... I'm not much to look at. No curves."

He chuckled. "Oh, I don't know about that." Her bra fell open and his palms cupped her breasts. "Looks

to me like your curves are just fine. Perfect, in fact."

She felt his breath on her skin, then his mouth closed, hot and intense, on her nipple. She moaned, arching her back. Her fingers threaded into his thick hair, holding his head to her breast. He nipped and suckled, then licked a wet line to the other side and started all over again. Each tug of his lips and teeth shot a line of erotic fire straight to her groin. She moaned and wriggled, trying to ease the pressure building there.

After a few minutes, he eased away. "I'm going to undress you the rest of the way now." His voice trembled. "Is that all right?"

Blossom's heart pounded into her throat. "Yes."

He eased her arms out of her blouse and bra, and then they were gone. He unsnapped her jeans and drew the zipper down, link by link. His hands were unsteady. Shaking. Cool air wafted over her as he moved to the end of the bed to slip off her shoes and socks. Then her jeans slid over her hips and down her legs.

Had her panties gone with them? No. He rose over her, easing his fingers around the elastic at her hips and thighs, brushing his thumbs over the swollen mound beneath. She groaned a little, pushing upward into his hand. He slipped his hands around her hips and cradled her buttocks in his hands. He drew her panties down her legs, inch by excruciating inch.

He moved away from the bed, leaving her naked, blind, and vulnerable.

"What about your clothes?" she asked. "I want them off, too."

"Soon," he told her. His voice didn't seem too steady, and that made her feel a little bit better. She heard his footsteps retreat from the room.

She shifted, trying to get comfortable on the bed, turning her head so as to better catch the sounds coming from the living room. She heard the scruff of Velcro separating.

The laptop case again. She listened more carefully. She heard a tiny cracking sound, then a click, a snap, and another click.

A gentle whirring told her he'd started a CD spinning in her player. A moment later, strains of lush music enveloped her. In the background, an ocean broke on an invisible shoreline. She heard a birdcall, then the rush of the wind. The surf pounded again, hard and sure. Blossom's body responded. Her arousal coiled a little tighter and she shifted, unsettled.

"Do you like it?" Clark whispered.

"Yes." She held out her arms in the direction of his voice. "Come here and I'll show you how much."

"In a minute," he replied. He moved around the bed again. She heard the laptop zipper. Another purchase from Lavish Love?

She heard a clink, then the strike of a match. The faint smell of sulfur drifted past, then a richer, spicier scent.

"Cinnamon," she whispered. "I love cinnamon. How did you know?"

"I didn't," said Clark. "I got it because it reminded me of your hair."

She smiled at that.

"What else do you have in that bag?"

More Velcro. Blossom ran her hands down her body, excitement rising.

The Velcro stopped. "Do that again," Clark said.

"What?"

"That thing with your hands."

"You mean this?" She let her palms drift down her torso, slower this time. She brushed the sides of her breasts, her stomach, her hips, then threaded her fingers through the curls at the apex of her thighs.

"Yeah," Clark breathed. "That."

"You like it?"

"Oh, yeah."

She did it again, starting from the top, this time lingering long enough to circle her nipples and stroke between her legs.

Clark groaned. She chuckled, enjoying his distress.

"You like tormenting me, don't you?" he said.

She smiled. "It's fun. I only wish I could see you suffering."

"It's not a pretty sight," he said with a soft laugh. He shifted off the bed, and again she heard the laptop zipper. "Here's something that will distract you." He returned to the bed. The mattress dipped a little, rolling her toward him.

"Taste this." He brushed something cool and firm against her lips.

She opened her mouth. He dipped a rounded object inside. She skimmed it with the tip of her tongue. Ummm... Something chocolate. Delightful.

"Suck on it." His voice was husky. Low.

She obeyed, pursing her lips and sucking. An explosion of flavor burst into her mouth. A cool, ripe strawberry. Covered with a layer of thick, dark chocolate.

Heaven.

She ate it all, licking every bit from his fingers, and even sucking them a little afterwards. Clark groaned again, and leaned forward to kiss her.

"Please don't tell me that strawberry came from a porn shop," she said when she came up for air.

He snorted. "God, no. I got them at the gourmet grocer on Main Street." He reached across the bed, his arm brushing her legs as he retrieved something she could only guess at. "But I did get this at Lavish Love."

A soft tantalizing touch brushed her forehead, her cheeks, her lips. "What is it?"

"You tell me." He swept the unseen instrument down her arms, across her breasts, and over her stomach.

"A feather?"

"A long one," he said, stroking the crease at the top of one leg, then moving around to stroke the inside of her thighs. He lingered there, teasing. "Open your legs," he breathed.

She obeyed.

"Wider."

She did that too, quivering as the feather touched her again. Her inner muscles contracted, sending a faint glimpse of bliss shooting through her body. Clark ran the tip of the feather over her swollen folds, then played it over her tight nub. The sensation was too fleeting, too light. She groaned, as the coil in her belly tightened.

The feather vanished. Her hips moved, wanting it back. The ocean music from the CD player surged and receded. Then the laptop's Velcro parted again, and her body went on high alert. What was coming next?

She heard Clark moving around--undressing, she thought. After a moment, he settled back onto the bed, down near the end. His warm hands lifted her feet and cradled them in his lap. His bare lap.

Blossom caught her breath. He was naked, in her bed. She wanted very much to see him. So what if he didn't have the body of a superhero? He had the heart of one. And he wanted her. She was beginning to discover what a turn on that was.

He began massaging her foot. He wore some kind of glove on one hand. It was slightly scratchy, but not unpleasantly so. Like a loofah sponge. "What are you wearing?"

He laughed. "I think it's called a bath glove. It's purple."

"Really?" She tried to imagine Clark, sitting on the edge of her bed, wearing a purple glove. And nothing else.

Her mind boggled.

He worked his way up her legs, his gloved hand leaving a tingling path in its wake, his bare hand soothing over the same path almost immediately. He avoided her breasts, and the slick, sensitive folds between her legs, moving close, teasing, then retreating without satisfying. The ocean music surged and ebbed in the background, a floating accompaniment to his attentions.

As he moved up her body, she reached for him, exploring him with her hands like a blind woman. He was surprisingly firm muscled. Not bulky like the superhero posters on her walls, but not soft, either, as she expected a geek to be. He must get away from that laptop occasionally, she thought.

Her hands slid across his flat belly and dipped between his legs. He sucked in a breath as she gripped his cock. Her fingers ran the long, firm length of it, all the way down, then all the way up again. The head was wide and warm. She cupped it in her palm, squeezing a little.

His breathing went ragged. He groaned a little as he leaned in and kissed her.

"You took off your glasses," she said. She tried to imagine it.

"Yeah," he said. "I can't see a thing."

She laughed at that. Her arms went around his neck, holding him tight. "Are we really going to do this?"

"If you'll let me."

"Do you have condoms in that black bag?"

"Only a couple dozen."

She smiled against his lips. "We can always go out for more later."

He levered himself away, until they were no longer touching. She thought she heard him strip off the glove, then tear a foil packet. She waited for him to return, but the seconds ticked by and he waited, not moving, not speaking.

"Clark?"

No answer. She lay still, waiting, listening. She couldn't hear anything beyond the ocean music--no movement, no breathing. Had he left her? Why?

The seconds ticked by. Blossom lay still at first, not wanting to break the magic of the game. But when endless moments passed and still he didn't return, she sat up, her hands reaching for the ties on the blindfold.

"Leave it on," Clark said.

Her hands stilled on the laces. "I thought you had gone."

"No," he said. "I'm here, watching you."

"Why?"

He gave a wry laugh. "I don't know. I guess I just like looking at you, knowing you can't see me. I'm not sure you would be so eager to make love if your eyes were open."

A glimmer of shame flashed through her. "My posters bother you, don't they? I'm sorry. I know it's silly of me, obsessing about superheroes. About men who don't exist."

"No," he said. His voice sounded strange. Uncertain. "It's not that. It's just..."

She wished she could see his face. "What?"

"I've dreamed of a woman like you," Clark said.

Blossom gave a shaky laugh. "You've dreamed of woman with freckles and frizzy red hair, who didn't want to date you because you drag a laptop around?"

He shifted on the mattress. "Well, not that, exactly. I've dreamed of one who trusted me enough to let herself go in my arms."

Blossom kept her voice steady. "And you think I could do that?"

"I know you can," he said.

"I wish I could believe you," she said. "But the truth is, I'm not sure it's possible for me. I've never had an orgasm. I can't even imagine it."

In lieu of an answer, she felt his lips on her stomach, her breast, her neck. His body moved, fitting itself to hers. She parted her legs, cradling his arousal.

And then he was inside, filling her, stroking, moving. "You know what I'm imagining right now?" he whispered in her ear.

"What?" she whispered back.

"The two of us on a beach, alone. Doing this." He thrust in.

"Someone would see us," she said. He eased out.

"No. We're alone. On a deserted island." He surged forward, harder than before.

Blossom sucked in a breath. "Are there palm trees?"

"As many as you want," he said, his hips flexing under her hands. "All around us. Swaying gently in the warm breeze."

"What does the ocean look like?"

He quickened his pace. "Pale green and sparkling. You can see clear through the water to the sand."

She felt herself slip toward something she desperately wanted to reach. "The sky. Is it blue?"

"It's brilliant." He was loving her hard now, with long, deep strokes, mingled with the scent of his sweat and the ragged sound of his breath in her ears. She opened her mouth on his shoulder and tasted the salty, slick flavor of him.

"The sand is warm," he murmured. "Warm and soft. You can feel it beneath you."

His hands ran along the backs of her thighs, lifting them as he angled her body for a deeper thrust. She knotted her hands in the comforter. So close. She could feel the moist breeze on her face, smell the salt in the air.

"Let go," Clark breathed. "Now. Do it for me." He gripped her hips and surged forward.

Shattering light burst inside her. She felt her body fling outward, as if exploded into a million, glittering pieces, each one an eternal fragment of bliss. She clung to Clark's shoulders as his body pistoned against hers. She felt him go even harder inside her.

He cried her name as he came. His orgasm triggered aftershocks of her own release. They pulsed like the ocean, waves and waves of bliss, carrying her gently back to earth. When it was over, she melted into the warm sand, her mouth seeking Clark's lips. He kissed her deeply, his breath slowing until it matched the rhythm of the ocean in the background. A soft spray of water misted over her.

Wait a minute. Sand? Water?

She jackknifed to a sitting position. Her head hit Clark's chin.

"Ouch!"

She tore off the blindfold.

And glimpsed wide ocean and white sand. The sparkling sunlight forced her eyes shut again. She wasn't

in her bedroom. Oh my God. "Clark?" Her voice wavered.

He grabbed her arms and yanked her to her feet. "Hoooo-yaaaah," he yelled, swinging her around. Her bare feet fought for balance on the soft sand. "We did it!"

She cracked her eyes open and focused on his face, struck by how handsome he was without his glasses. "Did what?"

He shoved a springy dark curl out of his eyes and grinned at her. "We teleported."

"That's impossible."

He laughed and swung her around again. This time, Blossom had the presence of mind to be embarrassed. They were both naked, for God's sake. Out in the open.

"Look around you," Clark said. "We're here. It's possible." He dropped her hand and punched a victorious fist in the air.

She couldn't deny he had a point. "But how?" she asked. "What did you do?"

"It wasn't me," Clark said. "You did this."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes," he said, "you did." He caught her hand and tugged her back down on the sand. "Let me explain."

By the time he had, she was stunned, bewildered, and seething mad. And wishing she had some clothes to put on. It was beyond awkward sitting here on the beach, naked, while Clark explained how he'd been acting under orders to talk her into bed.

"Let me get this straight," she said. "You're some kind of psychic superhero secret agent. I needed an orgasm to turn me into a superheroine. And you volunteered to give it to me? So I could help you save the world?"

He looked away. "Yeah. Something like that. You know, I think that's why you're so visually oriented. It's part of your talent. You have to see where you're going in your mind in order to teleport there."

Tears stung her eyes. She blinked hard, willing them not to fall. She'd thought she'd attracted Clark on her own. She thought he cared for her. Now she'd discovered she was nothing but an assignment to him. She scrambled to her feet and started marching across the sand.

"You can just take your save-the-world problem and shove it, Clark. I'm not helping."

He jogged up behind her. "What do you mean? You have to help. Or else everyone in the world, including us, will be dead in--" He checked his bare wrist. "Shit. I left my watch in your apartment."

She came to a halt. "Can't some other superhero stop Lex Loser?"

"If that were possible, Heroes Incorporated would have handled it by now." He shook his head. "No. The fate of humanity rests in our hands. You have to get us into Lex's lair. I'll do the rest."

"How am I supposed to do that? I don't even know how I got us here." She bit her lip. "What if I can't get us back? We could be stuck here for weeks. Naked. With no food."

"There are coconuts, probably," Clark said. "But that's beside the point. You can get us back. I know

you can. Just picture it."

Blossom sighed. "Okay, what do I have to do?"

Clark blinked. "I don't know. What were you doing when you teleported us here?"

Blossom frowned, trying to remember. "Nothing special."

"Thanks a lot," Clark said.

Blossom blushed. "I mean, I was just picturing the beach you were talking about, then, when I came, here we were."

"Okay," said Clark. "We can work with that. I'll describe HI headquarters, give you a mental image. You grab my hand, concentrate, and we'll be there."

"Uh, Clark."

"Yes?"

"There's only one problem."

"What's that?"

"We can't go to headquarters."

He gave her a puzzled look. "Why not?"

"We're naked, remember?"

He looked down. "Oh. Yeah. I forgot."

Blossom rolled her eyes. "Geeks."

Chapter Eight

Saturday, 3:52 p.m.

Eight hours, eight minutes, and counting...

They landed in the bathtub, limbs tangled.

Clark lifted Blossom over the rim of the tub, trying not to get distracted by all the soft skin in his hands.

"That's strange," she said. "I was picturing the bedroom."

"That's not good," Clark told her. "We could have rematerialized in a wall or something. Or in mid-air. Your father was killed by an error like that."

Blossom shivered. "Oh, God. I had no idea."

Clark strode into the bedroom. "Ideally, you should practice. Do some safe, little jumps. Get the hang of it." He glanced at the clock on the nightstand. "But there's not time for much. We've got to get to headquarters as soon as possible." He grabbed his clothes, then scooped up hers and tossed them to her.

She caught them and dressed while he placed a cell call to Captain Marvelous. He updated the Captain as to Blossom's... uh... progress.

The Captain chuckled. "Good for you, son. I knew you had it in you."

Clark stood a little taller. "Thank you, Captain."

Blossom practiced teleporting from the bedroom to the kitchen several times, then into the hall. First alone, then with Clark in tow.

"I can never get to the exact spot I want," she grumbled.

Clark wasn't too thrilled about that, but he didn't want to alarm Blossom by telling her so. She was already freaked out enough as it was.

"We can't delay much longer," he said. "The Captain wants us to report ASAP. Lex's bomb is set to blow in--" He checked his watch. "Six hours, forty-nine minutes, and counting."

* * * *

Saturday, 5:17 p.m.

Six hours, forty-three minutes, and counting...

Blossom grasped Clark's hand, closed her eyes, and tried to teleport into the HI ready room.

They landed in the dumpster behind the fake sub shop.

"Great," Blossom muttered, pulling unidentifiable muck out of her hair. "Just great. At this rate, all I'm going to do is get us killed."

Clark lowered his laptop to the asphalt, then jumped over the side of the dumpster and offered Blossom a hand. "No, you won't," he told her, but she could tell he was worried. "You'll do just fine. You're only a little off. The briefing room is directly below us."

"How far?"

Clark hesitated. "Thirty-six feet."

"Oh, God." Blossom's knees buckled.

Clark caught her before she could hit the ground. "Your long-distance accuracy is improving, you know." He steadied her on her feet, keeping one hand on her elbow and the other on the handle of his laptop case. "Come on. Try again. Thirty-six feet. Straight down." He described Captain Marvelous' briefing room.

Blossom sighed. "Hold on." She shut her eyes and pictured it.

They landed right outside the door. "Not bad," Clark said, but Blossom wasn't so sure. There was more to this teleporting business than one would think. It required a heck of a lot of concentration.

Clark guided her across the threshold. The room was small, just big enough for a round table and a few chairs. A tall, elderly man with a shock of white hair rose to greet them.

"Clark. You're right on time, son. Good work with the ... ah ... recovery of Ms. Breeze."

Good work. Sheesh. Blossom rolled her eyes. As if taking her to bed had been some kind of chore.

Her stomach twisted a little. Maybe it had been.

After all, Clark was a superhero. Oh, he may be a little on the underdeveloped side physically, but a lot of women wouldn't care about that. They'd be looking for the prestige of dating a superhero. Clark probably slept with a different woman every night.

Her stomach twisted some more. She didn't like thinking about that.

"Ah, Blossom," Captain Marvelous was saying. "Good to meet you, my girl." He wrinkled his nose. "What is that smell?"

"We had a small mishap, sir," Clark explained. "Nothing to get alarmed about."

"I see. Well, get cleaned up. The faster you get into Lex's lair, the safer the world will be."

* * * *

Saturday, 6:22 p.m.

Five hours, thirty-eight minutes, and counting...

"I don't know if I can do this," Blossom told Clark. They were standing in the middle of a very closed Megalopolis Museum of Natural History, in front of an enormous Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton. "I was supposed to land us next to the Triceratops."

"That's only a few feet away," Clark pointed out. "And it could have been worse. You might have teleported us into the men's room."

She frowned at him. "Don't joke. We've been practicing for hours, and the best I've done is three feet from the target. According to the Captain, Lex Loser's underground lair is a twisting maze of narrow passages. I'll never hit one. We'll materialize right in bedrock."

"His central lab is a large room. We'll go for that."

"And lose the element of surprise," Blossom grumbled. "He'll see us coming and blast us before you get a chance to defuse the bomb."

"Jeez," said Clark. "Are you always this pessimistic?"

"I don't know," admitted Blossom. "I've never done anything this important before."

"Welcome to the wonderful world of superheroes," Clark said.

* * * *

Saturday, 8:30 p.m.

Three hours, thirty minutes, and counting...

"Ready?" Captain Marvelous asked.

Clark glanced at Blossom. She didn't look the least bit ready, but unfortunately, their time had run out.

"Ready," Clark said.

"Go," the Captain said.

* * * *

Saturday, 8:33 p.m.

Three hours, twenty-seven minutes, and counting...

Well, the good news was, Blossom didn't teleport them into bedrock. The bad news was, Clark had no idea where they were. They'd materialized in a narrow channel enclosed by rocky walls. He raised his flashlight and shone the beam first in one direction, then the other. Nothing.

A drop of water splashed onto his nose. He sneezed. The sound echoed like a thunderclap.

"I hope Lex didn't hear that," Blossom said.

Clark unzipped his laptop case and powered up the machine. If he could get a satellite signal, he could triangulate their location with his GPS receiver. He punched in the required keystrokes. "Come on..."

A "no service" message flashed onto the screen.

"Damn," Clark said. "I guess we're on our own."

"Not what I wanted to hear," Blossom said. She'd found out during her practice sessions that if she didn't know where she was, it was much harder to get where she wanted to go.

Clark zipped up his laptop, then swung his flashlight to the front and rear. "Which way do you think?"

Blossom closed her eyes and pointed. "That way."

Clark clipped the flashlight onto his belt and put his arm around her waist. "Ready when you are," he said.

* * * *

Saturday, 11:46 p.m.

Fourteen minutes, and counting...

"Ah, Clark. I knew they would send you."

Lex's voice was casual, but the way his fingers stroked the buttons and levers on his futuristic-looking control panel was anything but. Clark swallowed hard. He'd hoped to defuse the bomb before Lex noticed anything was amiss. Unfortunately, after three frustrating hours of bouncing through caves and tunnels like human ping pong balls, Blossom had finally landed them right at Lex's feet. Within seconds, they'd found their arms stretched overhead, restrained by robotically controlled shackles. And not just your regular, everyday, run of the mill titanium shackles, either. No. Lex had imprisoned Clark with...

"Magnets," Lex said, sounding inordinately pleased with himself. "Your one weakness. Your psychic computer tampering powers are useless, Clark."

Clark supposed it was better than materializing in bedrock, but not by much.

"Only a few minutes until detonation," Lex said, squinting up at the foot-high digital clock on the wall above his head.

11:48:23 Eleven minutes, thirty-seven seconds and counting. And Clark was strung up like a side of beef, powerless to stop humanity's destruction.

Lex chuckled as his fingers danced over the control panel. "We'll want to watch, of course." He pushed a button and a picture appeared on the flat screen overhead. Downtown Megalopolis, bustling with nighttime activity.

"You don't want to go through with this, Lex," Clark said.

Lex ran a hand over his bald head. "Why not?" He seemed genuinely puzzled.

Clark eyed his laptop, lying useless on the floor at his feet. "Say your scheme is successful. Say you kill everyone in the world. What will you do for fun when there's no one left to terrorize?"

Lex's brows drew in. "A good point," he said, tapping his finger against his lips. "I didn't consider that." He laughed. "I guess I'll have to keep your girlfriend. That should be amusing."

Clark felt Blossom go stiff beside him. "Not an option," he told Lex. "You'd have to kill me first."

Lex smiled broadly. "That can be arranged." He reached under the counter and drew out a small caliber pistol. He leveled it at a point midway between Clark's eyes.

Beads of sweat broke out on Clark's forehead.

The trigger cocked.

"No," Blossom whispered.

"Oh, yes, yes, yes!" Lex said with an evil, maniacal laugh.

Clark's closed his eyes and braced for the end, a sharp sense of failure slicing through him. Some superhero he turned out to be. He should have let Bruce handle this one. Maybe then, humanity would've had a chance.

The gun's blast sounded in his ears. Clark's body went rigid, waiting for the pain.

It didn't come.

What the...?

He opened his eyes, then blinked to clear his vision. Lex Loser was sprawled on the ground, unconscious, his gun loose in his fingers. Blossom sat on his back, a startled look on her face.

"I did it," she said. "I really did it. I hit my target."

"Hit it hard, it looks like," Clark said.

"He smashed his head on the way down," Blossom said. "That part was pure luck."

Clark rattled his shackles. "The key," he said. "Find it. We've only got--" He checked the digital clock. Shit. "Nine minutes, seventeen seconds."

Blossom sifted frantically through Lex's pockets. "Got it." She lunged to Clark's side. Going up on her toes, she slid the key home--first one wrist, then the other.

Clark stumbled forward. "Thanks."

"There's only eight minutes left," Blossom said nervously. "Is it enough?"

"It'll have to be," Clark said. Bracing his hands on Lex's control panel, he closed his eyes and sank his mind into the neutron bomb's computer trigger.

<password?>

"Crap," Clark said. "Lex's account isn't logged on. The system's asking for a password." He dove for his laptop.

"Can you hack it?" Blossom asked, watching him power up his code-cracking program.

He linked it to Lex's computer, using his mind as a network bridge. "Of course," Clark said. "Given enough time. But can I do it in--" he looked at the clock, "--six and a half minutes? I don't know."

He urged the program to run faster. "Lex's password is ten alphanumeric digits," he said.

"That's 8.4 x 10¹⁷ possible combinations," Blossom said. "That could take hours."

She was right, but there wasn't much Clark could do about it. Except pray. He watched the list of possible passwords flash through the login screen. So far, nothing.

"Three minutes," Blossom said. "Maybe you should try a few manual combinations."

"Like what?" Clark asked, exasperated.

She bit her lip. "I don't know. He's your nemesis, isn't he? You should have an idea what he might pick."

"Birthday? Hometown? Mother's maiden name?" Clark tried them all. No luck.

"1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-0?" Blossom suggested.

Nope.

Clark glanced at the clock. Seventeen seconds. Come on. What would Lex have picked?

An idea hit him. Mentally, he typed it in.

Hot damn!

"We're in," he shouted.

"What did you put in?" Blossom asked.

"C-l-a-r-k-s-u-c-k-s."

His mind raced through Lex's system, picking up information. The bomb itself was hidden in one of the lair's upper passageways. Ironically, not far from Blossom and Clark's first teleport location. It was controlled by wireless pulse.

"Eight seconds," Blossom breathed.

Clark's brain rocketed through the directories on Lex's hard drive, searching for the bomb execution program.

"Six," Blossom said.

He found the document.

```
<C:\documents\lexdocs\evilplan\bomb\bang.exe>
```

Originality had never been Lex's strong point, Clark mused. Luckily for humanity.

"Five seconds," Blossom squeaked. "Four, three..."

Clark dove into the system manager and executed a delete command. "Got it," he said, slumping into Lex's leather upholstered command chair.

Blossom squinted at the readout on the control panel screen. "Are you sure?"

Clark looked up at the plasma image of Megalopolis at midnight. A couple strolled by, hand in hand, laughing, blissfully unaware of their narrow escape.

"Yep," Clark told her.

Blossom blinked. "Then we really did it? We saved the day?"

Clark exhaled a shaky laugh. "With two-point-four seconds to spare."

"Wow," Blossom said. "Who would have thought it?"

Chapter Nine

Friday, 10:35 p.m.

You'd think she'd be ecstatic.

Blossom leaned against the bar in the HI lounge, worrying the swizzle stick in her Long Island iced tea as she watched the free flow of testosterone all around her. The room belched muscle. Corded pecs, bulging biceps, buns of steel--you name it, it was here.

And a good portion of it was trying to impress her.

"So then I swung through the window," Peter Parkington was saying. "And knocked the kidnapper on his butt."

Pete was kind of cute, Blossom thought, but he seemed a bit immature.

"That's nothing," Dr. Banning said with a scowl. "Just last week I knocked a hole in a concrete wall with my bare fist and discovered a secret weapons cache."

A handsome man, Blossom reflected, but the green tinge to his skin was a bit disconcerting.

"Hey, babe. How's it going?"

She looked up, startled to find Bruce Wynn gazing down at her. Diana Price clung to his perfect tricep.

"I didn't know you two were still..." She drew a breath. "I mean after the Burger Shack..." She tried again. "I thought after Bruce ended up on the floor..."

Ah, hell. She took a gulp of her drink.

Diana laughed. "We're fine," she said. She leaned in close and lowered her voice. "Bruce likes things rough once in a while. You should try it with Clark."

"Clark?" Blossom squeaked. She couldn't imagine it.

Bruce's moody gaze scanned the room. "Yeah. Where is Geek Man, anyway?"

"Not here," Blossom said in a small voice. And she didn't know where he was, either. It had been six days since she'd last seen him, during the mission debriefing with Captain Marvelous. She had a sneaky feeling he was avoiding her.

Diana confirmed it. "It's not like Clark to miss his own victory party. Or a free buffet," she added thoughtfully.

"He's a geek," Bruce said. "He probably got wrapped up in a Star Trek marathon or something."

They laughed and moved off.

Blossom set her drink on the bar, feeling suddenly sick. It was true, then. She'd been just an assignment to Clark, and now that the world was safe, he didn't want anything to do with her. Probably, he was out on the town, one tall, anorexic supermodel draped over each arm. Probably, he'd spend the night with them. Probably, he wouldn't give Blossom a thought while he was doing it. Probably...

Probably he couldn't care less that she was in love with him.

The bar phone rang. The bartender snagged it. "Yo... Yeah, sure thing, Clark. It'll be down in fifteen."

Blossom's eyes widened. "Excuse me," she said. "But was that Clark Kendall on the line?"

"Yep," the muscle-bound bartender said. "He's in the computer lab. He wants me to send him a sandwich."

* * * *

Saturday, 10:59 p.m.

Clark clicked aimlessly on the Internet browser window, not even caring what popped up. It hardly mattered. He couldn't think of anything but Blossom, anyway.

He'd known it couldn't last, of course. But somehow, rather than being a comfort, the knowledge only made his heart ache. Blossom was everything he ever wanted in a woman--she was cute, smart, and brave. She didn't give up when things got tough. And she was sexy as hell. He closed his eyes, reliving the moment she'd reached her first orgasm. In his arms. Her inner muscles had tightened so hard on him that he'd seen stars. That's when he'd realized he loved her. And when she'd saved him from taking Lex's bullet, the emotion intensified exponentially.

Then they'd returned to HI headquarters, where Blossom had been swamped by every superhero on the payroll. They all wanted to meet her. He'd stayed close, and heard five invitations to dinner in the space of seven minutes. Laughing, she'd accepted them all.

In that moment, Clark knew he wouldn't be able to compete. Blossom couldn't help her visual orientation--it was part of her superpower. And Clark just didn't look like a superhero. He never would. He wasn't even going to try.

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and clicked over to digital TV streaming. There was an all-night Star Trek marathon starting at eleven. At least it would get his mind off his troubles.

A knock sounded at the door. His sandwich from the bar, most likely. "Come on in," he called. "Door's unlocked."

Footsteps, then a soft hand on his shoulder.

He swallowed hard and swiveled his chair around. "Blossom. What are you doing down here?"

"I brought you this." She placed a Styrofoam take-out container and a large soda on his desk. "So. This is where you've been hiding all week."

"I spend most of my time here," he told her. "I'm a geek, remember?"

She gave a soft laugh at that. "Yeah. I remember." Then, more softly, "How could I forget?"

Clark popped the lid of his sandwich container. "You should go back to the party. Everyone will miss you."

"It's your party, too," Blossom said. "Come with me."

"No," said Clark abruptly. "I've got work to do."

Blossom sidled in closer. "Work? That looks like Star Trek."

He hit the minimize button. "So what?"

"So turn it off. Come to the party."

He couldn't stand being the object of her pity. "I know what you're doing," he said. "And I appreciate it, but you really don't have to. The assignment's over. Let's just try to forget it." He took a bite of his turkey club.

She inhaled a sharp intake of breath. "So that's all I am to you, then. A completed assignment. Someone you fucked--"

Clark nearly choked.

"--in the name of duty."

"Is that what you think?" He grabbed his soda and took a gulp.

"It's true, isn't it?"

He coughed. "God, no."

"Then why are you avoiding me?"

He looked up at her, slightly dizzy from lack of air. "I'm not avoiding you." Well, okay, maybe he was, but he didn't like admitting it. "I'm giving you a chance to get what you want. A real superhero. Like the ones hanging all over your apartment walls."

"But I don't want a man like that anymore," she said softly.

"You don't?"

"No. I don't. You're my hero now."

Clark gaped at her.

She looked away, her cheeks turning pink. "I didn't mean to say that," she said. "Look. Just forget I mentioned it." She inched toward the door. "I'm going back to the party now."

He leaped out of his seat and grabbed her arm. "I can't forget it," he told her. "I need to know. Is it true?"

She hesitated.

"Blossom..."

"Yes," she said irritably. "Okay? Are you satisfied? Yes. I love you. Now let me go."

She loved him?

"No," said Clark. "Not until you say that again."

"Let me go."

"No." He grinned. "Not that part. The other thing. About how you love me."

"Clark..."

"Because I love you, too, you know."

She blinked up at him. "You do?"

"Yeah," he said softly, gathering her into his arms. She fit just right. A reckless, joyful feeling crept over him. "Marry me, Blossom."

"What?!" She tried to twist out of his arms, but he didn't let her. "Are you nuts? You're kidding, right? You can't possibly want to get married. Marriage means car payments, kids, a mortgage, life insurance..."

"And sex," Clark said. "Don't forget the sex. Lots of it. Night and day. In every room in the house. Even the closets. In every position you can think of."

She blushed. "Oh. Well. When you put it like that, I don't know what to say."

"Say yes."

Blossom looked into his eyes and laughed. "All right. Yes."

"Great," Clark said, taking off his glasses. He set them on the desk next to his laptop and reached for her.

"Hey," she said. "What are you doing?"

"This," he said, and kissed her.

The End