



## **Faster Than A Speeding Heartbeat**

Sara Dennis

"Truth, justice and a little bit of bondage?" I eyed the costume, one eyebrow lifted so high it felt like an exclamation point on my forehead. "You're kidding, right?"

Jeannie Lynch stood beside me, arms folded across her chest. She'd been my companion, my conspirator, my confidante for three years. I was fresh out of pharmacology school when I came to SpiriCorp and we'd been bosom buddies -- no pun intended -- ever since. She kept me up to date on the water cooler gossip, steered me clear of butting heads with the Bosses in Suits, and kept me company when it was my turn to clean out the lunchroom fridge. I thought I could trust her with anything.

Oh what a tangled web we weave.

"It's not so bad." She tried for cheerful. "It's Wonder Woman. Everyone likes her. It's patriotic. Besides," she added, "you promised."

Ah, the one-two punch, patriotism and solemn vows. I, Anya Seaton, never went back on my word. That didn't mean I wouldn't bargain. "I volunteered," I corrected, "to help out with the event, not to put my assets on display." I caught the star-spangled polyester hot-pants between my thumb and fingers. "This wouldn't cover a breadbox, much less my butt."

Jeannie snorted. "Your butt is not that big." I turned the force of that upraised eyebrow on her and she held up a hand. "Okay, bigger than a breadbox but you're taking this the wrong way. You're being dramatic."

"Of course I'm being dramatic," I said. "I have the right. It's not going to be your buns out there. It's not going to be mine, either." I let my hand fall. "I'm not doing it."

"Anya . . ."

"No." Get her over a barrel, girl. Put your foot down. "This is not open for negotiation. If they want Wonder Woman at this thing so badly, you do it."

Jeannie peered at me, lips twisted wryly. "That might be a problem. Wonder Woman's not blonde."

"Neither are you," I fired back. She didn't quite flinch. Instead she took that telltale that is human nature when someone hits a nerve. My shoulders tightened guiltily. "Without help." I glanced at her from the corner of my eye. No hate and loathing in her expression. I exhaled. "Sorry. That wasn't fair, but Wonder Woman? You couldn't at least have gotten me a cat suit?"

She smirked again. "Oh no. Mercedes will be playing the part of the catty wench tonight."

I tried not to laugh. We said, "Type casting," in unison.

Mercedes Cruz had curves in all the right places and, according to the office gossip, was a lot of fun in bed. She had handfuls of spiral-curled blue-black hair, a perpetual Saint Tropez tan and a beauty mark ala Cindy Crawford at the right side of her mouth.

We hated her.

"How does she rate?" I wondered bitterly. I fill out black leather nicely myself, thank you very much. I could pull off the cat. Not that I was really interested. Stay cool.

"How does she not," Jeannie countered. "She already had the boots. Besides." Her shoulders rose and fell. "Dr. Nelson asked for you."

My eyebrows started climbing again as I turned to give her my best disbelieving stare. "Dr. Nelson. Dr. Steven Nelson, the CEO? He called me Tiffany in the elevator this morning. He didn't ask for me. He doesn't know who I am!" Or did he? Was I really getting noticed? Was that a good thing if it lead to costume jobs?

"He did," Jeannie insisted. She picked an invisible piece of lint off the sleeve of her shirt, pointedly ignoring the look I gave her. "He said he wanted someone tall, dark and a little bit dangerous. Your name came up." She shrugged again, no doubt hoping I'd miss the slow creep of color rising from her collar.

Jeannie is not a good liar. The blush always gives her away. I narrowed my eyes and put my hands on my hips. "You gave him my name."

She looked at me at last, albeit reluctantly. Her blush was so deep that her eyes were watering. "I might have mentioned you in passing, but you are tall."

"Dark and dangerous?"

"Your hair's dark," she explained. "You have gorgeous eyes. And you wouldn't have to ask about dangerous if you were standing over here. What a face."

I went back to glaring at the costume. The torpedo-shaped bustier with the golden eagle firmly stitched in place. The baggie pinned through the hangar held a pair of plastic wrist cuffs and Diana Prince's trademark headband. A pair of red-and-white platform boots leaned against the cubicle wall, completing the ensemble.

There are times in my life when I feel like the universe is conspiring against me, setting me up to look like the world's greatest fool. This was one of them. Here I was, twenty-six, at the very beginning of a potentially successful career. For all I knew, I

might be the one to discover the right combination of drug therapy that would cure cancer or AIDS or put an end to the common cold. I saw Nobel Prizes and Time's Woman of the Year covers in my dreams.

And my best friend wanted me to play dress up for the night.

There would be cameras. Pictures of me, in costume, smiling cheerfully, would circle around the office for years to come. No doubt one day a copy would escape the cubicle farm and make it into the wild, passing from hand to hand. Strangers would comment on my thighs or my breasts or the way I combed my hair. When Time came to do their photo shoot, the camera man would have a battered copy tucked into his pocket while he leered at me through the lens.

I shook myself. I was getting carried away.

Back to the conundrum at hand. Did I stick to my guns, refuse and risk a black mark in my company file? They couldn't really fire me if I didn't play along, could they? On the other hand, it was for a good cause. If I went along cheerfully, played my part, maybe Dr. Nelson would remember it when my next review came up. It wouldn't hurt to humor the boss when it was something harmless like a costume, right?

I could all but feel the barrel beneath my feet. I took a deep breath. "Just the once?"

"I knew you'd do it." Jeannie hugged me hard, laughing in relief. "One night, just for the charity drive. The Children's Hospital gets its new wing, you make SpiriCorp happy and I get to keep my job." She kissed me on the cheek and let go to gather up costume pieces. "I'll do your hair and makeup," she babbled as she went. "You won't have to worry about anything."

Famous last words. It was bound to be one hell of a night.

Understatement.

SpiriCorp went all out when it wanted to impress. Tonight, we wanted to impress people into giving their hard-earned money to charity. If we could get a few hundred thousand in donations, the local children's hospital agreed to add a new wing, cleverly named to honor the company. An army of lawyers on both sides had gone over the proposed agreement with a mountain of combs, making sure there'd be no improprieties. Now it was up to us to come up with the cash.

So we pulled out all the stops.

The bosses chartered out the Marquis, the biggest hotel in the city. On a clear night, you could see the lights of its penthouse from five miles away. When bands, politicians, or the occasional movie star wandered through, they holed up here and partied in luxury.

I'd never so much as been through the front door. I was not a glitz and glamour sort of girl. That didn't keep me from accepting a ride in a stretch limousine on the company dime. After two hours of primping and powdering to make sure I looked wholesome and all-American, and that the fat sausage roll curls in my hair would hold the plastic diadem in place, I deserved it. I felt like I'd been painted with spackle and a trowel, but if my reward was free champagne and a limo ride, there wasn't much to complain about. I bit my tongue.

I wasn't expecting a crowd.

They'd laid red carpet down the steps that led up to the Marquis and when the limo stopped moving, a doorman dressed in formal black and gold jogged down them under the watchful eye of a couple hundred attentive guests. Donors and those we

hoped would pitch in by night's end had been invited to bring their families. They waited now like fans hoping for a glimpse of their favorite actor on Oscar night, lined up behind the golden ropes stretched to either side.

I stared at Jeannie. She met my gaze, wide-eyed. "I swear," she said, holding up one hand as if she were taking an oath, "I didn't know anything about this." She ducked her head, peering out the window past me. "It's kind of cool, though."

I took the doorman's hand when he opened the car and stepped out into a moment of surreality. Cameras went off like fireworks. There was applause and cheers and the very excited voices of children calling out, "Wonder Woman's here!"

The doorman closed the limo again a moment before Jeannie got out. The car was rolling as I protested that my friend was inside. He took my elbow with a smile muttered through his teeth, "Smile and wave. She'll be fine. Pretend you know what's happening."

I grew up watching Miss America pageants. I could do the plastic smile and swivel wave as well as anyone. I'd actually written and memorized my save the world speech in junior high, just in case. I made it up the stairs without tripping and the doorman ushered me inside where I took my first deep breath.

"Crazy," I said.

He smiled. "This is just the beginning," he said as he handed me over to a perky redhead in a business suit. "Nancy," she introduced when I stared a little too long. "I work in the mailroom so we probably haven't met. You can just call me Mary Jane tonight."

"Mary Jane?"

"Spider-man?" She smiled earnestly. "The girlfriend, you know." I must have looked concerned because she touched my arm consolingly and lowered her voice. "Don't worry, I don't mind. We can't all be superheroes." That said, she ushered me to the banquet hall and through the double doors.

In retrospect, I should have waited on that deep breath. It all rushed back out of me when I got a look at what the decorations committee had done. To say that I was impressed? Would be like calling the Grand Canyon a hole in the ground.

The hall was originally a ballroom. It was designed with wide, smooth-barreled Doric columns supporting the ceiling. Now they were hidden behind artistically shaped and stacked cardboard facades. They became skyscrapers and factories and if they sagged a little at the tops, it added to the notion that they helped give the illusion of urban sprawl. The walls had been decorated, too, canvases hung to cover the elegant wallpaper and wainscoting. Tiny light bulbs winked behind each painted window, giving the impression of a city at night.

The crystal chandelier was masked inside a globe of canvas that had been painted and dyed so it glowed like the full moon. Another tarp had been firmly tacked down to cover the marble floor. This one was painted to resemble asphalt, double-yellow lines dividing lanes as they wound around buildings and through the room. There was enough light to see by comfortably and yet the room was dim enough to match the scenery. It was almost perfect.

Nor was I the only caped crusader in the room. As I looked for Jeannie, hoping she'd made it back from wherever empty limos went, I saw that Mercedes and her boots had cornered Batman by the bar. Judging by his body language, he was one tiger who



was definitely not interested in being tamed. Maybe it had something to do with the way Mercedes was fondling that whip.

Spiderman jogged by, asking the way to the restroom and I caught sight of the Incredible Hulk, deep in conversation with the Thing. Both of them were thickly built men in body paint, wearing nothing as far as costume went but teeny tiny Speedos. Suddenly my cosmic hot pants didn't seem so bad. More to the point, I felt a few pounds of worry worries ooze out of the knots in my shoulders. For one night, this might turn out to be fun.

"So I guess we're supposed to stick together."

By now, I'd heard a thousand and one stories about love at first sight. Eyes meeting eyes, soul meeting soul. Knowing he was Mr. Right in that first glance across a crowded room. What I wanted to know was why, right up until that moment, I'd never heard of love at first sound.

The voice that said that simple sentence was rich and deep, like he'd just swallowed warm chocolate. I closed my eyes to savor it, rather than whipping around to see the man who could send shivers up my spine just by speaking. I'd only be disappointed, my conscience offered. Men who sounded like that never had the bodies to match.

He cleared his throat and touched my shoulder. "Excuse me. Are you all right?"

There was nothing for it now. I either looked or kept playing possum. I might miss out on the chance of a lifetime. I took another very deep breath, scraped together the shreds of my suddenly fragile courage, and turned to face him. I opened my eyes.

Whoa, Mama. I never should have doubted my ears.

The Voice was the textbook definition of hunk, from the span of his shoulders to the faint indentation of dimples by his mouth. Jet-black hair was slicked back save the spit-curl on his forehead. His eyes were light, probably blue, but I couldn't be sure in the staged lighting. Didn't matter. I was comfortable with the guess. His smile was wide and warm and wonderful but not perfect; one eye-tooth twisted a little crookedly. It only added to his charm. My smile went bright and stupid in response. God help me. I was head over heels.

"There you are! Cripes, the red tape. You would not believe how many times I had to flash my -- hi!" Jeannie jostled me lightly, all but skidding to a halt at my side. So The Voice could work his magic without saying a word.

"Hi," he said back, and offered her a hand, which she took eagerly. "I was just telling your friend that we were supposed to stick together. Superman, Wonder Woman. It's a patriotic thing."

Now there was a clue I should have picked up the minute I saw blue tights and the tiny red trunks. How had I missed the costume? How did I fail to make two and two add up to four? The giant 'S' in the middle of his very nicely sculpted chest? Not only was I hopelessly smitten, I was blind as a bat.

"I'm Daniel," he said, offering his hand to me this time. I took it and took a breath to answer, only to have Jeannie interject.

"Jeannie."

"I was talking to your friend," he said, while I said, "I think he meant me." I slid my hand into his, trying not to enjoy the brush of calluses against my fingertips too much. "Anya," I told him and shook gently.

Jeannie glanced between us, pursed her lips and straightened up. "Well then. I'll just go and get a drink."

I am not ordinarily one to pimp and preen for a man's attention. I found myself standing a little straighter in front of Daniel nonetheless. Confidence was attractive, right? I had confidence in spades.

"So." Daniel flashed his smile at me again. "Accounting."

Hello, left field. I tried not to tilt my head. "Pardon me?"

"Accounting," he said again as if it was the sort of thing people inserted into conversation all the time.

My forehead wrinkled. I kept smiling. "I'm sorry, I don't think I follow what you mean."

"You work in accounting, right?" He squinted at me. "I'm sure I've seen you around the building." Only belatedly did he realize that maybe he'd guessed wrong. Those handsome brushstroke eyebrows rose slightly. "You do work for SpiriCorp, right?"

"Oh!" I blushed and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear before I remembered that superheroes did neither. I tugged it loose again. "Right. Pharmacy. I'm in the lab most of the time."

"Ah." He looked embarrassed. It was still flattering. I began wondering if there was anything that wouldn't look good on the man. "I'm thinking of someone else then. No offense. I'm in marketing. Brain's taken up by flashy colors and catchy jingles, not important things like faces and names." He paused for breath and his smile warmed up. "I might have to make up reasons to do research in the lab."

I admit to a moment of girlish giddiness. I wasn't up on comic books or all the superheroes ever drawn, but I did know Superman. I also knew what flirting looked like, having tried it on a number of men to varying degrees of success. Superman was flirting with me! I sidled a step closer, planning to wow him with a clever comment about body chemistry and pheromones.

Perky Nancy Jane, clipboard in hand, had other plans. She stopped beside us and turned on her megawatt smile. "We're about to open the doors," she chirped. "Are you two ready for door duty?"

Daniel and I traded a worried look. I cleared my throat first. "Door duty?"

"Uh-huh." She checked her list. "I have you two penciled in to meet and greet." She turned and pointed back to the double doors. "All you have to do is stand there and say hello to everyone who comes through. If people ask you for pictures or autographs, ask them to stand to one side so the doorway stays clear of traffic, okay? Otherwise, the fire department will be very cross with you. Thanks!"

She'd circled us before we could protest and put a hand in the small of our backs, giving us both a cheerful nudge toward the door. I glanced over my shoulder at her, intending to glare. No one pushed me around. She didn't notice; she'd already set off on her beeline to interrupt Mercedes and the Bat.

"So what do you think," Daniel asked when we reached the door. "Side by side or facing each other?"

I caught a whiff of his cologne as his cape settled. I'd know Drakkar Noir anywhere and my decision was made. I smiled up at him. "I get to pick?" Side by side I could breathe him in without making it obvious. Side by side I could pretend we were together, in more than the costumed buddies sense.

I knew I was hopeless. I embraced it.

"Maybe facing each other," he volunteered so I could see the unvoiced laughter in his eyes. Blue. I was certain they were blue now. "Divide and conquer, so to speak."

"What ever happened to strength in numbers," I asked.

"That's for other lesser heroes," he joked. "Since when do you need help, Diana?"

My smile faltered. Diana? He'd forgotten my name? I took a breath to correct him then remembered the reason we were here in the first place. Diana Prince. Wonder Woman. Right. "Only rarely. Take advantage when you have it, Clark," I fired back.

He grinned and winked. Heat flared low in my stomach and spread through me.

Then someone opened the door for all those donors and their kids. All my thoughts of a night spent in strong arms and good company were drowned out by the roar of laughter and the conversations of the people with the money who were pouring through the door.

The saying goes 'time flies when you're having fun'. It doesn't mention anything about being overwhelmed by hundreds of people, all clamoring for autographs, pictures and handshakes. I'd faced so many camera flashes that the blue after-image felt looked permanent. My cheeks ached from smiling non-stop and I'd long since given up making sure my headband was on straight.

There was a lull in the circulating crowd. I closed my eyes for a moment as a tendril of cool air curled in through the still-open doors. My esteem for the decorations had slipped a notch or two when we realized that all that canvas was trapping heat.

The banquet hall was now as warm as the city on a muggy summer night. But in the cool air, the little hairs on the back of my neck stood up and I shivered, more appreciation than a chill. I looked for a clock when my eyes opened again. I hadn't thought to hide a watch anywhere on me.

"Three hours." The Voice still worked. Daniel appeared beside me, a glass of water in his hand. He didn't look as tired as I felt, but his smile wasn't quite as broad and bright as it had been at the start. "You don't stop. I'm impressed."

Weary as I was, I couldn't ignore innuendo or let it pass uncommented. I smiled slowly and murmured, "Let's hear it for stamina." I winked and drained the water glass in four deep swallows, never taking my eyes off his. I licked beaded water off my lips and offered the empty back to him. Our fingers brushed. In different surroundings, this would have been when the low purr of a jazz sax started to play. The camera would flash to the hallway outside and Daniel would have his tongue down my throat.

Nothing kills the mood like the sudden urge to pee. Chugging water reminded me that I hadn't visited the little Amazon's room since leaving Jeannie's place. I wanted to stay right where I was, my shoulder almost brushing Daniel's chest. My body had other plans. My cheeks warmed and I slid away. "I'll be right back," I told him. "No dashing off to save the world while I'm gone."

He shook his head, amusement glinting in his eyes. "Cross my heart." He actually made the gesture.

I ran.

"Wonder Woman doesn't go to the bathroom."

I was washing my hands when the revelation came, delivered pertly by the blonde at my elbow. It's hard to be offended by an earnest twelve year old. Nonetheless, I had a sudden appreciation for secret identities. A pair of glasses and some bobby pins and I could have disappeared right before her eyes.

"Sure she does," I told her, watching her reflection in the mirror. "She eats doesn't she?"

"Yes," my little critic said.

"Then she goes to the bathroom." It made sense to me. I reached for a paper towel.

"No." She was persistent, my new friend. "Because she's not human."

Huh. News to me. I dried my hands, threw the waste away and leaned toward her. "The real Wonder Woman couldn't be here tonight. They asked me to stand in for her. You won't tell anyone, right?"

Blondie squinted at me so hard that her eyes disappeared into a wrinkle of eyelash. I wasn't sure she could see me at all but she kept squinting. "Wonder Woman isn't real," she told me. What she meant was 'how stupid do you think I am?' That came across loud and clear. "But if you're going to pretend, you ought to at least have her story right. Don't they have a different bathroom for you?"

Kids are not my thing. I wanted one or two, years from now, but I wasn't good at talking to them. I knew I needed more practice. I needed more friends with babies. I leaned against the sink basin, one hand propped on my hip. With the bustier on, I was already cinched in at the waist and the pose was more comfortable than letting my arms dangle. Now I knew why superheroes always stood this way.

"Does it seem fair to you," I wondered in my most patient voice, "to make someone use another bathroom just because they're different than you?"

Pale eyebrows drew together. "No. That's discrimination. It's wrong." Damn, she had me there. What's more, she'd beaten me to my own point. What happened to twelve year olds who acted their age? "I just meant that the little kids might not understand. My brother works at the mall and he says that when Santa's there, they give him a special bathroom just so no one sees."

I had to admit that it made a kind of sense. I wrinkled my nose and confessed, "I didn't ask if there was a hidden bathroom."

Blondie clucked her tongue and shook her head at me. "You should ask next time." Then she patted my arm and left me scanning my reflection in the mirror for the sudden appearance of grey hairs. I'd been corrected by a child half my age. I was due.

I found none. I righted the headband, 'fluffed my girls' as Jeannie called it, and headed back toward the banquet hall to finish out the night.

No need. Daniel leaned against the wall outside the bathroom, waiting for me by all appearances. He straightened up when I got close, smile warmed as it spread. He offered me his hand. "Five more minutes," he said, tugging me past the door to the party. "I want to show you something."

He led me to the lobby elevators and pressed the 'up' button. We stood a while in silence, waiting for the car to arrive. He could have let go of my hand at any time. Instead, he threaded our fingers together. I was all but floating.

The elevator chimed too loudly. I startled then laughed and led the way into the car. Daniel hesitated, balking at the threshold. He took a deep breath and stepped in beside me. I should have known that was a bad sign but he smiled and shook it off.



"You should see me on an escalator," he explained. "Takes me five minutes to go down. When I was a kid, I convinced myself it was some weird kind of mechanical elevator and if I stepped at the wrong time, it'd eat me. Guess it stuck."

Weird, but cute. I smiled. "Guess so." I squeezed his hand. I meant to reassure him. I also wanted to be absolutely certain that I wasn't dreaming and that I could still feel his hand in mine. "I promise not to let you fall," I said as the doors closed and and sealed us in.

Daniel pushed the button for the topmost floor and we rode upward for a while in relative silence. Quiet jazz played in the background, almost hidden beneath the whirr of machinery and the hum of the air conditioning that feathered through my hair. I closed my eyes.

"So, pharmacology." Daniel's hand tightened on mine. "That's not what little girls usually talk about when they're growing up. How'd you get in?"

"I had a chemistry set," I told him, amused. "I figured out that I could not only make things foam over but turn colors and smell bad too. I was hooked." I shrugged and looked up at him, grinning.

Elevator light is not the most flattering thing in the world. Even Taye Diggs, one of the world's perfect men, would look washed out and tired in your generic, non-artistically enhanced elevator. Daniel was not Taye Diggs.

He looked jaundiced, completely unhealthy. There was a sheen of sweat on his cheeks and upper lip. He tapped the knuckles of his free hand against his leg anxiously, and watched the light shift from button to button as the elevator climbed as if his life depended on it.

"So how'd you get into marketing," I asked. Maybe distracting him would get him through whatever was bugging him. Talking was bound to keep me from freaking out, at least.

He flashed me a brief, if mostly sincere, smile. "Lemonade."

I blinked and waited for him to elaborate. He stared at the buttons again, so I laughed and tugged his arm. "Lemonade? That doesn't make sense."

"Sure it does," he argued. This time his attention stayed on me. "You didn't have a lemonade stand when you were a kid?" I shook my head and he chuckled. "I thought everyone did. I had one. My brother too. We'd set up on diagonal corners in the neighborhood and try to outsell each other."

"And you won." I assumed. I'd have bought lemonade from a young Superman.

"Every time," he agreed proudly. "I came up with all kinds of ways to do it. Once I thought up every joke I could and wrote them all down on slips of paper. Any time I sold a cup, I'd hand one over. Another time, I bought a bag of cheap balloons. Buy a cup of lemonade, I took requests for balloon animals. I had no clue how to make them, but I tried." He laughed. "They were terrible."

"But it worked." I leaned against his arm. "You won."

"I did." He nodded. "I'm all about winning." Somewhere in there, he'd stopped fidgeting. Stopped tapping his knuckles against his leg. His color looked better, though that might have been wishful thinking on my part.

He tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. I didn't stop him. Who cared about Wonder Woman? She was just a costume. He was going to kiss me, I could see it in his eyes. Could already feel it tingling in my lips. His gaze was on my mouth and I licked

them, not entirely meaning to tease. I just wanted to be ready. He lowered his head. I went up on my toes.

The elevator jolted. I held on to his arm and we both stumbled for balance. The bad lighting flickered then went steady again. The elevator continued its upward climb. 17. 18. I murmured, "It wasn't me." We both laughed.

The lights went out.

There's a curious thing that happens when the world goes suddenly black. I can't see, of course, but it's more than that. All my senses go out, for just a second. My ears feel like they're stuffed with cotton balls. My fingers tingle and my mouth goes numb. For the space of a few seconds, I forget how to breathe. It's like my brain gets overloaded with a lack of input and shuts down. Thankfully it doesn't last. I'm not big on fainting.

It happened now, that gap where there was nothing in the world except me and even that was questionable. I waited, hoped, for the lights to flicker on. I took a breath. My ears cleared but there wasn't much to hear. The music was gone; the hum of the air conditioner had stopped.

Daniel moved, letting go of my hand to go to the button panel. It still glowed dimly, now that my eyes had adjusted, but all of the buttons were lit, not just the one for the top floor. He hammered at it with his thumb desperately all the same, gaze lifted to the display above the door which was just as dark as the rest of the cab. "Come on," he breathed. "Come on!"

"It'll be all right," I told him. "It's probably just a glitch. Things have been flickering all night. It's the heat."

Daniel wasn't listening. He had the emergency phone pressed to his ear, and rattled the cradle desperately. "Dead. It's dead. They won't know we're here."

I am not the most observant person on the planet. I'd never before seen a full-grown man completely lose his grip. Even I knew that Daniel was teetering on the edge of a complete breakdown. The problem was, I wasn't entirely sure what to do to bring him back.

"Hey," I tried. "That lemonade thing. Put you through college, right? I could use some help with the bills. Think you could teach me?" All right, so I'm not the first person one should call in a high-strung situation.

It didn't work. Daniel abandoned the telephone for trying to wedge the elevator doors apart. It was somewhat fitting, Superman spending his strength trying to get us out of bad situation. In the moment, it wasn't quite as entertaining as you'd think. He managed to pull them part enough to get his arm through, but that was all. I had visions of the power snapping on and Daniel losing an arm as we headed for the roof. My imagination is not always my friend.

Hands on was the next tactic. I grabbed a fistful of cape and tugged firmly. "Let's just sit and wait."

"I can feel the doors," he told me. He was out of breath and straining.

"They'll get the power back on, Daniel. It's probably the whole building. Think of all those people down there. They're not just going to stand around in the dark." He kept reaching. I puffed out my cheeks. "They'll come and find us if they have to. They're not going to leave us here." It made sense to me. Someone would notice we were missing. Probably Nancy and her clipboard of doom.

Daniel hit the mostly-closed doors with the heel of his other hand. "I can't stay in here. I can't. We'll die. I can't breathe!"

Right. The time for half-assed attempts to calm the big guy down had passed. I squeezed around him, wedged my shoulders between him and the door, and got, quite literally, in his space. "Look at me," I insisted, with my hands framing his cheeks. "Daniel? We're going to be fine."

"There's not enough room," he argued. "We're too heavy." He looked right through me though there was no logical way he could not see me.

So I cheated. I dug for something to snap him back to the here and now. I admit that it was low, cruel, and almost sure to make me look like the crazy one, but I had to do something. I was in the direct line of fire and I definitely didn't want to be alone. I took as deep a breath as I could.

"Superman wouldn't freak out."

Daniel's gaze snapped down to mine. He focused, recognized me. I thought we were in the clear. I was about to sing praises to Little Miss Blondie when he said, "Don't talk anymore. You'll use up all the air."

So I did the next most logical thing. Crushed against him and forbidden to speak, what else was I supposed to do? I kissed him.

I confess that I might have been looking for excuses. My motives may not have been entirely pure. Let's face it, he was handsome and we'd been flashing the green light at one another all night. In the heat of the moment, though, it wasn't about attraction or carnal anything. It was an act of desperation.

It worked.

He wrapped his arms -- both arms -- around me. His lips moved against mine. I felt him relax beneath my hands and I smiled against his mouth. In no time flat, we'd be back to talking about sales gimmicks and pheromones.

Or not. One kiss turned into two and then a few more. Daniel picked me up, encouraging my legs around his waist, and the two of us skidded down the back wall of the elevator car, too busy with each other to notice how warm we were getting. We were caught up in body heat, the slide of sweat-slick skin against skin what we wanted. His cape made a serviceable mattress. My bustier worked as a pillow for my head.

Then we sat, tangled together and naked, trapped somewhere between the twenty-third and fourth floors, laughing about claustrophobia and my fear of heights.

The firemen found us that way, wrapped together in Superman's cape, my headband crooked and my curls thoroughly mussed. I'd fallen asleep in Daniel's arms. He'd dozed off behind me, head back against the wall and mouth dropped open. The screech of the doors being pried apart woke us both.

I shielded my eyes against the flashlight flare, squinting past my fingers at the half dozen figures who filled the doorway. "Oh thank God," I heard Jeannie say. "You're all right, aren't you? You're . . . Anya, you're naked."

"What, you've never seen bare feet before?" I wiggled my toes, amused. "We're fine. Cozy." Daniel chuckled, dropping kisses on my shoulder. "What happened?" I asked. "Why the emergency gear?"

"Faulty wiring insulation," one of the firemen said. "Overheated and shorted out the whole panel. Fortunately nothing burned. Probably a good idea to get you two out of there though. Just in case."

How we managed to get to our feet together without flashing our rescuers I will never know. We fumbled on enough costume pieces to be decent, then Daniel helped to boost me up and out of the elevator and onto the floor above. Jeannie grabbed my arm while we waited for the firemen to pull Daniel out. "Everything," she murmured. I think I imagined the emerald glint of jealousy in her eyes, but I can't be sure. "I want to know everything. No skimping."

I laughed and vowed silently not to share a word. A girl had to have some secrets.

Daniel and I made it down to the lobby where a team of paramedics separated us again. Once we'd checked out healthy, we were free to go home. Back to our apartments and our every day lives. The picture of the two of us together was promised for the front page of the city paper. That was the one that would haunt me years from now. Funny how it didn't seem to matter any more.

"So," Daniel said when we'd been left alone.

"So," I agreed. "See you on Monday?"

He exhaled laughter, grinning at the ground. "Right. Work. Pharmacy."

"Marketing," I answered. "Lunch? I'll bring lemonade."

That got him to look up. Yep, true blue eyes and an almost-perfect grin. My heart skipped a beat. "Lunch. Dinner?"

"On the same day?"

"I was thinking more like tomorrow. Civilian clothes, mundane meal."

*Faster Than A Speeding Heartbeat*

"Ohhh." I grinned slowly. "Secret identities." I went up on my toes again, gave him a second to pull away, and kissed him when he didn't. Score for me. "Sounds great. Seven-thirty?"

"Seven-thirty." We traded numbers. We swapped email addresses. He stole a kiss, hugged me, and headed down the block to catch a taxi.

I caught myself thinking, so this is how love works in the big city. Long spans of nothing, then out of the blue, you're your head and sinking fast. Faster than a speeding heartbeat.

Works for me.