

My Wife the Boss

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Rated PG-13

Submitted October 2009

Summary: In this sequel to “The Forgotten,” Clark tries to regain his role as husband, father and reporter. Lois also discovers that Clark’s return to work, though welcome, brings some need for readjustment on her part, while Matt faces challenges of his own as he takes on the mantle of Superman. Life for all of them is complicated by the escalating crimes of an unknown villain, whose acts of revenge are threatening Metropolis’ inhabitants. Can Clark’s investigative skills discover the truth in time to rescue his family from deadly jeopardy?

Story Size: 123,964 words (672Kb as text)

This story is a sequel to “The Forgotten.” A couple of months have passed since Clark returned to his family in Metropolis. In this story — My Wife the Boss — we explore Clark’s journey to get his life back on track. The title was taken from a line of dialogue in the episode Stop The Presses, though that will be the only resemblance to that plot. In fact, that particular line stuck in my head until I had come up with a plot to plausibly justify Clark’s words.

I’d like to thank all my beta readers for staying with me on this project. It took me a very long time to write this story, and I’m not sure I would have finished it without their encouragement and hard work. I’d especially like to thank EditorJax for doing such a great job of betaing, though she was particularly busy with real life. I’m sure my writing has improved greatly with her help and suggestions. I also have to thank Carol Malo for continuing to be my confidant and chief brain-stormer over the many years I have been writing Lois and Clark fanfic. As usual, she was there when I needed her.

The main characters in this story do not belong to me, though I have invented a few of my own. I have borrowed Lois and Clark for a time for my pleasure in writing and hopefully for my readers’ enjoyment.

Chapter One: A New Start

Clark Kent stood across the road from the Daily Planet building, gazing up at the famous globe which seemed to dwarf the building, while in his stomach giant butterflies played havoc with his innards.

This was the first time he’d actually viewed the new improved logo of the famous newspaper since he’d returned from China. Lois had suggested, on a number of occasions, that they take a walk past the headquarters of his old workplace, perhaps even visit his ex-colleagues, but Clark had been unusually reticent. Besides, most of his closest workmates had visited him at home.

Now, he was wishing he’d listened to his wife’s advice. Walking cold turkey into this building on his first day back at work wasn’t ideal. Why did he ever believe that he knew better than Lois?

He should have gone into work with her, but Bernie had been adamant that his first days back at The Planet should be on a part time basis, and Lois had an early morning staff meeting. Clark was disappointed that the partnership of Lane and Kent was over,

but Lois had moved on and was now co-editor-in-chief of the newspaper. In fact, she was shouldering more of the responsibility now that Perry was considering retirement.

So he stood alone, staring at the impressive edifice and wishing he could run home. He wasn’t sure he knew how to be a reporter anymore. Perhaps he couldn’t cut it on his own, especially since the part of his brain that had made him into a respected writer was truly rusty. Maybe he should have asked Lois if he could start as a fact-checker, though he supposed he was a little old for that post.

Unconsciously, his hand threaded through his peppered gray hair; hair that had darkened only a mere fraction with the removal of the kryptonite-coated chips from his brain, just as a shadow of his superpowers had returned. It was a pity his finger hadn’t grown back ... but that was the stuff of science fiction ... or wasn’t there some lizard that grew back a damaged tail?

<Come on, Dad. Stop messing about!>

Clark heard a young male voice admonish him, though he had no doubt who was talking and to whom. Only one person spoke to him inside his head.

<I’m not messing about, Matt. I’m just admiring the scenery.>

<Oh, and I’m Batman!> Matt laughed. <You’ll be fine. Remember Mom’s band aid theory ... and she’ll be waiting for you.>

<I know. That’s part of the problem. Not that I don’t appreciate her help ... I just don’t want to let her down.>

<That’s not going to happen. Mom doesn’t expect you to write any Kerth-winning stories today. Maybe tomorrow ... >

Clark heard Matt laugh again and couldn’t help but join in. <I guess your mother is just as competitive as ever.>

<You guess right, but she does understand. I’ll bet she’s just as nervous as you. Didn’t you notice that she took real sugar and cream in her coffee this morning? We were placing bets on whether she’d fish out the chocolate ice cream.>

<For breakfast? Wow! She was uptight.> [Clark stuck his hands deep into his pockets to keep them from shaking and walked to the edge of the sidewalk, waiting for the light to cross the road.] Moments later he was at the front entrance, noticing that the revolving doors had been replaced by automatic glass ones. He breathed deeply. <Here I go, Matt. Wish me luck.>

<You don’t need luck, Dad, but you have it anyway.> The concern in Matt’s voice was evident, but cut off by a quick sigh. <Oh, I’ve gotta go now, gotta get to my next class.>

<Thanks, Son.> Clark wasn’t sure that the channel to Matt was still open, but he was grateful for the superhero’s help in crossing that road. Was it just a road? It had felt like crossing the Gobi desert.

“Good morning, Mr. Kent,” a voice hailed him from the reception desk and he turned to see a middle-aged man addressing him. “Mrs. Kent said you’d be in later. It’s good to have you back where you belong.”

“Good morning, Ma ... Ken?” Clark’s voice lifted in a question, but when the man returned his smile, he relaxed a little. He had remembered the first face he came across and put the right name to it. “It’s good to be back,” he added, and was surprised by how jaunty his voice sounded. Maybe he could do this.

Ken came from behind his desk and ushered Clark over to the elevators. “Let me get that for you, Mr. Kent. You’ll find the newsroom has been expanded to take in the sixth floor. That’s where you’ll find Mrs. Kent’s office. She’s expecting you.”

Clark had already been told this a number of times by Lois, but the man’s gesture of kindness helped him enter the elevator and press the button for the sixth floor with only the smallest of tremors in his hand.

This was a new start for him, and he just hoped he didn’t let

anyone down. Himself included.

Lois was dealing with an irate accountant about what he called “over-the-top” expense reports and watching the clock in the bullpen outside her office. Her toe tapped as she grew more frustrated with the grating bean-counter. She had wanted to be downstairs to escort Clark up to the newsroom.

Her attention swung to the elevator as it arrived on the floor, and she cut the phone conversation short when a nervous looking Clark walked onto the platform above the bullpen. She watched, mesmerized, as her husband’s gaze scanned the large room, from the rows of screens that covered the side wall, all linked by satellite to news outlets around the world, to the rows of desks on the floor below him. He seemed to be searching for something or someone familiar, and her heart went out to him.

Lois was certain he hadn’t looked so hesitant years ago, when he’d first interviewed at The Planet, though she had to admit she hadn’t paid much attention to the greenhorn who was sitting in the Chief’s office that day. Now, all her concerns were focused on the tall figure who stood by the wooden rail, surveying his place of work a little like a Christian about to be thrown to a pride of hungry lions.

Was it too soon for Clark to return to work?

No. She knew Clark was growing stir-crazy staying at home. Even when he’d lost his memory due to his encounter with the Nightfall Asteroid, he had continued at The Planet. And he’d worked all the time he was in China, just not as a journalist. They’d already discussed the timing and agreed he was ready, so it was pointless to second guess herself at this late stage.

Pushing her worries aside, she strode into the newsroom, her face lighting up in a welcoming smile.

“Clark,” she called, alerting those colleagues who hadn’t already noticed his entrance. “I’m glad you made it in.”

Clark’s startled glance settled on her, his body appearing to freeze as others turned to look in his direction. Lois quickened her pace as she willed him to move down the ramp to meet her.

“What do you think of the new bullpen?” Reaching the bottom of the ramp, she was grateful to see Clark walking toward her, though with less than his easy stride. She felt a presence by her shoulder and wasn’t surprised when she heard Jim’s voice.

“Hey, CK, my man. How ya doing?” Jimmy moved closer to Clark’s side, and a wide sweep of his arm covered the large room. “Come on, take a look around. It’s probably a little different from the last time you were here. Everything is high tech these days. All the reporters’ computers are linked to our online edition. We have video links and blogs ...”

“Jim! Give Clark a chance to get his bearings,” Lois said quietly, yet with authority. Scaring Clark off first thing wasn’t exactly high on her agenda. “Even I’m not totally at home with all the new technology. One of these days, I guess they’ll do away with the paper and ink version of The Planet, but it will still be the reporter’s skills which make a good newspaper.”

“I wouldn’t argue with you there, Chief,” Jimmy said, taking Lois’ unspoken hint.

Clark blanched, hearing his wife called Chief for the first time.

My wife the boss.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, that phrase struck a chord. Lois had been promoted to editor-in-chief once before, and though his memory of that time wasn’t clear, he had the uncomfortable notion that it hadn’t been a good time in their lives.

Yet, who was he to cavil? Lois deserved her position. She’d fought hard to get here and had more than enough talent to match her determination, while he now felt he was masquerading as a journalist. Pretty soon he’d be found out, and Lois would be put in an awkward situation. Still, she’d never doubted that he was fit

for the task, and Perry had backed her. At that thought, Clark’s nerves stretched tighter than a bowstring, and the butterflies in his stomach morphed into a herd of stampeding elephants.

Fortunately for Clark, he was given no time to wallow. A small group had surrounded the trio and Clark was soon shaking hands with smiling people who weren’t quite strangers. Thankfully, he recalled most of their names, with only a couple of mistakes. A few minutes passed in exchanging pleasantries, then Lois cracked the whip and everyone returned to their jobs, leaving him alone with Lois and Jimmy.

“Let’s go into my office while Jim here makes sure your desk is set up and ready to go. I had the IT people install your computer.”

Lois’ hand settled on Clark’s back, shepherding him forward, but her heart constricted a little as Clark allowed himself to be led. She hoped his confusion was due to first-day nerves and that he would soon feel more comfortable in an environment he obviously found a bit intimidating. But she wouldn’t permit any negative thoughts to cloud her enthusiasm. Clark had come through so much, and regaining his rightful place as one of The Planet’s top investigative journalists was bound to be a piece of cake.

Oh, if only she believed that with more certainty. But if she could be sure of one thing, it was that she would be there to offer him encouragement when he needed it.

Once they were locked in the privacy of her office, the blinds slatted as a warning to any inopportune visitor that the editor-in-chief was not to be disturbed, Lois directed an appraising look at her husband.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

Clark walked into the middle of the room, taking in the general décor and atmosphere. “Fine. I’m feeling OK.” He accompanied his statement with a firm nod of his head, yet he didn’t turn in her direction.

Lois frowned. “Clark! Why don’t you try looking at me when you say that?” She took a couple of steps toward him. “And remember, we tell each other the truth, no matter what.”

There was a pause, and Lois found herself holding her breath. Then, almost casually, Clark swung around, but there was nothing casual in his stare.

“OK. I’m a bit apprehensive,” he admitted, closing the small gap between them. “Honey, what if I never get this part of myself back?”

Her first instinct was to dismiss his fear. After all, they’d had this discussion a number of times since she’d suggested he return to work, but she also realized that actually being here had probably increased his doubts. She took a couple of deep breaths and spoke calmly, repeating the now-familiar argument.

“Clark, all the other parts of your personality have come back ... why not this?”

“But they haven’t, Lois. Even you have to admit that I’m not exactly the same.” He grabbed hold of the hand she’d held out to him. “Superman can’t ever come back.”

“Superman is back. He was never just about the powers. Superman was you, Clark. The caring, compassionate man behind the suit and the cape ... that man is here. I know some of your memories are still a bit hazy, and your powers aren’t full strength, but your experiences are helping Matt a whole lot.”

“He told you?”

“Of course, he told me. He appreciates your suggestions, even if you can’t be out there with him physically.”

“I don’t really do much.” He hung his head.

Lois dipped her head a little to catch Clark’s eye. “That’s not Matt’s opinion, but right now, we’re talking about Clark Kent. You know you have all you need to be the journalist you once were.”

“I wish I had your faith.”

“Clark, I know it might take a while. I’m not expecting you to jump into the deep end.” She tightened her hold on his hands and offered him a grin. “Not yet, anyway.”

She wondered if he was aware she was putting up a front ... and hoped not. She had to be strong for him.

“Just as well.” He returned her smile ruefully. “I’m pretty certain I’d drown.”

“Then it’s just as well you have lots of friends who are only too happy to help you.”

“I guess ... but I’d bet a lot of the people out there think I’m the teacher’s pet.” Clark glanced at the blinds. “They’ve earned their positions. They’re probably just waiting for me to fall flat on my face.”

“Will you stop?” Lois’ voice had an edge to it. She would not allow him to spiral into a pit of self-doubt. “Believe me, you’ve earned the right to be here. You’ve won awards and you’ve more talent in your little finger than a lot of those others. And before you remind me that you’ve been away for a few years, I’ll have you know that Mac gave you a glowing reference.”

That brought his attention back to her face. “You asked Mac for a reference for me?”

Lois smiled. “Not exactly. Last time he called, I mentioned you were coming back to work, and he said that I’d got myself a fine laddie who wasn’t afraid of hard work and knew how to use his own initiative. Mind you, I still haven’t gotten the accent right, but I totally agree with him.” Lois led Clark to the couch and pulled him down beside her. “Clark, I’m not expecting this to be a walk in the park, but I seriously doubt you’ve lost the ability to be a good journalist. You have to have more faith in yourself, and I can tell you that all of the people who knew you before are rooting for you. You were a very popular member of the staff. No one wants to see you fail.”

Again there was silence in the office as Lois and Clark regarded each other, the former encouragingly, the latter with some trepidation.

“Come on, Clark.” Lois bumped her husband’s shoulder teasingly. “Where has the ‘Clark Kent is a very lucky guy’ gone to?”

Her voice was playful, but her dark eyes told Clark a different story. Lois was putting on a brave act for his benefit. He suddenly felt ashamed. Once again, Lois was suffering for his sake, and he’d promised himself he’d never intentionally hurt her.

He forced a lightness into his tone which he wasn’t exactly feeling. “I’m sorry, honey. I think he went AWOL for a minute there.”

“A case of unexpected shell-shock, maybe?”

“You could be right, Chief.”

“Well, you got that part down pat. The Chief is always right.” Her eyes twinkled as she smiled.

The strange thing was that Clark did feel his mood brightening. “You know, I think Clark Kent is going to be OK,” he said, allowing his hand to touch Lois’ cheek. “He’s got the best backup team in the world.”

Lois covered his hand with her own for a moment, then stood erect. “And speaking of backup ... Jim is going to show you around, introduce you to the people you don’t know, and give you a crash lesson on our computer systems. I’d liked to have given you the tour myself, but Jim’s the techno-nut and I have some editing to do. We update our online edition in about an hour, and there are some stories that need polishing. But maybe we could catch up for a late lunch.”

Clark too stood and backed off toward the door. “OK, Boss,” he said, wiggling his brows in his own inimitable way. “I look forward to lunch.”

The rest of the day for Clark went better than he’d been expecting. His colleagues seemed genuinely pleased to see him,

and he hadn’t been expected to write any stories. Mostly, he’d caught up on the workings of a busy newsroom and hadn’t made a fool of himself over Jim’s computer tutorials. In fact, according to Jim, he’d been pretty quick on the uptake, better than most. Clark wasn’t sure if this was true or his friend was just trying to boost his confidence. Either way, he appreciated Jim’s kindness.

The high spot of his working day had been lunch with Lois, but he’d even felt a little ambivalent about that. Did Lois have lunch on a regular basis with her staff? He had memories of Perry eating with Lois, himself and Jimmy on occasion, but mostly their boss had been too busy. He had a feeling Lois had set time aside for him on his first day back and that he shouldn’t expect such treatment too often.

That thought saddened him, and as he made his way home alone, he felt a deep nostalgia for the writing team of Lane and Kent. Fortunately for Clark, his kids were waiting for him, and they soon fell into the routine of cooking dinner and chatting about their respective days, and this time he actually had some interesting input into the conversation.

So, all things considered, today hadn’t been a bad day.

Later that night, Lois sat in front of her dressing-table mirror, liberally applying cleansing cream to her face. Now that she was in her late forties, she’d decided that nature deserved a helping hand in keeping those facial lines at bay. Not that Clark would agree. She’d all but forgotten how much Clark could boost her ego by just one appreciative glance. But thinking of Clark caused tiny wrinkles to appear between her eyebrows. Just how well had he coped with his first day back at work?

She heard the shower switch off and moments later, Clark emerged, wearing only his sleep shorts. She watched him crawl into bed behind her, thinking sexily that his body was still wonderfully defined. Yet, the faint shadows beneath his eyes told her he was tired, and she set those thoughts aside for now. She concentrated on removing her own eye makeup and spoke as casually as she could manage.

“So, how did today really go?”

Clark plumped up his pillows, giving himself a moment’s distraction before answering. “Good. It was good ...”

She watched his reflection in the mirror, her fine eyebrows arching as she repeated her question. “How did it go, Clark?”

“OK, I guess.” As he had before in her office, he prevaricated, but when he caught her glance in the mirror, he caved. He was never very good at hiding things from Lois. “Well, I suppose I was a little anxious.” Still Lois stared. “Who am I kidding? I was petrified. Now that I remember most of my past, I know I’ve faced bad guys and bullets; kryptonite and quantum disrupters.” On the last word, his voice rose in a question, but at Lois’ nod he continued, satisfied he’d got the name of the weapon correct. “You’d hardly think that starting back at The Planet would make me feel so jittery.”

“You had your full range of superpowers when you faced that stuff, honey,” she said somewhat apologetically. “And you’ve been through some really hard times. All those things have to have made a difference.”

“I didn’t have my superpowers in China, yet I managed to hold down a job.”

Lois made a final sweep across her cheeks with a tissue, then turned on the stool to face Clark. “I think that’s because Letour had no memory, so he had no expectations. Now things are a little different.”

“Or maybe Mac and Marge took more care of me than I realized ...” Clark’s right hand toyed with the stub of his missing finger.

Lois nodded. “They were good friends to you, that’s for sure. I hate to think what could have happened ...” She rose and crossed to sit next to Clark, stilling his nervous fingers with her

own. “But I refuse to be frightened by what might have been. You’re home now. But don’t be too hard on yourself. This was only your first day back. It was bound to be strange. Once you settle in, your ability to write will return. For instance, you haven’t lost your parenting skills.”

Clark sat up in bed just a little higher. “Are you joking, sweetheart? The kids are looking after me these days.” His eyes twinkled, proving to Lois that he wasn’t totally upset by this observation.

“They just want you to know how much they love you and how much you were missed.” Lois stretched out on the bed beside him, her head coming to rest on his chest. “We haven’t really talked about this much, I guess mainly because you seemed so fragile when you first came home ... and then there was the surgery ...” Lois shivered slightly and felt Clark’s arm tighten around her, giving her the courage to go on. “Those four years when we thought you were dead were hard for all of us. Suddenly, you lose your reason for living ... but life goes on. You want to stop the clocks, but you can’t. Somehow you have to keep going, even when you feel you’d rather not. There’s this big hole in your life ... and yet it does get easier with time.” She laughed self-consciously. “Why is it that all the important things in life are covered by clichés?” She sat up and stared into Clark’s eyes. “But just because we managed doesn’t mean we want to be without you again. You have to make allowances if we’re a little over protective.”

“Lois, I understand.” He slipped his hand into the silkiness of her hair. “Letour had amnesia, but he was very aware he was missing something precious. Honey, I don’t mind you all being protective, in fact, I kinda like it. It’s just that maybe you shouldn’t treat me with kid gloves at work, otherwise you might have a strike in the newsroom.”

Lois shook her head emphatically. “That’s not going to happen. I wouldn’t let it. Now you just let me moisturize, then I’ll show you just how protective I can be ...”

An expectant grin lit Clark’s face. “You know, sweetheart, I really don’t mind the kid-glove treatment in the bedroom ... or any other kind ...”

Lois’ eyes gleamed lasciviously as she leaned over to plant a kiss on his lips, giving Clark a glorious view of her curves. “In that case, stand by to be stunned ...”

Chapter Two: Kent And... Olsen

“Mom!” Matt’s outraged voice drifted down to the kitchen where Lois was preparing pancakes for breakfast. “Can you tell Sara to hurry up and get out of the bathroom? She’s been in there forever, making herself bea-uty-ful for her latest crush, which in no way ranks higher than my early study period. I still have an essay to finish.”

Lois left the pancake batter cooking on the burner and, hurrying over to the door, raised her voice to call back ... though why she did that, she had absolutely no idea. Matt could hear a pin drop. “See, this is exactly what I didn’t want to happen. Your school work comes before your superhero patrols. I know you were out late last night.”

Matt appeared at the top of the stairs. “Mom, there was a bridge collapse. Do you expect me to let people die?”

“No. Of course not,” Lois conceded with good grace, about to return to her pancakes when she had a second thought. “Did you happen to spot a Planet reporter covering the story? If you did, I hope you gave him the exclusive ... and if there wasn’t, I’ll be asking why just as soon as I get into work.”

“Don’t worry. The answer is yes to both your questions, but could you do something about Sara for now?”

“Your Dad should be finished showering any minute, so you can use our bathroom. It only takes you seconds to get washed and dressed, Matt, so stop complaining.” She waved her spatula

warningly toward the second floor. “But, Sara, that doesn’t let you off the hook. Don’t take all day getting ready. I don’t want you to be late for school.”

“Mom.” A much younger voice spoke from behind Lois, just as a certain smell assailed her nostrils. “I think the pancakes might be about to burn.”

“Oh, da ... darn!” she exclaimed, in deference to Vicky’s young ears, as she ran back to the stove, snatching a pot holder and pulling the pan off the heat. Over the years, Lois had learned to get by when it came to cooking, but she’d never reached the levels of an accomplished chef and she was easily distracted.

“Why isn’t Dad making breakfast?” Vicky asked reasonably, clearly preferring her father’s cooking.

“Because he’s busy getting ready for work.” Lois dumped the burnt remains unceremoniously into the trash bin and prepared to start again.

“But he always makes our pancakes ... at least he has since he’s been better.”

“Well today he’s decided to come into work with me,” Lois explained, wiping the surface of the pan, then pouring in some fresh batter. “Between you and me, sweetie, I think he’s a little nervous, so I said I’d cook this morning. You don’t mind, do you ... and maybe we could keep the fact that Daddy’s worried between us?”

Vicky bit her lip as she gave the matter serious consideration. She’d really enjoyed these last few weeks with Daddy cooking breakfast and them all sitting down to eat as a family, but she also knew how much he wanted to be a good reporter again. Vicky wanted to be a reporter herself when she grew up, so she understood how he felt. More than anything, she wanted her dad to be happy ... and there was always weekends when she could ask him to make her favorite blueberry muffins. She’d even offer to help him.

“That’s fine, I guess,” she said a little disappointedly. Then with sudden insight she realized she might have upset her mother. After all, her mom had had to do all the work while her dad was missing. “Your cooking’s not that bad. I’ll set the table, OK?”

Lois smiled lopsidedly as Vicky turned her back and went to fetch the plates and silverware. “Thanks, Sweetie, for such glowing support.” Then she returned her concentration to the mixture in the pan. One near disaster was enough ... and where was a superhero when you needed him? There were ‘almost’ two in this house, and not one had sped to her rescue.

A hazy sun playing hide-and-seek with ominous gray clouds held Clark’s attention as Lois drove through the rush-hour traffic toward downtown Metropolis. They’d already dropped Vicky off at the school, while Matt and Sara had opted to make their own way as normal, considering an escort by their parents was decidedly uncool. Unless they were running really late, of course.

On his second day back at work, Clark had chosen to brave the staff meeting, hoping that Lois would assign him a story he could sink his teeth into. It might be too soon, but he’d been rolling around the house on his own for a couple of months, obeying Bernie’s orders, and frankly, he was tired of taking things easy.

Nerves still plagued him, but sometime during the night he’d decided that jumping into the deep end was probably the best course of action. He’d either sink or swim, and if he was going to sink, he was better off finding out sooner rather than later. It wouldn’t help either his career or Lois’ if The Planet should retain a washed-up reporter because of his past reputation or the fact that he was married to the boss.

So he was hoping that today he wouldn’t be left to twiddle his thumbs, learning current systems or doing research, and it boded well for his idea that Lois had agreed to his early start, as long as he left a little sooner in accordance with Bernie’s regime.

Mind you, doing research might not be a bad idea. At least the cautious part of his mind theorized, totally appalled by the 'deep end' option ...

"I think the sun might eventually break through today, though it's starting to feel colder, which is only to be expected since winter is almost here ..."

Lois' voice broke into his thoughts. It was unlike his wife to give him a weather report, so he guessed it must have been obvious that his mind was drifting. He shook himself back into awareness.

"True, honey." Clark glanced at the sky again, deciding Lois' forecast might be a bit optimistic, then he smiled at his wife. "Metropolis looks good to me in any weather, though."

"Where were you?" Lois wasted no time on further small talk.

"Thinking. Wondering if the Chief might have a story for me today."

"Right at this moment, the Chief isn't here and your wife doesn't know, but if your wife might be allowed to offer you some advice, I'd say you shouldn't expect too much too soon."

"You can offer me advice at anytime, but I've got to find my feet someday, and I doubt putting that off will make me any less stressed."

Lois concentrated on negotiating the Jeep around a delivery truck double-parked by the curb. "Clark, don't be in a hurry to run before you can walk ... and before you object, I'd take the same position with any of my employees who were returning to work after being sick."

Clark compressed his lips, swallowing a sigh. "But would you really?" He swiveled in his seat to face her. "We've already established that I shouldn't get any preferential treatment. Lois, you can't afford to have a member of staff who doesn't pull their weight."

"True. But you know I'm professional enough not to bring my private life into the office. In fact, I feel a little insulted."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. I guess I'm still a little edgy, which is all the more reason why I should get back to doing my job as soon as possible."

Lois pulled up behind a line of cars waiting in traffic with a jolt, testament to the fact that Clark wasn't the only one who was a bit on edge. "And you should let me do my job, which at the moment is a wife driving to work with her husband." She looked over at Clark. "Perhaps we have to learn to compartmentalize our lives better."

"We never did before," Clark said sadly, his shoulders drooping slightly.

"Whether we like it or not, our working lives have changed." Lois' tone echoed Clark's regret. "There's no going back, and we can't ignore what's happened in between." She reached over to touch Clark's leg briefly, before accelerating once the light turned to green. "But I will take your suggestion into consideration ... just as I would listen to other colleagues. Please, Clark, help me make this work." She risked a sideways glance at him, her teeth biting into her bottom lip. "Trust me?"

Again Clark sighed, only this time audibly. "Honey, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have raised this issue here. It wasn't fair ... or professional, and I do trust you. I trust you with my life, so I should trust you with my job."

"I'm glad you realize that, but we're about to swap hats." Lois flashed him a rueful grin as she pulled into the underground parking lot.

At this hour, the place was still fairly unoccupied, though probably not for long. Clark waited silently while Lois found her usual spot and deftly slid the Jeep into the space.

"Before we do ... swap hats ... I mean, do you think you have time to accept a groveling kiss from your husband who's been such an inconsiderate jerk?"

Quickly, Lois scanned the area. Satisfied they were alone, she checked her watch with mock seriousness. "I think I might be able to fit that into my schedule ..."

Wasting no additional time, Lois and Clark locked themselves into an embrace, sharing, without words, a multitude of feelings. There was no doubting their deep love for each other, but both were beginning to acknowledge that their careers might now be a little more difficult to manage than they had first believed.

A short time later, the large conference room was filled to capacity. The staff members who had arrived earliest were seated around the long table, while latecomers lined the sides of the room and crowded into every corner.

At the head of the table a chair stood empty, awaiting the arrival of the editor-in-chief. Lois had picked up the trick from Perry. It was much easier to call for quiet when the boss made a grand entrance, particularly if you'd allowed your employees a few minutes to say their good mornings and catch up on the gossip.

But the newspaper business was a hectic one, and Lois gave them only a moment or two before she opened the door and swept between the workers standing by the wall and those seated at the table. She carried a file under her arm, though nowadays it was mainly a prop as there were individual computer screens in front of every seat around the table. Yet Lois still resisted the lure of a totally technical world.

"Morning, everyone!" she announced as she took her seat. Actually, she'd already greeted a number of employees, but she had learned it paid to be polite. A satisfied staff was a well-motivated staff. There was a chorus of replies, though the group wouldn't win any prizes for harmonizing.

"OK. What have we got going today?" she asked, scanning the faces before her. "Anyone still checking out ongoing stories? Anyone got any new tips that need chasing down, and, more to the point, anyone got anything ready for the latest online update or for the evening edition of the newspaper?"

Lois, in fact, was well aware what most of her reporters were working on, though, clearly, some new tips had come in overnight and early that morning. She'd also learned, however, that this was a good time for her people to air their ideas and troubleshoot problems. So she sat back in her chair to listen to the general conversation, encouraging brainstorming and adding her opinion when she felt it was needed.

Finally, Lois called for order as she'd reached the point in the meeting where she would set deadlines and assign new stories. She couldn't resist glancing toward Clark, who was sitting halfway down the table on her right, next to Jim. Since their discussion in the car, she realized that Clark expected to be on her list, and fortunately, she wasn't about to let him down, though in her opinion, it was a little too soon for him to be tackling a story. She'd hoped to persuade him to do some editing, but Clark had been rehired as a reporter, and reporting was exactly what he and the others expected him to do.

The delegations were almost over and she noticed Clark beginning to fidget somewhat. She cleared her throat and tried to adopt a purely businesslike facade. "Clark, the word's out that the Metropolis Bus Company is hiking its fares when the price of green fuel is finally coming down. See if you can get an interview with them and find out what's going on there. The public deserves a fair deal!"

There was a general chuckle in the room at Lois' pun, but she saw Clark raise an eyebrow. Surely, he couldn't be taking their laughter personally?

"Clark?" This time she gazed directly at him and when he didn't reply, she challenged him. "Do you have a problem with that?"

The pen in Clark's hand was tapping lightly on the wood, but he slipped it back in his pocket and sat back in his chair. "No, Chief," he answered politely ... too politely.

Just what was Clark hoping for? The bus story might not be the hottest, or the most difficult, but it wasn't a fluff piece ... and it was the best she was prepared to do at this point in time. She and Clark really needed to talk, but not here in front of other staff.

That was one lesson she'd learned long ago.

Lois' contemplation was suddenly interrupted by Jim's shout. "Chief! There's a breaking story."

The small screen in front of her was beeping, attracting her attention. The Planet's computers were set to warn of incoming stories, and everyone in the room was trying to read the latest newsflash from the nearest available monitor and Lois was no exception, apart from the fact that no one dared crane over her shoulder.

There was little information, other than the fact that some delivery truck had exploded, though thankfully with no serious injuries to the driver or passersby. A live feed appeared on the screens and Lois watched the scene unfold. Just as she was about to send Jim to investigate the story, Clark spoke up.

"Lois, that's the truck we passed on the way to work this morning."

Leaning closer to the screen, Lois began to recognize the street they'd driven down before turning onto Main Street. She remembered being annoyed by the delivery man's double-parking, but she had to admit she hadn't paid much attention to the logo on the truck. She'd had other things on her mind, but it seemed there was nothing wrong with Clark's awareness, nor his recall.

"Lois, please, let me take it?" Again Clark's voice came at her, and she tampered down a feeling of irritation that he should put her on the spot like this. She stayed silent for a few seconds before reaching a decision.

"OK, but you're partnered with Jim on this ... and I still want you to follow up with Metro Bus!"

Clark nodded, sending her a grateful smile as he rose to follow Jim, who had already reached the doorway. "I can do that, Chief."

Lois' stare focused on the two men as they hurried through the bullpen and disappeared into the elevator before turning back to the staff. "What are we waiting for people? We have a job to do, so let's get to it!"

There was a scrape of chairs and pounding of footsteps as people filed through the conference door, but Lois remained still, a strange feeling of *deja vu* creeping along her spine. It had been years since she'd been anywhere near an explosion.

What was she thinking? She and Clark had just happened to drive by a truck which had somehow exploded some time later. It was a coincidence ... nothing more.

"Jim, Clark, can I see you in my office?"

A little more than an hour later, Lois leaned her head around the door of her inner sanctum and invited the two men inside. She walked back to her desk and perched on the edge ... waiting.

When Lois spoke with just that tone, her staff knew she must be obeyed and, seconds later, both men strode into the room, Jim finding a seat on the couch, while Clark stood behind the big plaid chair. Perry's furniture had been refurbished but never changed.

"What happened with that truck?" Lois' gaze shifted between the two. Normally, she wouldn't be riding her staff this way, but this time she couldn't restrain her curiosity.

Jim shrugged. "It was no big deal. I mean the truck didn't really 'explode' explode. Apart from a slightly buckled side and some burn damage, you'd never know anything had happened."

"Was it an accident?" Lois continued to pry, noticing Clark's hands tightening on the back of the chair.

"Definitely not," Clark answered. "It appears a package blew up. The police aren't saying much, but they do suspect it was a small bomb."

"Jim!" Lois threw the seated man a disapproving look. "I thought you said it was no big thing. Now it seems we might have someone sending bombs through the mail."

"One bomb, Lois." Jim defended himself. "And only a small one. Sergeant Peterson said it was little more than a large firecracker."

"Even firecrackers can maim," Clark said, his mouth set obstinately.

"No one was hurt. The delivery guy wasn't even in his truck at the time," Jim fudged, yet he refused to look the older man in the eye.

A confused frown marred Lois' brow. She couldn't ignore the uneasy tension between the two reporters. "But if someone had opened the package, they might have been injured, so it's no thanks to whoever sent the thing that no one was hurt." She stood up and crossed her arms, taking charge of the situation. "You didn't by any chance find out who the package was meant for?"

Clark shook his head. "The wrapping was pretty badly damaged, and I'm afraid my telescopic sight isn't as good as it once was, so I couldn't make out the address," he said quietly, adjusting his glasses in a gesture that smacked of frustration. "We can check with Speedy Deliveries later. They're bound to keep records, but it might take them some time to narrow it down. Meanwhile, the bomb squad took what was left of the package away for investigation, but Jim managed to persuade the sergeant to let us know what they discover." Clark cleared his throat and sent Jim a quick glance. "I'm sorry, Jim. I don't agree with you that this is no big deal. That bomb could have gone off prematurely, and I believe the perpetrator meant to harm someone ... maybe not enough to kill."

Lois decided to end the meeting. Something else was going on here, but she was fairly confident she'd get nothing more out of either man while they were together. It was a case of divide and conquer, and Lois had no doubt who would throw in the towel first. She moved around her desk to continue with the work she'd been doing before they had returned.

"OK, you seem to be on top of things for now." She halted in mid-stride, as if she'd just remembered something. "Oh, Clark, don't forget you still have to interview a Mr. Donovan at the Metropolis Bus company. I took the liberty of calling over to arrange an interview for you. Why don't you let Jim write up what you have on the explosion so far and head on out."

It was Clark's turn to frown. Didn't Lois trust him to arrange his own interviews? "I have time, Lois. I can help Jim and still get over to the bus company."

"Clark! Now, if you don't mind." Lois remonstrated, leaning her hands on her desk to keep them still.

Perhaps she shouldn't have paved the way for Clark. She just wanted to make his life was a little easier. Surely, there was nothing wrong with that, but from the look on Clark's face, he didn't appreciate her ... meddling. Was that what she was doing?

Lois continued a little more fiercely than she intended. "I want that story for this afternoon's online edition. You forget we have more deadlines to meet these days, if we want to keep ahead of the competition."

Clark grimaced. "Sorry. I did forget. I guess I'm not really up to speed yet."

"You only started back yesterday." Lois' voice and eyes softened as she continued. "No one expects you to be up to speed."

"I do, Lois," Clark stated baldly, with a little shrug of his shoulders, while he backed through the door. "I'll get you that

story.”

For the second time today, Lois watched Clark almost run from the newsroom, her heart aching somewhat. Then she turned back to Jim.

“Are you going to tell me what that was all about?” she said, her tone deceptively offhand.

Jim, however, was not fooled. He squirmed back into the couch, finding the pattern of the cushions suddenly deserved his full attention. “What’s what about?”

“Come on. Don’t play games with me ... pretending there wasn’t a story.” Lois advanced on the younger man, causing him to blanch.

“Lois, it really was a small explosion ...”

“Jimmy!”

“OK. It needs investigating ... Jed Peterson’s in charge. He promised he’d get back to me.”

“Then why did you play it down?”

“I still think it might be a dead end.” Lois was almost standing over him, making him even more uncomfortable. He really didn’t want to get between Lois and Clark, but he knew she wouldn’t be sidetracked. “All right. I thought maybe I should try to rein CK in a bit. He’s a little uptight.”

“He’s trying so hard, Jim,” Lois explained sadly, turning away, hiding her eyes.

“Too hard, Lois.” Jim stood up and shifted so he could see Lois’ face again. “He says he has a gut feeling about the bomber.”

Lois glanced up at the ceiling and gave a slightly shaky laugh. “He could be right, you know. I never ignored my instincts.”

“Facts, Lois. Hard facts. Wasn’t that what Perry taught us? It’s what you’d tell any other rookie reporter.”

“Clark’s not a rookie!”

“No, and I’m not saying he’s wrong either, just that he needs to take a few steps back and view this a little more rationally. He has some weird idea that the bomb might have been meant to go off sooner ...”

“While we were driving down the street?” Shocked, Lois’ hand flew to her mouth.

“Yeah.”

“Strangely enough, that idea occurred to me too. I couldn’t help but think that Clark’s just back on the job and already he’s in the near vicinity of a bomb blast.”

“Actually, he thinks you were the target. I had to remind him that you haven’t been in the line of fire for quite a few years.” Jim let his arm steal around Lois’ shoulder. “Lois, I know this is a tense time for both you and Clark, but don’t go seeing boogey men around every corner. There’s no evidence that that bomb was meant for either of you ... and it wouldn’t have dented the paintwork of your jeep, let alone hurt you.”

Lois patted Jim’s arm, her eyes closing briefly. “You’re right. Of course, you’re right. I’m letting this whole Clark-getting-back-to-work thing get totally out of perspective. I used to complain that he was over-protective, and now I’m in danger of doing the same thing with him.”

“What did you expect?” Jim asked gently, letting his arm drop from Lois’ side. “Don’t go giving yourself a hard time over that. Even I found myself trying to babysit him out there. It just made him more determined, so I stopped.”

“And I should too?”

“Lois, I’m not saying anything.” Jim grinned sheepishly. “Now how about I get out of here and do that investigating you pay me for?”

Finally, Lois smiled. “Thanks for reining me in too.” The phone on Lois’ desk rang, demanding her attention. “Sorry, Jim, I need to take this. Let me know what you find out from Peterson, though. Hopefully, the police will get their man and you can write the story before Clark’s imagination goes into overdrive.”

With a mock salute, Jim returned to his desk.

Much sooner than expected, Lois looked up to see Jim knocking on her door. She eagerly set aside the overtime claims she’d been going over and beckoned him inside.

“Hey, Lois, I just heard from Peterson about Metropolis Bus ...”

The smile froze on Lois’ face and, underneath her makeup, her skin paled. “Why? What’s happened at the Bus Company? Was Clark involved?”

“No! Nothing has happened at Metro Bus. At least, not that I’ve heard. It’s what was going to happen.”

Lois laid her pen carefully on the desk and regarded Jim with a stern look. “I can do without the cryptic clues, so why don’t you explain.”

Jim pulled at his tie and sauntered a little closer to his boss. “Jed got a call from Speedy Deliveries ...”

“That was quick.”

“Yeah. Speedy Deliveries must live up to their name ... but if you want an explanation, don’t interrupt.” Jim grinned, taking the sting out of his words. “The delivery guy was new and wanted to impress his boss, so he got out early and was on his way back to the depot. He only had a couple of deliveries left, so it was easy for him to narrow the recipient down. Seems the package which blew up was addressed to the Metropolis Bus Company.”

“It was?” Lois’ eyes widened in shock as her brain started racing. “But Clark ...”

“... is over there.” Jim leaned his hip on the other side of the desk. “It’s a coincidence, Lois. It has to be. How would the bomber have known we were covering the bus story, or that you would send Clark? You know, sometimes coincidences do happen.”

“I guess.” Lois tipped her chair back. “So, what do we think this is? A disgruntled passenger who’d also heard about the rate hikes?”

“Could be, or a disgruntled ex-employee. Jed’s already checking into their employment records, and I’ll run my own searches, though I’m thinking I should call CK.” Jim stared at his hands for a second before returning his gaze to Lois’ face. “Ask him to do some digging around while he’s over there. I wanted to check with you first, though.”

Lois lifted her pen and found herself tapping out a tattoo on her desktop, while the seconds ticked by, then she shrugged and threw the pen down. “My first reaction was to say no, he has enough on his plate ... but you knew that anyway.”

A tiny grin lifted the corner of Jim’s mouth. “You assigned the story to Clark and me and, right now, he’s Johnny on the spot. Let him do his bit, Lois. Clark’s not going to get into any trouble. If there is a bomber, the guy’s just found out he’s missed his target. I doubt he’s had time to set anything else up, and don’t forget, that bomb was nowhere near lethal.”

“OK, I agree. Would you mind if I call Clark though?”

“Yeah. As a matter of fact, I would.” Jim clasped his hands together and stood up a little straighter. “Think about it. If you were still Clark’s partner, wouldn’t you expect to handle the story between you? Would you have been happy if Perry had interfered?”

Lois’ lips had tightened in a thin line at Jim’s words, then they suddenly relaxed into a rueful grin. “No. Didn’t stop him from doing it, though. But, I suppose the circumstances were different.”

“Lois, if you make the call, Clark might think you’re checking up on him. In this case, Clark’s your reporter not your husband.”

“Yes, I know. You told me before. Let him do his work.” Lois stood up and came around the desk, linking her hand through Jim’s arm as she walked him to the door. “You make the call,

then we can head out to Callard's for lunch, if you have the time. All this mental hat-juggling is getting to me."

"What?" Jim's face screwed up in question.

"Never mind. It's a private joke. Go." Lois waved him out. "Call Clark, and when you're ready to go, let me know."

The rest of the day went as planned, or as close to it as one could expect in the headquarters of a major metropolitan newspaper. Clark returned with information on both stories. Mr. Donovan had explained the rising fares as the only way to recoup the company's expenditure on a new fleet of 'green' vehicles. As to the second question, Donovan wasn't aware of any ex-employees who might want to vent their anger on blowing up the premises, at least, not without checking back on employment records, which he would be happy to do if The Planet's report on the increased fares was without bias.

A rather indignant Clark explained that The Daily Planet always reported stories in a fair and factual way, and reminded the man that the newspaper wasn't in the business of writing puff pieces. Thankfully, Donovan had been a subscriber to Metropolis' foremost newspaper for many years, and he not only remembered the reporting team of Lane and Kent, but was in fact a member of the public who'd been happy to hear of Mr. Kent's miraculous return.

He'd accepted Clark's assurances readily and promised to look into the other matter forthwith.

Both stories made the next edition of the paper, though neither were front-page news. Lois and Clark were happy with his writing up of the fare increases, and Donovan was satisfied he'd got an evenhanded hearing, while not a total endorsement of his higher rates.

The case of the exploding package, unfortunately, reached a dead end. As promised, Peterson had kept Jim informed, but there was little to tell. The police had traced where the package had entered the system, a depot in the dockland district, yet no one could identify who had mailed it. Plus, the forensic team had studied the package but had found nothing to link it to any known perpetrator, or unknown one, for that matter. Whoever had made the bomb had been very careful and worn gloves throughout, or wiped his — or her — prints off every surface, and no trace of DNA was found.

The makeup of the device gave nothing away, either. It was just your run-of-the-mill small explosive, something that any Tom, Dick or Harriette could find out how to construct from a Web site.

Donovan also called Clark to tell him that he had spoken with some of his longtime employees, and was able to highlight the names of three workers who had left under acrimonious circumstances. However, none of these leads had planned out.

Clark's research uncovered that one guy had been killed in a drunk-driving incident, the second had moved to New Jersey and started a small transport business, which was doing well, so he was actually quite pleased that he'd been fired, and the third was a woman who was at the moment in the hospital having twins. Clark doubted she had much time to be constructing bombs.

For now, the case was on hold, both at the MPD and The Daily Planet, and Clark was less than thrilled. He still had a funny feeling in his gut, and, though Lois wouldn't deride such instincts, she couldn't see what else Jim and Clark could do.

Only, this time around, Lois wasn't about to kill Clark's story. Instead, she asked him to put it on hold until something else happened to turn up, and she also made it clear she wasn't averse to him investigating in his spare time ... if he had any.

Now that he'd proved he still had what it took to be a reporter, over the next week Clark was assigned regularly to what he referred to as 'middle of the road' stories. That, however, didn't stop him looking for the 'big' story, the one that would

confirm, more to himself than anyone else, that he was back on top.

Lois had to laugh, if somewhat ironically, at their role reversal. These days, Clark was the ambitious, impatient one, while she was the one urging caution, praying he'd do things by the book. Still, she had to admit that it felt great to look out of her office window and see her husband in the newsroom again.

The rain dripped steadily from the ceiling into the old buckets and pans which were dotted around the basement room, a single room in a dilapidated block of apartments in one of the poorest areas of Metropolis. A room that had been home to Thomas Timmons since the bank had repossessed his house ... just because he'd missed some payments.

Technically, it was more than just a few payments. But what did they expect? He'd been taking care of a sick wife and been fired from his stupid job in the process. All their money had gone to Mary's medical treatment ... and even that hadn't been enough.

Yet those faceless people at the bank hadn't understood. All the letters in his mailbox ... month after month. The demands that he come to see them, probably to have his fingers wrapped by a snobby, well-paid financial adviser. Did they really think he'd play their game?

Well, he hadn't! He'd even stopped opening the letters.

In the end, they'd foreclosed on him. He'd lost everything ... just as he'd lost Mary, and everything that reminded him of his few short years with her. Now all he had were some photographs of her in happier times, and they weren't nearly enough.

Well, the bank would pay for his living in this pit. Everyone who'd ruined his life would pay in time. He'd begun his revenge. OK, he hadn't exactly done a lot of damage, but it was a start. Speedy Deliveries had been his first, like a test. He'd never realized he could be so clever, learning his explosive techniques from the Internet. Just as well he'd patiently written down all the instructions he needed as there was no way he could connect to the Internet from this rat hole, and he couldn't use an Internet Cafe or a library; it would be too easy to trace what he'd been checking out.

No, he'd copied everything he needed to know before his house and his possessions had been taken away, but they hadn't gotten his computer. He'd smashed that to bits. No one would be able to trace him through technology. Funnily enough, he'd learned that from the Internet too.

His tongue popped out of his mouth and licked his lips, like a cat savouring its last meal. He'd made the news. A sly gleam lit up his eyes as he perused The Daily Planet's coverage of the bombing. They were way off track, thinking the Metropolis Bus Company had been his target. He'd simply chosen that address because he'd happened to be on one of their buses when he'd decided on his first target from the list.

Not that Met Bus wasn't on that list, but it was just a minor offender. He had sent an application to the company once, but they'd never even bothered to reply. He guessed because he couldn't drive, thanks to his guardian, who'd forbidden him to learn after he'd crashed her precious 1950s Buick, taking it on a joy-ride when he was a teenager. She'd had him arrested for stealing, and he'd spent the night in a cell. She thought more of that car than she did of him!

But Speedy Deliveries had once employed him in their depot for a short time, then they'd fired him for tardiness and too many sick days. Selfish morons! Didn't they understand that someone who suffered from depression and low self-esteem often found it difficult to get out of bed in the mornings? And it had been his first job. He'd have finally gotten into the way of things, if they'd only given him a chance.

Now was pay back time.

He'd gone for a motion sensor bomb, primed to go off when the package was picked up by one of the Speedy Deliveries employees. He'd stuck 'handle with care' labels on the wrapping, certain that someone would ignore the warnings. He'd even worn gloves and a disguise when mailing it to prevent anyone recognizing him.

So the bomb had exploded at the wrong moment, only causing the company a damaged truck and a bit of annoyance, but he would definitely get better with practice. In the future, he would try a more reliable type of trigger.

One thing he knew, without a shadow of doubt, was that this role of an avenger made him feel good, and he wasn't going to be stopped. Most villains were caught by the cops building up a pattern of their crimes. Well, he wouldn't be so obliging. He had a list, a long list of victims, and from now on, he would choose his next target randomly. With that thought, he pulled out his pin ... one of Mary's old dressmaking pins ... and stabbed it into the well-folded sheet of paper.

Oh, good. This particular target was from his earlier life, way before he'd met Mary, but it was here he'd begun the downward spiral into his sad life, from which Mary had rescued him for a few years.

If only he'd found the courage to stand up for himself earlier, perhaps he'd have been able to save Mary.

"Oh, Mary," he whispered to the empty room. "I miss you ..."

He swiped at his eyes with shaking hands. There was no room in his life for sentimentality.

Right now, he had to get his butt in gear if he wanted to make it into work on time. He hated working as an all-night waiter at that sleazy cafe; the hours were long and the regulars treated him like some sort of indentured servant, but he needed the money to fund his plans.

And that made it bearable.

Chapter Three: The Wrong Path

This year, the Kents' Thanksgiving Day was truly a celebration. Their family was again complete, something none of them had ever considered possible. Clark's presence, rather than his memory, made the atmosphere joyous and spirited.

In a benevolent move, Lois had asked her parents and her sister to join the festivities, and had been happily surprised when all had accepted her invitation.

Sadly, Ellen had suffered a stroke three years earlier and was still quite frail, but her illness had had one advantage. The Lanes had never remarried. Though their relationship had improved since Lois and Clark's wedding, neither were willing to take the risk of total commitment. Yet, when Ellen had most needed Sam, he'd given up his independence, found a suitable house in the Metropolis suburbs and moved them both in. In his later years, Sam Lane had proved to be a very competent and caring ex-husband.

Lucy's current lifestyle too had astonished her big sister. After a disastrous marriage to a man Lois would describe as a Neanderthal, Lucy had renounced love, gone back to college and was now a successful partner in a PR company in Los Angeles.

Oh, how things changed!

She was the happily married, albeit working, wife while Lucy was the driven career woman.

Yet Lois was content with her life. She smiled broadly as she stuffed the large turkey. Who would have thought she'd gain such a feeling of accomplishment from a domestic chore? Clark was home; her children were excited but behaving well; her in-laws, parents and sister had come to visit, and Jimmy would be joining them for dinner. Why wouldn't she smile?

Perhaps a more mature Lucy and Jim might actually hit it off with each other.

A gentle kiss was pressed on her neck from behind and Clark's voice whispered in her ear.

"What are you smiling at?" he asked gently.

"Oh, nothing really. Just life in general." Lois turned into his arms, wrapping her arms around him, careful to keep her dirty hands off his clean blue shirt. She loved him in blue, and not necessarily Superman's blue. Now that she thought of it, she loved him in any color, especially skin tones. She giggled again.

"Lois?" The timbre of his voice rose in what she recognized as confusion.

Still smiling, she pressed her head against his broad chest. "I'm just contemplating how my life has changed so much for the better from last Thanksgiving to this."

At that she heard Clark's laugh rumble against her cheek. "Mine too. In fact, I never celebrated Thanksgiving last year. Wasn't something that was all that popular in China. Now New Year's is different." Clark leaned back to look down into her face, but he didn't loosen his grip around her. "I got to celebrate that twice. The Chinese one, and a Scottish Hogmany. Mac was a big fan of that. He insisted all the workers and villagers should go 'first footing'. That was quite an experience. I swear Mac could down more whiskey than me without it affecting him." Clark laughed again. "Because he didn't know about my genetics, he assumed I was a connoisseur."

Lois eyebrows rose. "So even though you'd lost your powers, alcohol still didn't make you drunk?"

"Nope. But then I didn't actually drink as much as Mac thought. Marge taught me to hide my glass when Mac was dishing it out, or to conveniently lose my drink. It's what she does." Clark grinned, thinking of Marge's inventiveness, but he quickly added as he saw Lois pout, "Not that Mac is addicted like your mother once was. He swore by a glass of Scotch at night; said it was good for his circulation, but I only ever saw him drink a lot at New Year. It's traditional, I think."

"Then maybe we should get in more Scotch for him when they come to visit this New Year's." She was still looking a little doubtful. Her mother had finally conquered her addiction, and Lois herself enjoyed a glass or two of wine, but she was uncomfortable in the company of those who drank a lot.

Thinking she looked adorable with that smear of stuffing on her cheek, Clark quickly kissed her lips. Since his return, he couldn't get enough of kissing Lois. "I don't think you need to worry, honey. Mac won't expect it."

"But I want them to feel at home. We could do this 'first footing' thing. Is it some sort of country dance ... like line dancing?"

Again Clark's grin grew wider, his eyes sparkling. "No. That would be the Gay Gordons."

Lois almost choked. "What? A gay dance is a Scots New Year's tradition?"

"I'm sure 'gay' didn't have that connotation when the dance was invented, but I'm sure Mac would be happy to teach you. He had us all doing it last New Year." Clark couldn't help but chuckle at the memory of Chinese and Caucasians muddling through the steps. That occasion had been one of his happier moments in his lost years. "No, first footing is a custom where all the neighbors visit each other's houses on New Year's Eve. The first person to come across your doorstep is supposed to be a tall, dark and handsome male, so I was always pushed in first." Clark blushed in embarrassment. "I guess because I was the tallest and my hair is still semi-dark ... if you ignore the gray streaks."

One of Lois' hands trailed playfully through his hair. "Oh, I don't know. I think the gray is distinguished and you still fit the third part of that description."

"You're in love with me, honey." Clark smiled down on her, then his eyes gleamed teasingly again. "But don't interrupt. I'm not finished with my story. You bring a piece of coal with you

and say ‘lang may yer lum reek.’”

Lois lifted a dish-cloth from the counter and swiped Clark. “Now you really are joking!”

Pretending to be hurt, Clark flinched, only he didn’t have to pretend all that much these days, but he threw his head back and laughed. “No, Sweetheart. I swear this is true. That saying signifies that you want the householder to always have enough coal to keep their fire burning, so wishing them prosperity, I guess. I have no idea about the tall and handsome bit, though I think it might have something to do with warding off the devil ... oh, and you always carry a bottle of Scotch with you, so you can repay the host’s hospitality.”

“Wow!” Lois’ eyes were wide open. “And I thought Kansas crop worshiping was bad ... It just goes to show you don’t know how other people live.”

“I could always tell you about the Chinese New Year too.”

“Don’t bother. Metropolis has a fairly large Chinatown, so I kinda know about that one ... though I expect it’s got a little turned around in exportation. Meanwhile, we have our own traditions to see to, so stop distracting me.” Lois poked Clark’s chest with her finger. “You know I’m not the best cook in the world.”

Clark’s head tipped to the side. “Is it my imagination, or have you improved over the last few years?”

“Necessity, I guess,” Lois said with a shrug, lowering her head. “I lost my own personal chef and I couldn’t rely on your mother all the time.”

As had often happened over these last few months, their conversation changed quickly into a more sombre tone.

Leaning his chin on her hair, Clark whispered gently. “I’m sorry.”

“No!” Lois’ head lifted sharply, causing Clark to move quickly to avoid a collision. “Sorry,” she said, understanding what had almost happened. Clark’s invulnerability hadn’t really been tested yet and she had no wish to try it out now. “Don’t apologize. We’ve been here before and you aren’t to blame ...”

“But if you hadn’t married Superman ... The North Koreans wouldn’t have wanted an ordinary man.”

“If you’d been an ordinary man, you could have gotten sick, or been killed crossing the road ... and our jobs are dangerous. Any number of criminals could have tried to take revenge ...” Her voice failed for a second; that scenario still applied, and she didn’t want to go down that road today. Her chin firmed as she locked glances with Clark. “I never had any regrets. OK, that’s not true. I regretted your absence every single day of those years, but I wouldn’t have changed one moment of the time we shared together. It just hurt so much when I thought it was over.”

Clark tightened his arms around Lois once more, burying his face in her hair. “Didn’t you ever look for someone to console you?” When he spoke his voice was stilted. They’d never talked about this, but perhaps the very domesticity of this scene gave him the courage to broach the subject. He lifted his head to study Lois’ troubled eyes. “I’m not objecting, you know. In fact, I would understand completely. You thought I was gone forever.”

“No. Clark, I never ... but I’ll have you know it wasn’t through lack of offers, either.”

A tiny smile curled Clark’s lips. “I don’t doubt that,” he said, a touch wistfully. “Any man would be lucky to be with you.”

“I didn’t want anyone else. You’re kind of a hard act to follow.”

Clark’s shoulders lifted disparagingly. “But having a partner might have made your life easier ...”

“But I didn’t want another partner.” Lois leaned closer to his body, if that was physically possible. “You’re the only man I’ve ever wanted ... the only man I’ll ever want!” She brushed her lips against his throat and felt his pulse quicken. “But what about you?” Her voice trembled. “Didn’t you ever look?”

“I was looking ...”

Lois pushed out of Clark’s embrace, taking a step backward, only to smack into the kitchen counter. “What?”

“I was looking for my dream woman.” Clark closed the gap and placed his fingers on Lois’ cheek, stroking gently. “I just didn’t know she was you, honey. Not until you walked into Marge’s spare bedroom. My heart recognized you long before my head.”

“Oh ... you,” Lois gasped, then said nothing more as her lips were involved in a much nicer occupation than talking.

“Oh boy! Can’t you two be trusted to do a job right?”

Another teasing voice asked from the doorway as a young man in a black suit and mask entered the room. “I’ve been out on a busy holiday patrol and I come back, looking forward to a good meal, and I find my parents making out in the kitchen.” Matt winked, before spinning back into his casual clothes.

“Hi, Son,” Clark replied. “You’ll have to blame your mother for looking so cute with that stuffing smeared on her face. I couldn’t resist ...”

“What?” Lois repeated, but she squirmed away from Clark and ran over to a small mirror on the back wall. She swiped at her face with the dish towel which was clutched forgotten in her hand. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she demanded, giving Clark a reproving glance.

“I was getting around to removing it myself.”

“Oh, gross!” Matt harrumphed and went to raid the fridge for a snack. It didn’t look like he’d be getting his dinner anytime soon. “You know, shouldn’t that turkey be in the oven by now, if you want it to be ready for the gang coming for dinner. Unless you want me to ...” Matt waved in the general direction of his eyes.

“No way,” Lois assured him with much feeling. “Last time you tried that we ended up eating beef briquette.”

“You did?” Clark asked in amusement, though he was also interested in the answer. “I thought you had control of your heat vision, Matt.”

“I have. Funny thing is though, Dad, I’ve inherited your superpowers, but I’m afraid I got Mom’s cooking skills ... or lack of them.”

“Don’t push your luck, Matt,” Lois said, throwing the towel at him. “I might send you to your room without dinner.”

“Nah, you wouldn’t.” Matt’s impish grin sparkled, lighting up his face. “Your bark is worse than your bite.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Clark joined in the conversation cheerfully. “There’s a whole lot of criminals in jail who wouldn’t agree with you about Mad Dog Lane.”

Lois looked askance at Clark, after all, there were as many who were no longer safely behind bars. Villains whom Clark had been just as responsible in bringing to justice, who might now be plotting their revenge ... and Clark was back on the streets and not exactly invulnerable.

Why did he have to remind her of that fact, turning her into a worrywart? This day was for appreciating what they had and not for wallowing in groundless fears. She quashed her bad thoughts and pointed at both men with mock seriousness.

“And you could join Matt in my doghouse, Clark, so be careful what you say.” When Clark winked at her, she couldn’t hide a grin. “But I know that cooking skills can be learned, so since you’re here, Matt, and you’re complaining that dinner won’t be ready in time, you can help. You know where the knives are and there are potatoes that need peeling. Even you can manage that, so get to it.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

As Lois marshaled her super troops, all three laughed and settled down to prepare the meal for their very special Thanksgiving Day.

Young Vicky Kent skipped along the corridor to the stairs which led to the principal's office. The sun, shining through the windows, felt warm, though she knew it was cold out, and she was so lighthearted, she could almost believe she was flying.

The last few days had been about the best days of her life. Her whole family had come to her house for Thanksgiving: Grandma Martha and Grandpa Jon, her Lane grandparents, Aunt Lucy and Uncle Jimmy, though they weren't together, which seemed to disappoint Mom.

Mom had cooked most of the meal, with a little help from Dad, and everyone had said she'd excelled herself. Vicky thought that meant the food tasted good, even better than normal, but what made the day really special for her was the fact that Dad was there. She was still pinching herself over his return, making sure she wasn't dreaming.

Now she was back at school. Though she didn't really mind lessons. In fact, she liked them, and if she wanted to be a famous investigative reporter like her parents, she had to study. Besides, school was fun! She had lots of friends, and she was about to be made into a peer mentor. How cool was that! Mind you, she'd had to look up 'peer' and 'mentor' in the dictionary, 'cause she didn't want anyone to know that she hadn't been quite sure what that was, but it was an important job and she'd make sure she did it well. She'd make Dad proud of her.

Today he was coming to talk to Mrs. Perez. The school needed her parents' permission before they could appoint her, which was another word she'd learned lately. For the first time, her father was attending a meeting with her principal, a circumstance that swelled Vicky's heart. Since she'd been old enough to go to school, it had always been her mother who'd dealt with her teachers 'cause Dad had been missing.

This was a big day for both her and Dad.

She'd reached the main office and could see Miss Smith, the head secretary, keeping an eye out for her arrival. The woman beckoned her over to where her father was waiting, a big smile on his face, which deepened as she approached.

Vicky grinned back, but remembered to be polite. "Hello, Miss Smith."

"Good morning, Vicky." Miss Smith inclined her head slightly. "Mr. Kent, I'm afraid Mrs. Perez was called away for a brief moment, but she'll be with you and Vicky soon. Please go in and take a seat while you wait," the secretary finished breathlessly, causing Vicky to glance at her appraisingly.

There was a goofy grin on Miss Smith's face. Vicky had noticed that Dad's smiles sometimes had that effect on females, even though Miss Smith was old ... maybe over forty, and she wasn't married. She probably wasn't used to smiles from the opposite sex. At least, that's what Vicky's friend, Emily, said. Actually, it was Emily's brother who'd told her, and he was in sixth grade, so he knew about these sort of things.

"Thank you, Miss Smith," Dad said, bestowing another one of his friendly smiles on the secretary, then he stretched out a hand to Vicky as they were ushered into the principal's office. Dad bent low to whisper in her ear. "Hi, Tory. Did I tell you I'm very proud that you've been chosen to be a peer mentor?"

Vicky was sure her feet weren't touching the ground.

They hadn't even had time to sit down when Mrs. Perez hurried into the homey office. She was just as old as Miss Smith, and she'd been a teacher at this school forever, but she had a husband and kids. In fact, one of her daughters was a friend of Sarah's — another gymnast.

She walked forward holding out her hand. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Kent, and may I say, it's so nice to see you again."

Dad shook Mrs. Perez's hand, like the gentleman he was. Grandma Martha liked all the Kent kids to have good manners. "Don't apologize. We just got here."

"I was so pleased to hear you were home," Mrs. Perez continued. "Your family must be very happy."

"Not half as happy as I am, Mrs. Perez," Dad said, sliding into the chair he was offered.

"Vicky, would you like to sit next to your father," Mrs. Perez instructed, rather than asked, then turned back to Dad. "But, of course, Mr. Kent, I can believe that. Still, it's good to have you back and looking so well. It is such a long time since you were here for a parent/teacher meeting. Back in Sarah's time, I remember."

"Yes. It would be." Dad was nodding. "You were one of Sarah's favorite teachers. Though I see you've been promoted now."

"Mr. Wilson retired, which was quite a loss to the school, but I was honored that they asked me to fill the position." Mrs. Perez sat in her chair, resting her arms on the desk. "I hope I run the school as well as he did, but sometimes I miss teaching the children ... being on the cutting edge, so to speak."

"I think my wife would know where you're coming from, Mrs. Perez. Lois wanted to be here, but unfortunately the pressure of being the editor-in-chief got in the way this time."

"That's not a problem. Mrs. Kent did an excellent job while you were ... lost. Holding down an important job and looking after three children couldn't have been easy. She must be so relieved now that you're back and sharing the responsibilities. Now, shall we get down to the business of making Vicky into a peer mentor?" Mrs. Perez glanced over at Vicky, who sat up straighter in her chair and grinned. "You got our letter suggesting she take part in the new program, Mr. Kent?"

"Yes." Dad flashed another smile. "Lois and I are extremely proud that Vicky should be chosen as a mentor. We've spoken with her about it over the past two days and we're sure she'll take her role very seriously."

Vicky was just vain enough to enjoy hearing good things about herself ... and just confident enough to know her dad was right. She would never not do a job well, not if she could help it. Vicky thought she might get that determination from Mom.

"We have no doubt of it," Mrs. Perez replied. "We've chosen a number of our students, and Vicky was among the first we decided upon. She's very popular among her classmates, and very friendly and outgoing, which is important for a mentor."

Vicky definitely got that part from Dad.

"And she's not afraid to speak her mind if she sees any fellow student acting inappropriately," Mrs. Perez added.

That was from Mom again. Vicky almost giggled; her mother wasn't afraid of anyone.

"We've always tried to teach our children to do what was right, even though they might find that difficult to do sometimes," Dad said, folding his arms. "I know they're not angels, but they are good kids." He sent a sideways smile in Vicky's direction.

"Of course they are. So shall we get started? I'll go over everything that would be expected of Vicky as a mentor and the training schedule we've set up. Then, if you agree, and Vicky is still interested, of course, you can sign the paperwork giving your permission, or if you'd like more time to discuss things with Mrs. Kent. So much red tape these days in the school system ..." Mrs. Perez began to open a file which lay on her desk when a loud bang and a shudder startled the people within the office. "Oh, my goodness! What was that?"

Dad was already moving.

"Stay there. Both of you," he said over his shoulder, and Vicky knew by the tone of his voice that was an order. "That sounded like a bomb!"

He disappeared into the heavy, smoky air that filled the outer office, slamming the door behind him, leaving Vicky wide-eyed and trying her best to live up to her mother's reputation for

bravery.

Clark stood just inside the closed door of Lois' sanctuary, the blinds drawn to give them some privacy from the busy newsroom outside, his voice striving for calm as he relayed the morning's incident to his troubled wife.

"Please, honey, relax. Vicky is fine ... really."

"Maybe I should go check on her," Lois said anxiously, poised to rush off at any moment. "I'm her mother."

Clark moved across the room and laid his hands gently on her shoulders. "I took her to Mom and Dad's, and they know how to look after her. Besides, Vicky held up really well through it all, and she doesn't think she needs looking after. A bit like someone else I used to know." He ended on a reflective chuckle, which Lois couldn't help but share.

"You're right, of course. Vicky would hate it if I started fussing ... and if you're sure she's OK."

"I am, Lois."

"Fine, you win. Martha and Jonathan are perfectly capable of taking care of Vicky." Gently, she shrugged Clark's hands from her shoulders and returned to sit in her chair behind the desk, where she removed a tissue from its container and blew her nose, covering up a sniffle.

"God, Clark, who would want to bomb a school?"

Clark shifted uneasily. "I've been asking myself that question since it happened ... and if I could have stopped it somehow. I didn't hear a thing ... no warning whatsoever."

"Do letter bombs give off warnings?" she asked, shredding the tissue she still held within her grasp.

"To a superhero? I wouldn't know!" Clark ground out, walking away from her to the bookshelves which lined the back wall, his hands clenching the polished wood. "I should have been able to do something, Lois!"

"From what you've told me, you did as much as you could." Part of Lois' brain wondered if the shelves could withstand the pressure of semi-super fingers. How would she explain the indents of fingerprints to anyone who noticed? But before she could answer herself, Clark was moving again.

He pushed himself away from the unit to march restlessly across the office. "Only this time it wasn't enough. That poor girl got hurt ... And, the thing is, it won't be enough ever again."

"You don't know that, sweetheart. You've regained some of your powers. You have to give yourself time."

Clark halted for a moment, turning to her, looking for some form of benediction. "And if Bernie's right and they never improve?"

His anguished stare almost persuaded her to lie, but she loved him too much to do that. "Then you'll find a way to go on. Once, when you were blinded, you told me that if fate decreed you lost your sight, then you'd learn to be the best blind person you could be." Compassion filled her, and she leaned over her desk toward him, willing him to hear her. "The years haven't changed you, my love. You are still the strongest man I will ever have the grace to know."

"You have such faith," he said, his voice almost a monotone, as if he doubted he could live up to her confidence.

The sounds from the outside office faded into the background as Clark resumed his pacing back to the book-lined wall. Lois couldn't help but notice that while he walked, his right hand tugged subconsciously at the stump of his missing finger. Over the years, Lois had become accustomed to all Clark's mannerisms, but this was a new sign of tension, and one which tore her heart in two. It reminded her of the terrible things he'd gone through while they were apart.

Suddenly, when he could go no further, Lois saw the tension seep from Clark's body. He swung to face her, and she quickly relaxed her expression. Right now, he didn't need to know that

she shared his pain.

"I'm sorry, Lois. I do get frustrated sometimes, realizing what I can't do." He offered her a small smile. "It does hurt ... and that's why I'm so lucky to have you to remind me to count my blessings."

Lois rose from her desk and went to wrap her arms around him. "Well, that's what we wives are for, general cheerleading and reminding our husbands not to be lunkheads."

Returning her hug, Clark buried his nose into her satiny hair, inhaling her clean, familiar scent. "Not that I'm complaining, but is this kind of cheerleading allowed in the Chief's office?" he asked her left, exquisitely formed, earlobe.

"Of course, lunkhead." She grinned up at him. "If the chief is involved. Just don't go bringing any of your other partners in here."

"I think you can forget that idea. Jimmy isn't my type. But speaking of Jim, I suppose I should get back to work, and kidding aside, I'm just grateful that no one was killed this morning."

"Oh, Clark, I thought we were through with villains attacking us!"

Clark's eyebrows rose incredulously. He'd been thinking exactly the same thing himself, but now he wasn't so sure. "You believe we were the targets?"

"It's happened before, frequently." As Clark's brows arched even higher, Lois went on. "Sure, I'll admit it hasn't happened recently, but then you've been gone for years and I've not exactly been on the front line ..."

"I don't believe anyone is out to get us," Clark interrupted.

"Do you have any clues to substantiate that?" Lois asked, her voice becoming more businesslike as she slipped into her role as editor.

Clark threw Lois a questioning look. "Come on. Shouldn't that be the other way around? We can't start with a supposition and work backwards."

"Why not? I used to do it all the time." Lois sounded aggravated as she backed toward her desk.

"You had great instincts, honey," Clark said consolingly. "Most of us aren't quite so talented."

"Had?" Lois pounced, totally ignoring his second statement. "You think because I'm behind a desk that I've lost my edge?" Actually, Lois had wondered that a time or two herself, but she wasn't willing to admit that to her husband.

"No!" Clark stared back at Lois. His hands splayed wide in an apology, then dropped forgotten to his side. "I just think that this time you might be letting your emotions get in the way, which isn't surprising or wrong, but ..."

"But?"

Having regained his objectivity, thanks to Lois' efforts, Clark took a moment to collect his thoughts. "It just doesn't sit right with me. I still have no idea who is doing this or why, but I don't think we were the intended victims. We weren't even in the same room ..."

"The bomber couldn't have known you'd be somewhere else ..."

"Lois, think about it. How would the bomber even know we'd be there? I seriously doubt Tory or I were his targets."

"I still don't believe we should dismiss that theory so quickly." Lois frowned in concentration. "We made that appointment with Mrs. Perez before Thanksgiving. I was the only one who couldn't make it. There are a lot of people out there who take issue with you and me, and it is the second bomb we've been in close proximity to recently."

Clark sighed audibly and dropped into the plaid chair. "I'm not ready to buy that. Driving by a van which just happened to explode five minutes or so later doesn't mean we're in someone's sights, and with this bomb, the villain would have had to mail the package before the holiday to be sure it would arrive in time for

our meeting with the principal.”

“But that’s entirely possible.” Lois too sat, letting the familiarity of her editor’s chair calm her.

“Lois, come on. It’s a stretch ...”

She pointed a finger at him. “You know how I feel about coincidences, and this happens to be the second one in just as many weeks.”

“I agree, but sometimes coincidences are just ... coincidences.” Clark leaned forward, his forearms resting on his thighs. “I’m more concerned who that bomb was really meant for, and I doubt it was poor Angela either.”

The corner of Lois’ lips turned down as she was reminded again that coincidences did exist ... and she was upset for the poor assistant who’d had a letter bomb explode in her face. “Do you know how she is?”

Clark grimaced. “Thankfully, it was another small bomb, though bigger than the last one, but it blew up as she opened it. Her hands and arms took most of the blast, though her face was burnt too. Actually, if it hadn’t been for Miss Smith — seems she has an advanced diploma in first aid — the poor girl would have gone into shock, and things could have been much worse. But Angela is going to have to undergo some pretty extensive plastic surgery, and they’re not sure if there’s any permanent damage to her eyes.” Clark stood up from his chair and began his restless pacing again. “She’s not much older than a child, Lois.”

“Old enough to make some crazy person mad at her ...”

“I really don’t think so. Miss Smith told me that she usually opens Mrs. Perez’s letters, but she was compiling a special report for the school board and had asked Angela to do the mail. The poor woman felt so guilty.”

“Why? She didn’t send the bomb! It annoys me, Clark. Everyone else feels responsible and the perpetrator is enjoying himself.” Lois rose again, too fidgety to stay in one place. As she came around the desk, Clark caught her and pulled her close. “I can’t help thinking what if the explosion had been bigger ... what if you and Vicky had been closer ...”

Clark’s fingers slid into Lois’ hair. “Don’t, honey. Don’t torture yourself. Vicky is fine with Mom and Dad. They closed the school for the rest of the day and they’ll let us know what the plans are for tomorrow. Believe me, Vicky wasn’t at all fazed. In fact, she was annoyed when the police asked us to leave. I think she was hoping to investigate.” A soft smile tugged at his lips. “I had to explain that we couldn’t go blundering around a crime scene, and she told me she’d be very careful. But I told her the bomb squad had to do a sweep of the school. I think that was the only thing that stopped her.”

Lois returned his smile, but no matter how worried she was, the reporter in her was never far from the surface. “Did you manage to check it out?”

“As much as possible, but that’s not quite so easy for me these days. I never realized how much I relied on the powers,” she said ruefully. “Luckily, I had backup.”

“Matt showed up?”

“Oh yeah. He told me he was between classes when he heard a police report of a bombing at Vicky’s school, so he dashed over. It was just as well he showed up because there was a risk of a fire starting. I’d just managed to find the extinguisher when Matt took over. Once he’d contained everything, I asked him to take a ‘closer’ look at the desk and surrounding office, but he didn’t spot any clues.”

Lois shrugged in frustration and leaned closer to her husband for a second or two, then she returned to business mode, taking a few steps back to her desk. “Pretty much like last time then?”

“Seems so. Fortunately, Jim’s police sergeant was on the scene and he’s agreed to keep me in the loop,” he said, sounding a little weary.

Once more, Lois turned back to face Clark. “Are you sure

you’re up to this, honey?”

As soon as the words left her mouth, Lois knew she’d made another mistake. Clark was not amused by her concern, but she couldn’t dismiss her fears. She saw his brow wrinkle and a hurt look flash in his eyes, even though he tried his best to conceal it with humor.

“I know I’ve been away for a few years, Lois, but isn’t investigative reporting like riding a bike? You never really forget how to do it.”

Closing the small distance between them, Lois caught Clark’s hands. They were taut with tension. “Honey, I don’t doubt your ability to write.” She lifted their clasped hands to her chest, her voice becoming a whisper. “It’s the lack of super powers that worries me.”

Obviously, her statement didn’t mollify Clark as much as she’d hoped. “You worry I can’t work without the advantage of the powers? Because I’ve got to tell you I didn’t use them all that regularly before ... and mostly you had to talk me into it.” Now he sounded just plain indignant.

“No, Clark, that’s not ...”

The door behind them banged open and Jimmy’s inconvenient entrance was like a blast from the past. “Hey. I got a phone call from Jed Peterson. Metro Radio just got a message from someone called The Avenger. We should go talk to them, partner.”

It was wrong. He shouldn’t have done it. This was for Mary. Everything was for Mary, and not for his own gratification. There would be time enough for publicity ... for telling the world who and why he had taken the actions he had. When it was over ... and he had gone beyond their anger and their prejudiced sense of justice. When he had gone to join his Mary.

Thomas pushed himself to the edge of his narrow bed and buried his head in his hands. He hadn’t been able to sleep since his ‘message’ had made the headlines in every news outlet in Metropolis. It was a foolish act ... and filled with risk.

Yet he hadn’t been able to stop himself sending his proclamation to the media. His first choice would have been The Daily Planet, but that was much too close, so he’d chosen one of Stern’s subsidiaries instead. He’d needed the public to know they were under attack, but not in a big way ... not yet. He’d escalate his campaign each time until the final cataclysm, planning for them to slowly become aware of the danger they faced. Why couldn’t he have resisted the urge to have the media understand the dreadful feelings of futility and rage which drove him? Now was too soon ... much too soon.

Thank goodness he’d hadn’t let slip he’d once been a pupil at that school. The snobby school Aunt Ina had insisted he go to because she sat on the board and had wanted everyone to know how generous she was. Thomas shivered and pulled his blanket around him as he remembered. All those years ago, when Thomas’ father had walked out on him and his mother ... though technically, he’d never known his father; he’d left before Thomas was born, and Aunt Ina had offered his poor mother a refuge.

Refuge, that was a laugh. She’d treated them like poor relations and never missed an opportunity to tell them she was just doing her Christian duty. Poor Mom had been terrified of her older, puritanical sister and she’d allowed herself and her son to be bullied. Because of the way she had been treated by the evil old bat, Mom had passed away too young — just like Mary.

He knew that often, when he’d been locked away in his lonely room for some misdemeanor which he no longer could remember, he’d wish that he could die too. Thomas hated Aunt Ina. She was on his list, but he was making an exception for his only living relative and saving her for later.

Thanks to Ina, he’d spent his formative years in a school where he’d been looked down on and forever made to feel like a

fish out of water. In his old fashioned clothes, he'd been bullied by his classmates and been mostly ignored by the teachers. OK, the current staff and pupils weren't the ones who'd hurt him, but he was sure they were just as rich, arrogant and uncaring as they had been in his day and deserved what he'd done to them. But even in his anger, he'd had the sense not to divulge that information.

He just hoped he hadn't jeopardized his plans. After all, he had been very careful, taking all the steps needed to make his message untraceable. As usual, he hadn't handled the recording or the packaging without wearing gloves, which he'd since burnt, and he hadn't recorded it here in his home. He was too smart to be caught out like that. He'd made the recording in the unused alley in the back of his workplace, during those dead hours of the night when the drunks and down-and-outs had left and the early morning punters hadn't arrived; when the traffic on the roads had disappeared and the only sounds in the area were of feral cats stalking their prey and rats rooting about in the mounds of trash. Let even Son of Superman try to place that with his extraordinary ears! No, neither he nor the forensic police would have a chance to compare any fibers or background noises belonging to him.

Plus, he'd made the long trip to New York at the start of the Thanksgiving holiday to mail his packages, so there was a better chance he'd be lost in the crowds of commuters. He'd traveled up by bus and back the next day by Amtrak, so the transport system's surveillance cameras wouldn't have a total record of his journey should they have caught him in their sights. He'd even worn a disguise.

But for all his meticulous precautions, he hadn't been able to rid himself of the fear of the heavy knock on the door; the police pouring into his basement room, weapons drawn.

Not that he really cared what happened to him. Going to prison wouldn't hurt him. He was already in a prison of his own. He laughed mirthlessly as he looked around his dull, dirty little room. Prison would probably be an improvement. But it mattered a whole lot that he wouldn't be able to take his full revenge ...

Thomas' head shook from side to side. Never again would he give into temptation. He would put his folly behind him and continue with his quest; learn from his mistake and remain the anonymous Avenger from this day forward. Having made the decision, he crossed the room to his table and sitting down pulled his list and Mary's pin in front of him. He closed his eyes and jabbed downward, then looked to discover who would be next to be brought to justice.

Oh, for this new target he'd certainly up the ante.

Lois walked quietly along the hall. She didn't want to alert the person inside the room of her presence, knowing just how much her daughter would resent the fussing. According to Clark, Vicky had stayed very cool during the traumatic incident; however, Lois was willing to bet that her baby might not now be so calm and collected and needed a little tender loving care. Of course, Vicky might have to be persuaded about that.

It hadn't surprised Lois one bit when Clark had told her that Vicky had disobeyed his instructions to remain in Mrs. Perez's room and had exited before the principal had recovered her wits, which meant that Vicky had seen the immediate carnage of the bombed room. OK, perhaps the bomb hadn't had a huge impact, nevertheless one young woman had been hurt and the area around her desk had suffered quite an amount of damage... not to mention that a few of the other staff had had minor cuts and abrasions and were suffering a degree of shock. Lois would have preferred Vicky not to have been exposed to the scene.

Besides, Lois still couldn't suppress the fear that her daughter and her husband might have been the villain's target ... even if Clark did have a point when he said she was reaching.

A muffled sniffing was emanating from the slightly open

door and Lois forgot about being careful and walked with her bundle of folded laundry into Vicky's bedroom.

"Hi, Vicky, sweetie. What ya doing?" Lois said as she breezed past her daughter on the way to the closet. Being worried didn't prevent her from using a little subterfuge to get through Vicky's defenses.

"Homework, Mom," Vicky answered, her voice sounding flat.

"Homework, huh?" Lois busied herself stowing away Vicky's clothes, but she gave her daughter a studied sideways glance.

"You do know that Miss Smith called to say the school will be closed tomorrow? The police are still doing forensic work on the offices, and they want to search the rest of the school. I doubt they'll find anything else, but that means you don't have to work tonight." Leaving her task aside, Lois crossed to the bed and sat, leaving only a small gap between herself and her daughter.

"Maybe it would be a better idea to leave your homework until you feel better?"

Vicky's head snapped up. "I feel OK. It wasn't me who got hurt, Mom."

A tiny smile touched Lois' lips at Vicky's knee-jerk reaction. Her daughter was so like herself, putting on a brave face but probably hurting inside. For a moment, Lois was tempted to leave the comforting to Clark ... Vicky was his special girl, but Lois knew exactly where the child was coming from and Lois had been filling the role of confidant for a long time.

"Perhaps not physically, but you must have gotten quite a fright."

"I wasn't frightened!" Vicky's chin lifted and her shoulders straightened.

"Not even a little bit?" Lois asked, keeping her voice even. "I'm sure I would have been."

That brought Vicky's stare around to Lois. "But you're never scared by things like that ..."

Lois' hand reached out to stroke Vicky's shining hair. "Sweetheart, that's not true. It's OK to be scared, you know ... and I've been scared a lot in my time. The secret is to not let your fear overtake you, so you can get yourself out of trouble and help other people."

Lois swallowed hard. Perhaps that wasn't quite the right advice to be giving her madcap daughter, who seemed to get herself into enough scrapes without encouragement. Clark would be affronted.

"Dad would say you shouldn't get yourself in trouble in the first place," Vicky said in a voice that sounded midway between a laugh and a cry.

Even young Vicky knew her father.

"Yes, he would." Lois shared Vicky's little smile. "But sometimes you don't have any choice. Like both of you today. That situation was totally out of your control. Was it very bad?"

Vicky nodded and putting her book aside, she moved closer to Lois. "The lady was hurting, Mom, and screaming ... and there was a lot of blood ... and everyone was running about, like they were lost. Except Miss Smith. She was great ... and Dad, of course. He sort of took over, telling people what to do." Undetected, tears started to fall from Vicky's eyes. "I would have liked to help too, only I didn't know how."

Lois wrapped her arm quietly around her daughter and drew her closer. "Not many people would under those circumstances, but your father told me you were very brave."

"Just like you, Mom."

Vicky's voice sounded very small and, momentarily, Lois was tempted to prevaricate, yet Vicky would recognize the lie. She'd heard too many stories about Mad Dog Lane.

"Vicky, I've been known to put myself in danger before, probably when I shouldn't have ..."

"Uncle Jimmy told me Superman was always rescuing you

from ... ‘the jaws of death’, I think he called it,” Vicky said with a dramatic flourish.

Lois really did have to talk with Jim about his wildly exaggerated tales ... teaching her daughter bad habits.

“Well, I’ll admit there was a time when I was a bit ... headstrong. A long time ago.” Another life ago, but Vicky was too young to understand that love and responsibility made you more cautious. “Yet that didn’t mean I wasn’t frightened. Deep down I was, and when I was safe, I’d bawl like a baby. Once I was in private, of course.” Lois looked down on her daughter’s fair head. “So, if you’d like to cry, I’d completely understand, and I could hold you too ... if you’d like.”

Vicky sniffled more loudly, leaning into her mother’s arms. “I’d like that, Mom.”

Lois tightened her embrace and at once Vicky’s control gave way. For a few minutes, mother and daughter sat on the bed and cried. Vicky wept from delayed shock, and Lois for her daughter’s introduction to a reality which wasn’t warm and comforting and cocooned from danger.

“Matt showed up.”

With her thoughts drifting, Lois didn’t, at first, understand Vicky’s words... and her immediate reaction was brush off the comment.

“I don’t think so, honey. Matt would have been in school.” Lois bit nervously at her lip. Was it time to tell her daughter the truth? Vicky was her baby and letting her in on the secret was an admission that she was growing up. Lois wasn’t sure she was ready to lose her little girl.

“Maybe he was, but Jor-El did come ... and he looked really worried. He bit his lip, just like Matt does ...” Vicky raised her head and glared at Lois. “And like you’re doing now.”

“I’m sure a lot of people do that, and I’m not surprised he was worried, what with some villain bombing schools ...”

“Mom! He stopped doing it when he saw me and Dad, and OK he was still upset about the bomb, but he wasn’t so upset. I recognized him and Dad did too!”

“What makes you think that, Vicky?” Lois tipped her head downward, trying to gage her youngest child’s expression. She wished that Clark and Matt were here but they’d gone off after dinner, probably out patrolling. Recently, Matt had got in the habit of asking his father to go with him, though she had an idea that this time they might have a particular purpose ... like searching for a bomb maker, which was like looking for a needle in a haystack, even for two super men.

Vicky shrugged off Lois’ arms and stood up. “Because I know Dad. I know how he looks. Please, Mom, I’m not a baby.” As she finished Vicky crossed her arms, very like both her parents did when they were determined to get to the truth. “I know it’s true. Matt is Jor-El, so don’t tell me lies ...” Vicky’s voice dropped. “Please.”

Lois swallowed again. Clearly, this was time for the truth. The confession really ought to come from either Matt or Clark, but Lois couldn’t ignore her daughter’s whispered plea.

“Come sit down,” Lois suggested, patting the bed.

But Vicky held her ground. “I don’t want to hear any fairytales.”

“I promise, no stories,” Lois said, holding her hand out. Thankfully, Vicky came back to sit on the edge of the bed, though she ignored the outstretched hand. “OK. The truth ...”

“Matt’s Superman’s son! If he can do everything Superman used to, then he has to be.” The look Vicky sent Lois was full of accusation.

“Well, yes, he is,” Lois admitted. “But there’s something else you need to know ...”

“You went out with Superman.” Vicky didn’t wait to hear what Lois had to say. “How could you, Mom?”

Lois couldn’t help smiling a little. She’d been here before,

quite a few times. Why was it always she who had to do the explaining, when it was Clark’s secret? Though they had told Matthew together.

“It’s not funny, Mom!”

Uh-oh! Clearly Vicky had caught her smile. Lois composed herself. “Only because you don’t know the full story, sweetie. I’ve had a relationship with Superman just as long as I’ve had with your dad because your dad is Superman ... or he was.”

“Don’t talk trash!”

Lois’ eyebrows rose at her daughter’s tone. “And don’t be so rude, young lady. Believe me, it’s not nonsense. You’re father was Superman. I mean Clark Kent was Superman ... is still Superman to me, even if he never dons the blue suit again. You should be proud ...”

But Vicky wasn’t ready to be proud, not by the stormy expression on her face. “If it’s true, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Oh, Vicky, everything was so mixed up when your father went missing ... and you were very young. I missed him so much and felt so lost. Telling you that Daddy wasn’t coming home was a hard enough job without telling you the family secret. We just didn’t feel you were old enough to understand.”

Vicky continued to pout. “OK. Maybe I was a little kid then, but you’ve had years to come clean.”

Lois refrained from pointing out Vicky was still a kid. “That’s true, but somehow it didn’t seem quite so important when we thought your father was dead. I meant to tell you, because like Matt and Sara you’ll probably get the ‘powers’. I just thought I’d have more time...” Lois’ shoulders drooped despondently. “I’m sorry, I was wrong.”

“You should have told me when Matt put the suit on.”

Lois heaved a loud sigh. Her daughter wasn’t about to let her off easily. “We thought about it.”

“Who thought about it?”

“Grandpa and Grandma Kent ... Uncle Perry and Jimmy ...”

Vicky jumped up again and strode across the room. Her back was ramrod straight but every so often her shoulders shook. Lois thought Vicky might be crying and wanted to wrap her arms around her child, but knew from experience that, for the moment, Vicky would repulse any overtures of comfort.

Her suspicions were confirmed when Vicky turned on her, only whether these were tears of hurt or anger, Lois couldn’t say. Perhaps a bit of both.

“Everyone knew but me,” Vicky stated on a whisper.

A lump formed in Lois’ throat. Surely, after all these years, she should have gotten the revelation right. Clark’s flawed attempt to tell her his secret all these years ago suddenly didn’t seem so bad.

“Not everyone, Vicky. Your Kent grandparents always knew. They’d raised Superman, remember, so obviously they were in on Matt’s ‘coming out’. Uncle Perry guessed about your dad even before I did, I think, though he never said anything until after you kids started coming along. I’ve forgotten exactly when Jim learned the secret, but I needed all their support when Dad ‘died’. I could never have gone on without them ... but that’s not the issue here, is it?” Lois rose too and took a couple of steps toward Vicky. “We all thought you were too young to keep Matt’s secret. Actually, that’s not true. Sara was against not telling you. She’s been at me for months. More since Dad’s been home, and she was right. My only excuse is that my head’s been in the clouds since we’ve all been together again. It’s like we’re living a miracle ... and I just didn’t want to break the spell. Forgive me, Vicky. It was very wrong of me, Dad and Matt not to speak to you.”

“I can understand Matt not telling me. He still thinks I’m just a kid, and Daddy’s been ill and he might pretend to be cheery all the time, but I don’t think he is,” Vicky said sagely, her insight beyond her years. “But you, Mom ...”

Lois' lips tightened and a slight frown appeared between her brows. Why was she always the one in the doghouse?

"Mom, you're always the organized one ... the one who keeps us right." Then Vicky took a step toward her mother. "But I guess you can get it wrong sometimes too. Maybe you meant to tell me, but I wish you'd done it before I figured it out on my own."

Great! Lois sighed in resignation. Vicky was going to be grudgingly forgiving. Her daughter was too much like herself for comfort. She'd given Clark a hard time over exactly the same thing.

"I should have. But it's not an easy secret to tell, Vicky. Maybe someday you'll find that out for yourself."

"I guess." Vicky smiled magnanimously, then shocked Lois with the depth of her next question. "Do you still think Daddy's scared, Mom?"

Lois remembered the conversation she'd shared with Vicky on the morning Clark had gone back to The Planet. She returned to sit on the bed and this time Vicky followed readily, both happy to leave their argument behind and indulge in their favorite topic of talking about Clark. "Like I said, Daddy was a little insecure about whether he could be a reporter again, but I think he's beginning to settle back into the job."

"Is that true, Mom?" Another voice joined in the conversation as Sara came around the corner of the door. "May I join you?" she asked, pulling up a chair without waiting for an answer.

"Yes, of course, Sara, and I believe it's true," Lois replied, schooling her features. She was doing enough stressing for everyone and she was telling the truth to that particular question. Clark's reporting abilities were certainly back. Perhaps too keenly for Lois' peace of mind, but she didn't want to infect her daughters with her unsubstantiated fears for Clark's safety. Besides, there was no guarantee Clark wouldn't pick up on Sara's and Vicky's distress and that was the last thing she wanted.

Sara's brow wrinkled as she perused her mother's words. "It's just that I've seen you looking at him sometimes ... kinda funny."

"I kinda like looking at your dad." Lois said with a big grin, her conscience completely clear on this point. "Actually, I'm still having to convince myself that I'm not dreaming and he's really back home."

"Me too, Mom!" Vicky stated forcefully. "We got lucky."

But Sara wouldn't be placated so easily. "So, you're not worried about Dad in any way? You're not upset that he isn't super anymore?"

Lois searched her eldest daughter's steady gaze, giving careful consideration to her answer. The fact that Clark was no longer invincible was the pertinent point, but not in the way that Sara might be implying. "He might not have the powers, sweetheart, but your father will always be super in my eyes."

Sara dismissed her mother's statement with a tremulous smile and a quick movement of her hand, then her face settled back into more serious lines. "But doesn't it worry you that he's out there chasing down criminals who could harm him now?"

Clearly Sara had arrived at the same conclusion without any help from her mother.

"Does it worry you, Sara?"

"Mom, don't! Stop being a reporter and answering my questions with one of your own."

A flush colored Lois' cheeks. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was. Yes, I'm a tiny bit scared. I guess this is payback for all those years when we were first partnered up and I kept throwing myself into difficult situations in pursuit of a story. Your father was petrified he wouldn't be around or get there in time to save me. Now it's my turn to sit on the sidelines, but even though it does worry me a bit, I have to let your father find his way." Suddenly, it all became clear to Lois, just how much she'd been

mothering Clark. "And, you know, I haven't been very good at doing that ... I've been fussing."

"So what do we do?" Sara asked, not quite willing to let the subject drop.

"Well, it's hard not to worry about the people we love the most, but we can't put Daddy in a glass cage and we certainly can't let him know that we're all acting like scaredy cats," Lois said, glancing between her daughters. "He'll think we have no faith in him."

"He did great at the school today," Vicky announced after a few minutes of silence. "Everyone else was running around scared, but he knew exactly what to do ... getting us all out of the way. He asked if anyone had first aid training and Miss Smith had, so he told her to look after Angela. Then he got the fire extinguisher and he'd already put out some of the fires by the time Matt arrived. Daddy was super!"

Lois pulled Vicky into a one-armed hug. "Of course he is. That's what I'm telling you. He's very capable without the powers, and I should listen to myself more often too. So how about we make a pact to stop fretting and to keep this to ourselves. If any of us need reassurance at anytime, then we talk about it together."

The three Kent females exchanged smiles, then Vicky stood up in amazement.

"Awesome! I'm really Superman's kid! How long before I get powers?"

Chapter Four: A Down-payment on Revenge

"Clark, how are you coming along on that game-rigging story?" Lois' voice could be heard calling stridently above the general chatter of the bullpen. "We'll never get this paper out by deadline if my staff doesn't submit their stories on time!"

The reporters sank a little lower into their chairs and concentrated more pointedly on their computer screens, or on the files strewn across their desks. The few who were gathered around the coffee-break area slunk covertly back to their posts, or anywhere else that would offer them cover from their irate boss. Some brave souls stared back defiantly at the Chief. After all, they weren't the one being targeted at the moment, though they'd hate to be in Kent's shoes. On the rare occasion that Mad Dog Lane made a reappearance, it was best to make yourself as invisible as possible.

James Olsen, however, had no fear ... or not quite so much as the others. Besides, Lois' treatment of CK probably had something to do with the warning he'd given her a week or so ago. He'd advised her not to act so protectively, but he hadn't expected her to go off with all guns blazing in the opposite direction. She'd been riding CK pretty hard these last few days. And, OK, Clark had been taking it pretty well, but the rest of the newsroom was starting to talk, wondering if things might not be going quite so well at home since the husband had returned to the marital bed. Maybe Mrs. Kent had become used to being 'king of the hill' and didn't relish sharing her domain ... or so the talk went on the Scuttlebutt.

Only this time, CK didn't seem to be reacting quite so mildly. His brow furrowed and he pushed back from his desk with calculated force, heading for Lois' office. Oh boy, Jimmy thought. This was going to be interesting. He just hoped they had the sense to close the blinds and keep their voices down, otherwise the gossip brigade were in for a treat. Jimmy laughed. It was just like the old days!

"Can I talk to you for a moment, Chief?" Clark asked loudly, as he disappeared into Lois' office. Jimmy thought the 'chief' was for appearances sake.

Meanwhile, inside the editor's lair the couple stared each other down, both with arms folded over their chests. Finally, it was Lois who got herself under control first.

“You had something particular you wanted to say to me, Clark?”

Taking a couple of deep breaths and uncrossing his arms, Clark tried to relax. “Yes! What is with you these days ... honey?” He decided to throw the last word in for good measure.

“What’s with me is that I have a paper to put out, and not just two editions these days. Oh, and don’t try to score brownie points. In here, I’m Lois ... or the Chief!” Now why on Earth had she said that? Clark was right! What was her problem? She’d made up her mind to stop fussing over him, but that didn’t give her the right to act like the Wicked Witch of the West. Not that she was acting like a witch. She was the editor and she had every right to ask how a story was coming along, particularly since she’d assigned it to him ... She gave a quick look at the clock on the wall. Hmm ... just a few hours ago.

Clark didn’t look happy. “I’m not trying to score points. And I know you have deadlines to meet ... and you’ll get your story, but you have to give me time to investigate. I’m checking sources, which isn’t easy when you’ve been away for a long time. I’m having to re-establish old contacts.” He dug his hands into his pockets and stared at the floor. “Not everyone is as happy to see me back as Bobby Bigmouth. And, you know, if you didn’t think I was up to the job, why didn’t you give the story to someone in the sports section?”

Lois, too, seemed to deflate. No matter which way she played it she was undermining his confidence. “I gave the story to you because I thought you were the best person for the job. The sports department writes game stories ... or about who’s signing with what team for a disgustingly high salary ... or who’s all set to win a suitcase of gold medals at the next Olympics. This is a criminal investigation, so I gave it to my best investigative reporter.”

A self-disparaging laugh burst from Clark. “Make that a ‘used to be’ investigative reporter. Right now I don’t seem to be doing so well. Most of my sources have stonewalled me on this story and I’m getting absolutely nowhere on the letter-bombings ...”

“No one is getting anywhere on that story.” Lois crossed to the couch and sat, patting the cushion beside her in an invitation to Clark. “Jim tells me the police are stumped.”

Clark shot her a look of surprise, but he did come and sit next to her. “You never used that excuse. In fact, if I remember correctly, you used to make it a point to beat the police to solving a crime.”

“True,” Lois said after a second’s consideration, leaning closer to Clark. “But good stories take time to build, and some are more difficult than others. It’s been over a week without more explosions, so maybe the guy has got his revenge and quit.”

“Or woman.” Clark put in with a tiny grin.

“Exactly. I’m all for an equal-opportunity bombmaker.” Lois grinned back, feeling much more comfortable, and deciding to do a little probing. After all, she was the editor. “So can you tell me what you have got on that story?”

“Sure. Though there’s not much to tell. I’ve interviewed the teachers and admin staff and none of them know of anyone who is angry enough to want to blow them up. Mind you, I’m still working through former staff members and that isn’t quite so easy.”

Clark was staring at his hands, playing with his fingers and Lois reached out to still his nervous twitching.

“What about old pupils?” she asked.

“I’ve been checking them out too, but so far no one jumps out as being an irate bomber, or even a petty criminal. Not that the records go back very far. This is a pretty exemplary elementary school in a good area. Not the type of school that turns out thugs and villains.”

Lois took his hands in hers and squeezed gently. “Well, keep

at it. I’m sure if anyone can dig up something, it’s you.”

“Or you,” he said with a wistful twist of his lips. “I miss my partner.”

“You don’t like Jim as a partner?” Her eyes opened wider.

“He’s not my permanent partner, honey, and he kinda believes the bomb story is a dead end ... and since no one was seriously injured, I’m not sure the police are giving it too much time either.”

“They could be right.” Lois turned to watch Clark’s eyes.

“But you don’t think so?”

He shook his head. “Truthfully?”

“Of course. We always tell each other the truth. In this office or out of it!” Lois felt herself blushing and hoped that Clark didn’t notice, because she had kept her fears about his return to work hidden from him. Thankfully, Clark was back to studying his hands, or their hands, since they were still holding fast to each other.

“I think this person — male or female — is just getting started. Don’t ask me why I think that. Just a gut feeling.”

“Like I told you before, there’s nothing wrong with reporters’ instincts. In fact, it’s what separates the good from the great, and we were great, honey.”

Clark looked up, his eyes twinkling. “The Hottest Team in Town!” Then the gleam faded. “Only we’re not a team anymore.”

“Yes we are!” Lois said forcefully. “We may not work together these days, but we’ll always be a team, and if you need to brainstorm, I haven’t forgotten what it’s like out on the street ... and I hope I haven’t forgotten my reporting skills.”

“OK, speaking of teams, don’t we have a parent-teacher meeting at Vicky’s school tonight?”

“As a matter of fact we do.” Lois stood up. She’d love continue with Clark, especially now that they’d both calmed down, but she had her job to do. “Are you thinking of doing some snooping while you’re there?”

“I wouldn’t call it snooping,” Clark remonstrated. “But I don’t think there’s any harm in talking to the other parents about what happened. Don’t you think the bombing is bound to be high on the agenda of topics of conversation?”

“I’m pretty certain it will.” Lois moved toward the door to open it for Clark, letting him know it was time to get back to work. “But we’re also there for Vicky and she won’t appreciate us turning the night into a series of interviews.”

Clark rose too, as did his brows in surprise. “Are you kidding, Lois? Vicky will want to be in on the job.” He stuck his hands back in his pockets as he took Lois’ hint to leave. “Oh, and don’t worry about the sports story. I’m not neglecting it.”

“I know.” Lois quickly kissed Clark’s lips as he passed. Why not give the gossipers something to talk about? “But, though I didn’t give this story to the sports writers, you could try talking to them. Chris is a pretty good guy and he might put a good word in for you with his contacts. It’s worth a try.”

“Thanks for the advice.” Clark meant that sincerely. He had been wondering whether to approach Chris or his team. He’d known Chris from before, though most of the others were new staff. “And, Lois, please try not to get caught up in work tonight. We have to get to the school on time.”

“Clark Kent, I’ll have you know that the new-and-improved Lois has her priorities straight!” she declared, but with a teasing smile, before closing the door and leaving him stranded back in the bullpen.

He stood there for a second or two, the center of attraction. Unease threatened to overwhelm him as he considered the opinions of the rest of the staff. Did they think he got special allowances from the boss? That was not a happy train of thought, and it was one which he’d believed he’d put behind him. Only, every now and then, especially when leads on a story appeared to dry up ... or, in the case of the games-rigging story, leads never

opened up at all, Clark's insecurities rose up to haunt him. Was he totally useless as a reporter without Lois? She seemed not to think so, or was she just humoring him?

But one thing he had learned about himself; he wasn't going to go down without a fight.

Clark straightened his shoulders and went to find Chris.

Much to Clark's pleasure, Chris Chapman had been very helpful and had appreciated Clark's suggestion that they share a byline on any articles that ran on the scandal. After an enlightening conversation, Clark had the distinct impression that maybe there was an investigative reporter lurking under the sports writer just dying to get out. With Chris's help, the people Clark needed to speak with began to open up and, the next lunchtime, he and Chris were on their way to meet with a couple of ballplayers belonging to one of the suspected teams.

Not wanting to alert the bosses that they were talking to the press about the allegations, the meeting was set up in Casey's Irish Bar in Bakerline, well away from the stadium. He and Chris parked a few blocks away and started on a hectic stroll along the busy street packed with lunchtime crowds.

This was the Metropolis that Clark had once known and loved, though, on occasion, it now intimidated him slightly. However, today he had someplace to be, a purpose to fight his way through the throng and a colleague whose company he enjoyed. His professional life was beginning to look up as much as his private one.

On the corner, the two men passed a bank which Clark recognized as The New Troy Bank; the one Superman had saved from an armed robber ... repeatedly. Had there really been an imp from the Fifth Dimension who had threatened to remove hope from the world by taking away tomorrow? He'd have to ask Lois if that was fact or just a trick of his overactive imagination. But, as his memories returned, he'd discovered that his life with Lois had been strewn with the unexpected and the unbelievable. One thing had become clear: it had never been dull.

The interview with the two players had been informative, though they divulged nothing concrete. No one knew who was behind the scam, so the athletes were understandably wary and wished to remain anonymous for the time being. However, they'd met Chris a number of times and felt he was a fair sports writer. They trusted him enough to admit they'd been approached, singly, by the same stranger who expected them to throw particular games when requested in return for a substantial fee.

The two were adamant they had refused the offer, but they did give out the names of some others who they suspected had succumbed to temptation. And just before the interview wrapped, under Clark's friendly and disarming questioning, the ballplayers revealed the name and a description of the guy who'd tried to bribe them. They also promised to testify if Clark and Chris uncovered the perpetrators. After all, they didn't want to see their sport dragged through the dirt.

With a few leads to follow, Chris and Clark left their business cards with the young men and left the bar to head back to The Planet to do some more digging. The winter sun was bright and the air crisp when they stepped from the dimly lit bar, so both men took a second to adjust to the brightness.

They walked the teeming street in accord, dodging the crush of bodies and discussing the threat to a game they both followed, but as they came abreast of the bank, Chris halted.

"Clark, could you wait a second? I need to get some cash from the ATM. It's my fifth wedding anniversary, so I'm taking my wife out tonight, and I'm a bit of an old-fashioned guy. I like to have cash in my pocket."

Clark nodded, smiling, instinctively trying to remember the date of his wedding and how many years he and Lois had been married. It was the sort of information most people took for

granted. He supposed he once had done the same. Maybe he would buy Lois a bunch of roses anyway ... just in case today was the day, or just because ...

"Go ahead." His hand waved in the general direction of the line waiting at the cash machine. "I'm kinda like that myself, or maybe I just haven't got back into the swing of things. There weren't many banks, let alone ATMs, where I was in Jilin. Lois keeps on at me to renew my account and my cards, but I've been putting it off, which is totally stupid."

"Maybe, but I can understand. It must be a bit of a culture shock coming back to Metropolis, especially when you've had amnesia." Chris dug around in his pocket for his wallet. "I have no idea what that must feel like, but I suspect it isn't very comfortable, not knowing, I mean."

Chris stood in the line, but both his voice and his expression were full of concern. He hadn't worked at The Planet for long when Clark disappeared, but he'd liked and admired the veteran reporter. He'd hoped one day to emulate Clark's success and he was still pinching himself to make sure his working in tandem with the famous Clark Kent was true.

"That was ... bad," Clark admitted, a dull flush shading his cheeks. "But the trouble is that most people believe my memory returned in one fell swoop; that I woke up one day knowing everything, when actually it was more of a trickle. Even now, I'm still putting things back together in my head. I get these images, but I'm not exactly sure what order they're supposed to be in, so I'm burying my head in the sand in some ways."

Clark laughed self-consciously, having no idea why he was unburdening himself to a man he didn't know very well. But Lois seemed to value her top sports writer, or perhaps it was the fact that Chris wasn't a close friend. At least, not yet. He would be more detached about Clark's revelations. "For instance, dragging my heels with the bank thing. But I've got to get that sorted or I won't have an account for my paycheck to be deposited into."

"You don't bank online?" Chris asked.

"Lois doesn't believe in it," he replied, shaking his head with a wry smile. "Since she knows how easily Jimmy can hack into highly protected computer systems, she doesn't trust online banking. If you ask me, Lois is against anything online purely on principle. She spends a lot of her time and energy fighting against publishing The Daily Planet only on the Internet, and I agree with her. Metropolis will be a sadder place when we eventually lose the paper and ink version of The Planet."

"I'm with both of you there." Chris moved forward in line. "Hey, Clark, have you any particular preferences for a bank? 'Cause you could always go in here to open an account and surprise Lois. We have time."

Looking up at the bank's logo, Clark wondered if it still had the same head of security. What was his name ... Mr. Weston? But, more importantly, had he turned his back on a life of crime? Clark couldn't remember Superman ever checking up on the guy in the intervening years. Maybe he should go inside. He moved to the door and pushed it open. The bank's interior was an efficient yet calm oasis from the busy thoroughfare, a small branch of a larger chain. He took a few steps forward, allowing the comparative silence to smooth away his nervousness.

What was so difficult about opening a bank account? He only had to fill out a form ... but that meant details, and what if they asked him something he couldn't remember? They'd think he was some kind of con artist.

This was crazy! He remembered most things now. He was a grown man and he shouldn't be anxious, though, by rights, he and Lois were husband and wife and they should have a joint account. He was wrong to have kept putting off Lois' offer to go together, feeling as if she were treating him like a child. And who could blame her? He wasn't exactly acting like an adult here.

Yes, being here was wrong. It was very unlikely he'd know

anyone who worked at this bank now, and if he had he'd known them as Superman not Clark Kent. He started to leave, promising himself he'd arrange a time with Lois to organize his finances. Yet as he did so, a soft sizzling sound penetrated his brain, while his nose twitched at a strange noxious smell. He swung back and in one fluid motion was moving as fast as he possibly could, shouting a warning, but his voice was strangled by an earsplitting boom.

Lois pushed her way through the assembled press core and rubbernecks, cursing aloud at those who impeded her passage.

"Hey, Lois," one of her rivals called. "Didn't know you were back on the streets ... and how about waiting your turn like the rest of us."

She sent the guy a dagger-edged stare and yelled back as she continued to fight her way through. "You're right, Larry. I'm not back on the beat, but I still have no intention of waiting around like you other poor schmucks. Never did, never will."

With some fast footwork, a little use of her elbows, and sheer determination Lois reached the police tape, only to find herself confronted by a fresh-faced cop, who looked as if he was more suited to a Boy Scout uniform than that of the MPD. Lois was ready and flashed her press pass.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I have instructions to keep everyone out, even the press. I'm sure the detective in charge might have a few words to say later, but until then, you're goin' to have to stay behind the barricade."

Lois glanced at his badge, then started to speak, trying to stay calm and reasonable. "Officer Kaplinksy, I might be a member of the press, but I'm also Clark Kent's wife and I received a call about him."

The policeman paled; he was obviously aware of the name. "Wait right here, please, and I'll get someone to talk to you."

With that he strode off, clearly unaware of the reputation of the woman he left behind. Seconds later, Lois had ducked under the barrier and was hurrying toward the broken door of the bank, dodging the glass that scattered the pavement. If this was another bomb, it was certainly bigger than the preceding ones. And all she'd been told was her husband had been involved in an explosion. Just when she was getting a handle on her concerns for Clark, 'this' had to happen! She'd been certain of it all along.

Someone was out to get him.

She bypassed a couple of uniformed cops who were busily questioning the people she surmised were the uninjured staff and customers, and saw Chris talking with a uniformed security man. At least one of her reporters was on the spot ... and if Chris was working, instead of hovering over his injured partner, then it had to mean Clark was OK.

Didn't it?

When she reached the door, she opened it only a crack, in the hope that she'd remain unnoticed, and sneaked inside. Her jaw dropped as she took in the scene. The glass barrier behind which the tellers normally sat was shattered and, though the heavy oak counter was still in one piece, the office area was a jumbled mess of overturned desks and chairs.

She walked slowly, careful not to disturb the evidence, or to interfere with the investigative and forensic teams, who were dressed in white coveralls. Looking around, she spotted a paramedic hovering over someone sitting in a chair. Gingerly, she moved in their direction and her heart skipped a beat as she recognized her husband. He was safe. Unhurt.

No, strike that. He wasn't completely unscathed. So that answered the invulnerability question. She sped up and arrived at Clark's side, her heart skipping another beat as she took in the cuts and bruises on his face ... his torn clothes. The paramedic seemed intent on removing a piece of glass from one of the larger cuts which ran diagonally down Clark's cheek, just below his

right eye. Lois couldn't restrain a groan as the sliver came free with a rush of blood which the medic quickly staunched. But her moan had attracted attention.

With a quick glance over his shoulder, the paramedic spoke up. "Miss, I'm sorry, but you shouldn't be in here. We're very busy and I've no idea how you got through the police cordon."

Clark's eyes opened wide as he looked up at Lois and he tried to smile, though it looked more like a grimace beneath the blood and bandaging.

"I was sent for," Lois said quickly. "My name is Lois Kent and you're treating my husband."

The medic blushed. "Oh, sorry. I didn't realize. But I still think you shouldn't be in here. We'll have Mr. Kent ready for transporting to Metro General in a few minutes. Perhaps you could wait outside."

"Hospital? How bad is he?" Lois demanded, her gaze scanning Clark, searching for hidden wounds.

"I'm fine," Clark finally managed to speak up, addressing Lois and the medic. "And could you both stop discussing me like I'm not here, please? I don't think I need to go to the hospital."

"I don't agree." The man in the green uniform stood his ground. "I've just removed a piece of glass from one of your cuts, but there could be some smaller particles embedded in your skin. And I really think this cut needs stitches, not to mention you should be checked over for other injuries."

Clark was silent for a second or two, seeming to check the rest of his body. "Honestly, I don't think there are any hidden injuries. Maybe I'm a bit bruised and sore, but other than that, I'm OK."

"You could have a concussion, Mr. Kent, or cracked a rib or two ... could even be some internal injuries. I strongly advise you to get the once-over at the ER."

Lois' stomach lurched at the thought of Clark being hurt and decided to side with the paramedic. "Clark, maybe a quick trip to the hospital wouldn't be so bad." She looked pointedly at him, trying to convey the fact that she didn't believe a perfunctory examination would discover anything untoward about his origin. For example, he didn't look like he'd need a blood transfusion, though the pad the medic was pressing to his cut cheek was glistening bright red. She decided to check. "You're bleeding a lot, Clark. Will he need a transfusion?" she asked, turning large questioning eyes to the medic.

"I don't think so, Mrs. Kent," the man answered, smiling encouragingly. "I've been a medic for a year or two and I'm amazed at how few obvious injuries your husband's suffered. Don't be frightened by the amount of blood here." The medic quickly replaced the pad with another clean one. "Facial and head injuries bleed a lot. It's probably not as bad as you think."

"See, honey? No need for a visit to the ER."

"I wouldn't say that exactly, Mr. Kent." The medic refused to budge on his initial diagnosis.

There was a shout from across the bank, from behind a tangled, shredded pile of wood.

"Karl, can you give us a hand here?"

The medic looked up and quickly sized up the situation. "Mrs. Kent, do you think you could keep applying pressure to the wound here? My colleagues need my help with the other injured people."

"Right," Lois said, nodding her head and placing her fingers in the exact spot Karl's had been. "Is this right?"

"Exactly. I'll be back soon."

"Clark," Lois hissed, as soon as the medic was out of earshot. "What were you thinking?"

"I'm not sure I had time to think ... just that I could help." Clark's voice sounded somewhat flat, resigned to a dressing down from his worried wife.

"Oh yes. Did you think you were Superman?"

Clark looked away, anywhere but at his wife. He swallowed painfully, then said softly, “Lois ...”

There was the sound of someone clearing his throat from behind them and Sergeant Peterson came into view. “I don’t know about Superman, Mrs. Kent, but I’d certainly say a hero. If it hadn’t been for your husband here, there would have been more serious casualties. He shouted a warning and knocked a couple of the staff out of the way. As it was, just the head teller who opened the package was seriously injured.”

Shooting Clark a quick glance which was appreciation mixed with a small part of irritation, Lois resorted to being a reporter. “What happened here, Peterson?”

“I’m not sure I can divulge any details, Ms. Lane, what with you being from the press.”

“Come on, Sergeant,” she cajoled. “James Olsen tells me you’re a friend of his. Didn’t you promise to keep him in the loop? Clark’s his partner on this serial bombing case, and since he seems to be one of the victims, I’d say he has more of a right to be kept informed.”

“Serial case?” Peterson’s eyebrows raised. “We haven’t found any evidence to link this bombing with any earlier cases ...”

“Not yet, Jed.” Clark was still looking a little pale underneath the coating of blood, though his voice sounded stronger. “But you can’t persuade me you don’t suspect this could be the same perpetrator.”

The Sergeant grinned and Lois found herself liking his smile. She’d met the younger man once before when he’d come to The Planet to speak with James and she’d been grateful for his co-operation with her top reporter, co-operation which had no doubt helped James break a few cases and scoop The Planet’s rivals.

“I’ll level with you, Kent. I’m not a believer in coincidences, and I’m sure forensics will find similarities to the other explosions.” The detective stared around the scarred interior of the bank, his open expression darkening with anger. “Though judging by the blast damage, I’d say our perp is definitely upping the ante.”

Clark nodded. “I’d agree.”

Lois had been distracted by the policeman, but Clark’s head movement dislodged her hand on the dressing. “Clark, stay still.”

“Don’t worry,” he quickly assured her, his brow creased in deep lines. “I won’t try moving my head again.”

“Got a headache?” she asked archly, even as her free hand gently stroked his hair, robbing the sting from her voice.

“You could say that.” Clark raised his hand to rub the bridge of his nose while letting his eyes close. The residue of explosive and smoke hanging in the air stung his eyes. Then he sat up quickly. “Honey, where are my glasses?”

Lois looked around, but the Sergeant was quicker. “Would this be them?” he asked, retrieving the mangled frame from a corner of the room. He returned, his gloved index finger poking through one missing lens. “Sorry, but I doubt these ones will be any good to you now.”

“The glass is probably what was embedded in your cheek,” Lois muttered, holding her hand out for the destroyed frames.

“Sorry, Mrs. Kent, but anything in this bank is evidence. These glasses need to be checked over by forensics.”

“Then you might want to get the glass from Clark’s cheek from the paramedic.” she snapped back, anxiety sharpening her voice.

She hated the thought of anything belonging to Clark being in the hands of people she didn’t know. Who knew what they could discover if they looked closely enough. Of course, they would have no reason to look too closely. They’d do regular DNA tests to exclude traces of the victims’ from any that might belong to the criminal. Not that this criminal had ever been so sloppy to actually leave any traces of himself behind and she doubted that he’d suddenly gotten careless.

Lois couldn’t help but announce her thoughts. “You’ve never found any forensic clues before ... unless you’re keeping quiet about it.”

Peterson shrugged his shoulders. “Unfortunately, you’re right.” He stayed silent for a second, studying Clark. “You know, the only common denominator in these three cases is you, Mr. Kent.”

Lois turned around so quickly, she almost lost her balance. Clark put a hand on her waist to steady her. “What are you saying?” she demanded.

“I’m saying that your husband was involved in each of the incidents. He was at the scene of the last one and this and, by his own admission, you and he were in the vicinity of the street where the truck blew up ... and he had another connection to the Metro Bus company.”

A loud snort escaped Lois. “A very tenuous one. He was writing a simple page-filler article about the bus rate hikes.” So intent was Lois on refuting Peterson’s suggestion, she didn’t notice Clark blanch. “And I assigned him that story before the truck exploded. He knew nothing about any bombs at that time. No one did.”

“Apart from the bomber, Mrs. Kent,” Peterson replied, his hackles obviously rising at Lois’ ferocity.

Clark turned his attention to the sergeant, his brows raised incredulously. “Come on, Jed. You can’t seriously believe I’m the culprit here.”

Another silence stretched out as Jed watched the medics working on the injured, of which there weren’t many, thanks to the actions of the man sitting in front of him. A pale pink color tinted his cheeks.

“Actually, no. I can’t see why you would bomb a target, then show up to try to save your victims and get yourself hurt in the process. It doesn’t make sense. Whoever is doing this is keeping a very low profile, and giving us almost nothing to go on.”

“What about the voice recording?” Lois asked in a more friendly tone, hoping that cutting Peterson some slack would gain her some information.

“Our experts checked it over, but they got nothing definitive,” Jed replied, evasively.

“Jed, you did say you’d pass information to Jim, and I’m his partner here.” Clark decided to try where Lois had failed, but he attracted Lois’ attention once more. In her eager pursuit of the story, she’d forgotten the compression pad, but now she was pressing on his cheek with renewed vengeance. “Lois, that hurts!”

“I’m sorry, but I’m only obeying instructions,” she explained loftily, as if he were ten years old. “You don’t want to bleed all over the bank.”

“OK, honey, but I doubt I’m going to bleed to death.” He offered her a rueful smile, while his eyes relayed a silent message. He understood some of Lois’ concerns but believed them to be groundless. The police already had the broken lens coated with his blood, and the DNA tests done for elimination purposes wouldn’t highlight his strange origins, or so he’d once been told by Bernard Klein ... if his memory served him correctly, which wasn’t a given. Only it was too late to worry about that. He turned back to Jed. “Can’t you give us something?”

Again the detective seemed to think it over, then his stance relaxed. “I guess I owe you, but this isn’t for publication. Not yet. We don’t want to give this guy any clues about what we know ... or don’t know, in this case. The Avenger disguised his voice the old-fashioned way with a muffler. Our guys managed to clean it up a bit, but all they could tell me was that the voice is definitely male, with no discernible accent, though he probably comes from New Troy and maybe even Metropolis.”

“That narrows it down somewhat,” Lois said derisively.

“What about background noise?” Clark’s instincts were now on high alert.

“Nothing specific.” Jed sighed heavily. “They think it might have been recorded out of doors, or near an open door or window. Oh, and they heard a cat mewing somewhere close by.”

“Oh, so you’re looking for a local male, fresh air, cat-loving freak!” Lois gave a tight grin and shifted her stance to lean against Clark’s shoulder.

“One who has a grudge against bus travel, schools and banks,” Jed added.

“Or maybe the delivery services,” Clark offered thoughtfully. “I doubt the last two explosions were mistakes, so maybe the first one wasn’t. The package was addressed to Metro Bus, but maybe it didn’t go off early ... maybe it was meant for Speedy Deliveries.”

“You could have a point there, Clark,” Lois said, standing erect again. “Did you follow up on that Sergeant?”

“We’re still checking up on every aspect of these incidents, Mrs. Kent,” Jed informed her quickly, but there was something rather sheepish about the way his eyes wouldn’t meet her gaze.

“That’s funny. Clark got the impression you weren’t taking that first bombing too seriously.”

“LO-is!” Clark warned.

“OK. I admit that we didn’t think too much about the truck. I mean the blast hardly created a dent.” The sergeant stood tall again, regaining his confidence. “But I can assure you that we’re not about to make the same mistake again. This guy, whoever he is has bombed a school and a bank, indiscriminately, and I don’t intend to let him get away with it. We’ll catch him, Mrs. Kent, and make sure he’s put away where he can’t do more damage. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

“Jim and I would like to help you find him,” Clark said, stopping Peterson from marching off. “We won’t print anything you don’t want us to, but the more people you have on this investigation the better. And, if you gave us a copy of that recording, Lois and I could ask Jor-El to take a listen to it. That’s if it doesn’t break any of your rules. He might not find anything extra, but it’s worth a try.”

It took only a second or two for Jed to answer. He’d had other cases where James Olsen had been an asset and Clark Kent had once had quite a reputation. “It’s a deal. But we share information ... and nothing goes to print until I give the word.” He looked pointedly at Lois.

“Deal!” she answered, smiling sweetly now that The Planet had a way in. “Why does everyone think I’m not a team player?”

“Because you like to be on top,” Clark reminded her, grinning back a little crookedly. The muscles of his cut cheek refused to co-operate for now.

Peterson’s gaze passed between the two Kents, reminded of the tales James Olsen had recounted about the legendary Lane and Kent. With an amused shrug he wandered off, but after a couple of paces he turned. His voice lowered. “Oh, and I’ll get a copy of the tape sent over to The Planet. But that’s just between us.” He made a small circle with his hands, then left them alone.

“Lois, do you think you could stop pressing that thing against my face so hard,” Clark said plaintively. “I’m sure it’s stopped bleeding now.”

Bending down she whispered in his ear, though there was no one paying close enough attention to them to hear. “You have stopped bleeding. It’s what I was trying to tell you earlier.”

“Oh, I thought you were worried about someone checking up on my blood.”

“No need to worry about that. Bernie says that the tests for elimination purposes wouldn’t find any anomalies and they destroy the samples afterwards.”

“So, I didn’t dream that conversation.” Clark sounded relieved. “Well, if I’ve stopped bleeding, maybe we should go

find Karl and tell him we’re leaving. I’ve already given my statement to one of the uniformed cops. They want me to go down to the station tomorrow to check it over and sign it.”

“Clark, we can’t leave.” Lois placed her hand on his shoulder, stopping him from rising. “Maybe the very fact that you’ve stopped bleeding is ... unusual.”

“Then what do you suggest? Slashing my cheek again?”

“Don’t be silly ... and it might have stopped bleeding, but the cut is still pretty deep. It might need stitches.”

“It will heal.”

“You don’t know that. You’re hardly invulnerable. And I hope you remember that the next time you try any heroics!” Lois might have been whispering but there was no doubting the force of her argument.

“Calm down, Lois. I just did what any ordinary man would have done.”

“Well, you’re not an ordinary man. You’re my man, and I don’t want to lose you again.” Tears sparkled on her eyelashes and threatened to fall.

“I’m sorry, honey.” Clark stood up quickly and pulled Lois into his arms. “I didn’t mean to make you worry. I just forget sometimes ...”

“Mr. Kent, I hope you’re not leaving.” Karl the medic returned and blocked the couple’s path to the door. “That cheek really needs medical attention, even if there are no other injuries.”

“Are you sure?” Clark asked. “Lois seems to have stopped the bleeding.”

Karl looked a little skeptical, but he reached over and eased the pad away from the wound. “Good, that’s good. But if you don’t plan on going to the ER, at least let me put some butterfly stitches over that cut.”

Lois nodded in firm agreement. “That’s a good idea. Go ahead,” she said, while pushing Clark back down onto the chair. “And if it would make you feel better, Karl, Clark can go see his own doctor this evening.”

“I’d recommend that he does, Mrs. Kent. And if he feels dizzy or sick, you should get him to the emergency room immediately.”

“Oh, I’ll make sure of it.” Lois set her mouth in a tight line and folded her arms as she watched her husband being taken care of. Clark was going to visit Bernie, even if she had to drive him there herself.

Chapter Five: Problems, Problems

The atmosphere inside the elevator was tight with unspoken frustrations as Lois and Clark rode up to the newsroom. They both stared rigidly ahead, while the floor numbers slowly lit up, their entrapment seemingly endless. They’d had to break off their heated discussion, which they’d embarked upon in the Jeep, as other members of staff shared the elevator car, neither wanting another of their arguments to be the subject of office gossip.

The elevator stopped on the third floor and the two women from accounting exited. Lois was immediately on the case.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she ground out from between clenched teeth.

“Why?” Clark’s stare shifted to his wife as the doors slid shut. “I disag ...”

“Hold on there!”

A shout interrupted Clark’s impending diatribe and he stuck his hand between the sliding doors, purely out of habit. Seconds later, James Olsen boarded the car.

“Thanks, CK.” James immediately took in Clark’s disheveled appearance and his eyebrows rose in shock. “Hey, my man, what happened to you?”

Clark fingered the bandage which Karl had used to cover his cut. “I had a small accident.”

“Accident!” Lois barked, her eyes flashing dangerously. “He threw himself in front of a bomb.”

“A bomb?” Jim tried to shrink a little inside his jacket. This was one time when Lois’ bite might actually be worse than her bark. “I heard there’d been another one. Didn’t know you were involved though, CK. Do you want me to get in touch with Jed?”

“No need,” Lois said tersely, brandishing her briefcase in front of her like a battering ram, ready to fight her way out of the elevator. “Clark’s on top of things.”

“Great. Jed’s a good guy. He’ll see you right.”

James’ words dropped into a stony silence. Uh-oh. Trouble in paradise, but he wasn’t about to play referee to the Kents — again. He’d been cast in that role once too often recently.

“Well, would you believe it! Accounting has got my expenses wrong for the third month in a row,” James mentioned airily, feeling that a change in subject was in order. “What’s wrong with these bean counters? Don’t they know that a reporter has to keep his sources sweet?”

“Over-claiming on your expense form again, James?” Lois asked, her voice heavy with sarcasm.

“Hey, Lois, you signed it, so you can fight with the accountants. It’s not like we’re talking major fraud here. Just a few dollars to buy a source a hot meal. Do we have a bunch of Scooges working for us?”

As fate would have it, James never discovered who worked out his wages, as the elevator arrived at their floor. “Gonna give them a call for me, Chief?” He slung his request over his shoulder. “Gotta run. Deadline to meet.”

“Don’t we all,” Clark mumbled as he gestured for Lois to exit the elevator first. He might be angry with his wife, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t a gentleman.

“Clark, can I see you in my office?” Her words were more of a command than a question.

“Lois, I have a story to write.” Clark tried to keep his voice low, but heads began to turn as the couple made their way down the ramp. It was almost as if their colleagues had radar which sounded a warning whenever he and Lois were having a ... debate.

“We have time to finish this.” Lois never looked back at him, but her voice made it plain that her request was not up for argument.

There was little Clark could do but grit his teeth and follow in Lois’ wake, while curious, surreptitious gazes watched their progress. He put his head down to hide his face, feeling naked without the shield of his glasses.

The various noises of the busy bullpen ebbed with every step Clark took until silence reigned ... and he was certain that the gossip-mongers would have a field day with this latest situation. Living out their working lives within the confines of this fishbowl was making him touchy, and his most disturbing thought was that it didn’t used to bother him. Was the difference due to Lois’ change of status, or was it he who was ... damaged?

Whatever it was, he wished Lois would cede a little control. Just this once.

The minute she heard Clark close her office door, Lois turned, ready to do battle, but her harsh words died in her throat at the site of his slumped shoulders, his battered face and his guarded stare. Normally, Clark’s eyes sparkled with a love of life, even from behind his glasses. Now, he wasn’t wearing them; they were in the hands of the police, but it wasn’t only the lack of glasses that made him look more like the lost soul Letour she’d found in China’s mountainous vastness.

Well, there was one thing she could do about that. She opened her top drawer and fished a spare pair from behind her pens and personal stationary. Without a word, she handed them to him and her breath caught as she waited to see if he would accept

the olive branch.

“You still keep a spare pair in your desk?” he asked, not looking at her, but fingering the frames as if they were a precious gem.

“I never got out of the habit.” Lois’ smile was wistful and she fought to hold back her tears. “Not even after four years. Somehow, it made me think you were still with me.”

At last, Clark met her gaze. “I’m sorry for the pain you went through ... and I wish to God those four years had never happened.”

By the sound of the harsh edge to his voice, Lois could tell Clark wasn’t only regretting her past pain. He’d come to realize those lost years were still stealing part of his life, and she wasn’t sure how to help him. And he looked so tired and hurt.

Tentatively, she rested her hands on his arm. When he didn’t resist, she let her arms snake around his waist, pulling him in for a hug, and was happy to feel Clark’s arms tighten about her shoulders.

“You really shouldn’t be here,” she whispered against his chest. “Please, Clark. Go see Bernie.”

But Clark wasn’t ready to be persuaded, and he drew back from her embrace. She watched him place the glasses back on his face, as if he was assuming the personality of Clark Kent, investigative reporter.

“I have a story to write, Lois. As my editor, I thought you’d be happy.”

“As your wife, I don’t want you to make yourself sick,” she countered, more sharply than she’d intended.

“Ah, but you reminded me that in here,” his hands waved around her office and the newsroom beyond, “you’re the chief, not my wife.”

“OK, Clark, if you want to play games, then your editor doesn’t like her staff bleeding all over the office, either. It’s bad for morale.”

“I’m bleeding again?” Clark looked startled.

“OK, I meant figuratively speaking. Clark, no one expects you to be superhuman.” His eyes hardened at her remark. Why did she keep making these mistakes? She worked in the newspaper business, surely she should have a bigger repertoire of words. “You’re hurt, so go get some help. Chris was still at the scene when we left. He can write the story.”

Clark’s face seemed to turn even paler beneath the stained dressing. “Chris was outside. I was the one inside the bank. I’m pretty sure you’ve never turned down an eye-witness report before. Unless you believe that a sports writer can do a better job ... and that’s no disrespect for Chris, but maybe it shows how you feel about my abilities.”

Lois felt like she’d been slapped. “That’s nonsense, and you know it.” She was on the defensive immediately.

“Is it really, Lois?”

“You know damn well it is. I would never have suggested you come back if I hadn’t believed you were capable. The Daily Planet doesn’t carry reporters who can’t hack it.”

“Perhaps I haven’t lived up to expectations.”

“That’s not true!” she cried, reassurance and exasperation vying for supremacy in her voice.

“Then why do you keep hovering over my shoulder?” The fight had gone out of Clark and he leaned against the armchair, as if he already knew her answer.

But she answered his question with one of her own. “Is that what you think I’m doing?”

“Yes, I do! Lois, we’ve been here before and I’m tired of rehashing your motives.” Straightening up, he looked directly into her eyes. “Now, I’m going to go write my story ... which you can use or not, as you see fit, then I’ll head over to Bernie’s.”

She took a couple of steps toward him, halting his retreat from her office. “I’d like to come with you.”

His eyebrows rose again. “I don’t need a baby-sitter. I promise I will get this checked out.” He touched his cheek with his hand. “You have a job to do, and so do I. I think I’d like it better if we just let each other get on with it. I’ll see you at home.”

With those final words, he left, leaving Lois stunned. They were almost as far apart now as they had been when he was in Jilin and she was here in Metropolis. At least then she’d been sure of their love for one another ... now it was difficult to find common ground, and she was willing to admit that she was partly to blame. But Clark was acting like a stubborn, self-centred lunkhead, not letting his family and friends help him get his life back on track.

Maybe this is something he needs to do alone, a tiny voice in her head reminded her. If he doesn’t learn to have confidence in all that he is now, then he’ll always be just half the man he was.

If she loved him, she had to let him find his own way back. However, realizing that and acting on it was more difficult to do. She felt she was walking a narrow line in her relationship with Clark, and she was straying too far from that line in one direction or another, more often than not.

Clark was being oversensitive, but she’d be the first to admit he had the right. He’d been through so much ... and it didn’t really matter which one of them was to blame. What was the point in playing the ‘what if’ game? They were still colleagues, still married, still in love, but more than anything Lois wanted to feel comfortable with Clark again, and she’d do whatever it took to bring that about ... even if it meant doing nothing.

The ceiling lights in Bernard Klein’s lab glared relentlessly into Clark’s glasses-free face, hurting his eyes, so he allowed his lids to close, with just the faintest of pained flickers. The result wasn’t much of an improvement; the stark light was still imprinted on his inner eyes, but he felt too weary to take a great deal of interest in yet another medical examination. He sank lower into the chair.

Bernie had run all the usual tests, practically in silence, and was now studying the cut on Clark’s cheek intently. With some effort, Clark forced his eyes open, feeling that he could, at least, be polite.

“So, what do you think, Bernie?”

Carefully touching gloved fingers to the reddened skin around the wound, Bernard gave a minute shrug of his shoulders. “Judging by the news reports about the bomb, I’d say you’re a very lucky man.”

“That’s pretty much what Lois thinks.” There was a second of silence while Clark contemplated the rather unpleasant notion that his wife had recruited Bernie to warn him to take more care. “Lois didn’t call you, did she?”

“Not lately. No. Why would she call?” Bernie asked, straightening to his full height, looking startled and more than a little worried.

“No reason,” Clark admitted, guessing he’d misjudged the situation. The doctor wasn’t good at subterfuge. “Ignore me, Bernie. I’m just being surly, but, please, spare me the lecture. I’ve already heard it from Lois.”

“We are a little touchy today,” Bernie tutted, frowning in concentration, wondering if perhaps he’d missed a concussion. “You sure you don’t have a headache?” He placed a finger under Clark’s chin, turning his head to check out the other grazes and bruising. “She’s just got you back. You can’t blame her for being a little concerned.”

“No! I’m fine.” Clark sighed loudly. If he repeated it often enough, maybe someone would believe him ... even himself. “And I don’t blame her, but I can’t spend the rest of my life not trying to help when I can. You know what they say ... old habits die hard,” he ended with a half-hearted attempt at humor.

“But you’re not super anymore,” Bernie said gently. His examination complete, he took a couple of steps backwards, giving his prickly patient more space. “You have to be more careful.”

“I only did what any normal man would have done,” Clark countered. His hands clasped together to keep them still. Why did no one understand his ... need?

“But that’s the problem, Clark, and it’s why you have to be careful. You might not be super, but you’re not exactly normal either. You keep helping out as Clark and, eventually, someone is bound to notice.”

“What?” Taken unawares, Clark’s head shook from side to side in confusion. “Notice what?”

“Take this cut of yours ... it’s a good thing these are butterfly stitches, ‘cause real ones might start popping out in the next day or two, and I suspect these bruises will fade more quickly than normal too.”

Clark sat up straighter and there was a hint of eagerness in his eyes and voice. “Are you saying my powers could come back?”

Bernie gulped and backed further away from his patient, picking up Clark’s medical file and holding it before him like a shield. “I don’t think I can say that ... exactly.”

“Then what can you say ... exactly?”

Very deliberately, Bernie placed the clipboard down on his desk. He stared at nothing in particular for a long moment, before crossing and switching off the overhead lights. Only the desk lamp and the softer light behind the examination table remained. Suddenly, the ambiance in the lab seemed less formal. Bernie pulled a stool toward Clark and perched atop it. His hands rested on his knees, as if they needed an anchor.

“Clark, when you came back from Jilin, I ran every test, every examination I could think of ... and some I didn’t. Adrienne and Stephan suggested a few. But when the tests were completed, I reached the conclusion that the lengthy exposure to the kryptonite in your brain destroyed your ability to process yellow sunlight into super-energy.” Once more, Bernie paused, and Clark felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise in anticipation. “With everything that’s happened to you in the past few months, I feel I should reassess my diagnosis ...”

“And?” Clark was sitting on the edge of his seat, his expression animated.

“And, I don’t think you should get too excited ... not yet. I now think that the exposure damaged your ability, but couldn’t destroy it completely.”

“Are you saying I could recover?”

Bernie was up on his feet, his hands pulling nervously at his shirt collar. “I can’t say just how much you could recover. You’re not completely without the powers now. The healing progress of your wounds today proves that ... but you were still injured. Logically, the more the affected gene is repaired the more chance there is ...”

The doctor paused again, which had Clark resisting the need to bite his nails, a habit he wasn’t prone to. Finally, after some consideration, Bernie continued, his gaze earnest and true.

“The more the gene heals the more chance there is of a recovery. However, medically speaking, we were always in uncharted territory with you. I can’t say, with any certainty, that Superman will ever be back as he was before. Meanwhile, we have to take this a day at a time.”

Now Clark too was on his feet. “I can do that, Bernie.”

“That’s just it, Clark. I’m not sure you can. Any more stunts like today, and you’re putting your secret identity at risk ... and that of your family. As it is, you’re going to have to disguise these wounds. People can’t see that you’re healing this fast.”

There was a small thump as Clark sat down again, appreciating, for the first time, what Bernie was trying to warn him about. “I should be in the hospital, shouldn’t I?”

“Probably. I take it the others you saved were hurt?” When Clark nodded, Bernie went on in a lighter vein. “Don’t worry, I’m sure everyone just thinks you got lucky this time. After all, truth is stranger than fiction, only you can’t push your luck too far. I’m not so worried about your being hurt ... but about how little you would be hurt.”

Clark looked up to the darkened ceiling, seeking for divine help which, of course, didn’t come. Oh, boy! Just wait until Lois hears this.

Darkness had fallen when Clark finally mounted the steps to his home and ponderously unlocked the door. Truth be told, he wasn’t exactly looking forward to his impending discussion with Lois, but he knew it was inevitable. Besides, the kids would probably have heard about his injuries by now and he didn’t want them to worry needlessly. He didn’t want Lois to worry either, but he was afraid that the information Bernard had given him wouldn’t improve the situation with his wife.

Lois knew him better than anyone; surely she wouldn’t expect him not to help when he could. He’d been helping out in Jilin without the powers and everything had gone well, though he hadn’t had to worry about enhanced healing. But then, he’d been completely normal, and now, he was somewhere in between — stuck in no-man’s land.

Taking a deep breath, Clark quietly pushed the door open, wondering, with a fanciful smile, if this was the moment to shout ‘Honey, I’m home!’

Yet it appeared he didn’t need to announce his presence as Sara and Vicky were sitting on the sofa, watching a news report on the bombing. The second the girls heard the door click, they stood up and, immediately, Vicky came running to throw her arms around his waist.

“Daddy, you got hurt!” she cried, burying her face against him. Clark held her tightly. His little girl knowing his secret was taking some getting used to.

Sara approached more slowly, studying his face, which still sported a white dressing on one cheek. “How are you?” she asked, tentatively reaching out to link her arm through his. “Mom said you weren’t hurt too badly, but that explosion looked huge. Maybe you should come sit down.” She started pulling him toward the couch.

Clark allowed himself to be led. “Huge is a bit of an exaggeration, and, as you can see, I’m not hurt much. I’ve been to see Uncle Bernie and he says I’m going to be fine.” He sat between his daughters on the couch, content to let them fuss over him.

“You should be more careful,” Sara said seriously, but her smile was gentle.

Careful! There was that word again ... even from his kids. Everyone might have the best of motives, but didn’t they realize they were asking him to live life almost as if he were an invalid ... and he wasn’t. He might not be totally super, but he had more than human abilities. Surely he should be able to use them. Though Bernie had given him food for thought, he wasn’t certain he could continue on forever trying to hold himself in check.

“Daddy, are you sure everything is OK?” Vicky whispered, obviously scared by his silence.

Truth to tell, it wasn’t, but he had to come to terms with how he was now. His uncertain frame of mind was hurting the people he loved. To watch his daughters blossom under their father’s attention had been his great pleasure. And Lois. Lois, simply, was the other half of his soul. Today, his heroics could have robbed them of his presence once more, and to act churlishly in the face of their concerns was unforgivable.

Suddenly, he noticed the fear in Vicky’s eyes — fear for which he was responsible. And for a moment he was lost, alone, back in his prison cell, in the nightmare that had robbed him of

his memory of her. She was so precious, her well-being more important to him than his own. Her safety and her happiness. The happiness of all his children.

“Yes, Princess ... Tory. Everything is absolutely fine. My cuts and bruises will heal in no time. Now, what have you two been up to?” Intent on lightening the mood, Clark stretched out to an open book lying on the coffee table. Flicking it shut, but keeping the place with his finger, he saw a boy wizard, complete with glasses on the cover.

“It’s homework. That’s our school reading project,” Vicky announced quickly. Since this was study time in the Kent household, and both she and Sara had been caught watching TV, she wanted her father to know she hadn’t been slacking. After all, Dad couldn’t be mad at them for checking the news when they knew he’d been hurt.

Oblivious to Vicky’s thoughts, Clark gazed at the book sleeve. “It looks familiar.”

“It should be,” Lois’ voice sounded from the open door to the dining room. “Those books were really popular around 2000.” She gestured toward them with a spoon, one of several pieces of cutlery she had in her hand. “We used to read them to Matt ... and to Sara.”

“Don’t see how they were so popular.” Vicky pouted somewhat scornfully as she gave her considered opinion. “What’s so special about magic anyway?”

“I suppose having a superhero as a father and a brother does tend to make you a little blasé,” Lois answered with a chuckle, though she returned to setting the table.

“What’s blasé?” Vicky asked, ever curious.

“Not easily impressed, Vicky. But your mother knows I’m not exactly a superhero these days.” Clark felt his bristles rise, almost spontaneously, and his glance darkened as he looked through the wide doorway at his wife.

“Yes, you are, Dad,” Sara said, leaning forward eagerly. “Look at what you did today. You saved those people ... without powers. That was brave.”

“Reckless!” Lois added, under her breath — but not quietly enough that her family didn’t hear.

“Mom, that’s not fair.” Shocked, Sara sprang up, her lips trembling at her mother’s seeming derision.

“And I seem to remember it’s a word I often leveled at you, once upon a time,” Clark said with a definite edge to his voice. “You didn’t pay attention either.”

Lois toyed with the silverware momentarily, then she left them behind on the crisp linen cloth and walked back into the living room, her arms crossed. “Touche!” she said to her husband. Then she added somewhat defensively, “But I have learned to be more careful.”

“Mom, you couldn’t expect Dad to do nothing.” Sara tried again to support her father.

There was silence in the room as her husband and daughters awaited her answer.

“OK, OK.” She spread her hands wide in surrender — for now. “I’m sure, knowing what your dad did about the bombs, even I would have tried to do something. I’m sorry, Clark. I’m just being cranky.”

Clark was immediately contrite. He’d resolved not to hurt Lois and yet he’d done so without thinking. He stood up and crossed to her side, pulling her close to his chest. “Don’t be sorry. You’ve probably noticed I’ve been a little cranky myself.” Resting his chin against Lois’ sleek hair, he smiled at his anxious daughters to prove everything was fine between their parents. “I thought I’d come to terms with this ... this lack of powers. I have no idea why I’m suddenly acting like a jerk about it.”

Lois leaned back to look up at him, her fingers smoothing the material of his shirt, feeling the quickened beat of his heart. “It’s understandable you’d be upset by their loss ... and I wouldn’t say

a jerk ... exactly," she added, though she was smiling now.

Inwardly, Clark sighed with relief. For the moment, it appeared their disagreement was over. "What's for dinner, honey?" His nose twitched at the pleasant smells wafting from the kitchen.

"Chicken Tikka Biryani."

Clark's eyebrows arched and his eyes widened. Lois was no longer a bad cook — and her repertoire included Indian food?

"And don't give me that look." Lois swatted his arm. "It's one I made with your mother last week and froze. All I'm doing is heating it up. Besides, my cooking is much improved."

An unmistakable note of chagrin had sneaked into Lois' voice, causing Clark to hug her again. "That's true." He kissed her forehead. "I'm not complaining. And Indian cuisine, that's hard. I'm impressed, sweetheart."

Lois blushed. Being complimented on her cooking skills wasn't something she would have appreciated some years ago, but now she got a kick ... well, a tiny kick out of having climbed that particular mountain. Not that she'd ever reach Martha's standards.

"No big deal, Clark, but the kids inherited your taste for exotic food. As I've said before, when needs must ..." Staring into Clark's suddenly earnest eyes, Lois was aware of something she'd lost sight of: something a general in far off North Korea had learned to his cost ... Clark was born to do good, with or without his superpowers or memory. He could no more change his nature than turn the moon into green cheese. The pity of it was that the general had felt the need to find out at all, but life wasn't always fair and now they had to live with the consequences. "Kinda like throwing yourself at a bomb in the hope you can help."

Lois tightened her grip on Clark as she felt him withdrawing.

"Please, Clark, don't. I'm done arguing. I do know where you're coming from, really." She took a deep breath. "I've been letting my fears try to control you, and it's not fair."

"But completely understandable," Clark agreed softly, while his hand brushed a stray lock back from Lois' cheek. "I have been reacting badly, and for that I'm sorry too."

They exchanged smiles and might have kissed, only two kids clearing their throats loudly in the background brought them back to reality.

"If you two have made up," Vicky said, grinning impishly, "do you think you could feed your starving kids?"

Clark turned toward his girls, a twinkle in his eye as he pointed an accusing finger at them. "Hey, respect your elders ... and you can start by setting the table while your mother and I finish preparing dinner."

"Uh oh." Sara slipped her arm around her sister's shoulders and walked them past their parents. "Looks like we're going to starve, Vicky. If these two are left unchaperoned in the kitchen ..." Grinning, she lifted the cutlery from the table and began her appointed chore.

Clark rolled his eyes. "Lois, how did you happen to raise two such audacious children?"

"It was easy, but I think a lot of it is in the genes ... and they're your kids too." She winked at him over her shoulder and marched into the kitchen, her hips swaying, happy in the knowledge they'd cleared the air between them. No doubt they would hit the odd hitch in the future, but now she was sure they'd get through it together. "And while we're cooking, you can tell me what Bernie had to say."

"Oh, nothing much." Thank goodness Lois was in front of him and didn't see him blanch. He still had to tell her about the next problem, but not yet ... not when they'd just reached an accord. "I'll tell you about it later. Oh, and I just got a message from Matt." He touched his ear, indicating that he'd received it telepathically. He wasn't just changing the subject. "He's been

clearing up an accident on the freeway, but he's about done and he'll be home for dinner."

"Good. Chicken Biryani is his favorite," Lois announced, unaware that Clark was keeping information from her and feeling that everything in her garden was rosy. "You know," she added, turning back to the counter to cut up a loaf of French bread, "he doesn't mind my cooking."

Despite his guilty feelings, Clark grinned teasingly. "He's a superhero. He can probably digest bombs!"

"Bite your tongue. Being super never stopped you from appreciating good food!" She threw him a towel which had been lying at her side on the work surface. "Go empty the dishwasher and give the plates to the girls. And please, don't go giving Matt ideas about swallowing bombs. He hasn't tried that one yet and I'd rather keep it that way."

"Especially since there's someone out there sending letter bombs." Clark bent down in front of the machine and began unloading it, happy to lose himself in domesticity.

"Exactly, Clark! Do you have any leads?"

"Not yet," he admitted, his brow furrowed in a frown as he stacked the dishes on the counter. "The targets don't seem to be connected, but they must be. I've just got to put it together, and I'm not about to give up."

Lois stopped slicing. "I never expected you would," she said, giving him another one of her lovely smiles, drawing him to her side once more.

"Thank you for having faith in me." He placed his hands gently on her shoulders. "I don't always show my gratitude, but I'd never have gotten this far without your encouragement. If I'm ever able to get my writing back on track, it will be because of you."

"Oh, Clark, not just me," she said, softly, tears beginning to fill her eyes. "That eyewitness account you did on the bank robbery was first class. I should have told you that right off, instead of jumping down your throat."

Placing a finger on Lois' lips, he whispered, "No more apologies. We don't need them. We're fine, aren't we?"

She moved closer. "I think so. Do you?"

Clark's lips caressed Lois' mouth when a woosh was heard outside and the back door opened with a blast of cold air. "Boy! Do you two ever stop?" Matt asked as he stood in the doorway, his arms folded. "Maybe I should leave and come back in ... oh, an hour or two."

Laughing, his parents broke apart. "Don't you dare, Matt. Close that door before we all freeze to death and get changed ... and remember to wash your hands before dinner," Lois ordered her super son. "We'll be serving up in about five minutes."

Matt strolled into the kitchen, his blue cape swinging easily behind him as he inhaled the spicy smells wafting from the oven. "Indian! Mom, you're the best." An appreciative grin curled his lips, but, seconds later, his mood became serious. "Hey, Dad, I guess you must be feeling better. I would have come, but the bomb went off when I was in the middle of a class, and Mom has this rule."

"I know about the rule, son, and I know it has you chomping at the bit, but your mom's right. Your schooling comes first." Clark went back to picking the dishes from out of the washer. "Anyway, the emergency services had things pretty well covered. There was only one badly injured casualty, who was hurt before you could've arrived, and I wasn't seriously hurt. Now, can we please forget about what happened earlier and just have a normal family dinner, 'cause I'm hungry?"

The storm was over for now, but Clark knew that another one was brewing just over the horizon. Perhaps it would be better to keep quiet about Bernie's warning, but that wasn't an option. He remembered from his past life that hiding things from Lois was unproductive and futile. She had ways of finding things out.

Beside, he needed her advice.

After all, asking Lois' opinion didn't necessarily mean he couldn't stand on his own two feet, even if it felt that way sometimes. He should keep that in mind for future reference, and life between them might not be so rocky. Tonight, when they went to bed, would be a good time to talk.

Lois sat up against the pillows of their bed, her back ramrod straight, teeth biting on her lower lip, while the skin above the bridge of her nose puckered in a frown. Clearly, she was not amused.

Clark sighed, leaning forward in his chair by the side of the bed, his hands resting, not exactly loosely, on his thighs. The lateness of the hour meant the sounds of the city outside the window were sporadic, but if he concentrated really hard, he could hear Lois' quickened heartbeat. He'd known she wouldn't react well to his news. He hadn't taken Bernie's information very calmly either.

Eventually, after having mulled over all he'd told her for a much longer period than he'd hoped, Lois spoke up. "OK, what you're telling me is you can be hurt, but your 'superishness' has kicked in enough that you're healing faster than a normal person?" She looked over at him, the delicate arch of her brow even more pronounced.

"That seems to be right. Of course, the dressings will hide most of the evidence and Bernie suggested you could try out your skills as a makeup artist on the bruises." He laughed, trying to raise a smile on his wife's face, yet his laughter sounded forced, even to his own ears.

Lois grimaced. "That should be a challenge. Maybe we should have had Vicky try out her new camera, while the marks are still evident." She sat up straighter, if that were possible. "Clark, what if they've all gone tomorrow? Would we even know where to do the touch ups?"

"Calm down, honey. People don't really pay that close attention. As long as I have some scrapes, it'll be fine." Clark rose and crossed to his wife's side, laying a gentle hand on her wrist, his fingers drawing lazy, soothing circles on the spot above her pulse. "Besides, that sort of healing takes my powers to be totally up to speed, and I doubt they are."

"No, they're not!" she added vehemently. "You could have been killed."

"But I wasn't."

"Clark, Bernie said you were healing faster, but I'll bet he didn't say enhanced healing could bring you back from the dead."

His face flushed, abashed, and his voice was quiet. "Well, no. He didn't say that exactly."

"Exactly!" Lois said, sounding only a little triumphant. This was one argument she probably wasn't overjoyed to win. "And I'd rather not put the theory to the test, but if you keep throwing yourself in the path of danger perhaps one of these times you'll be ... seriously hurt." She ended her statement with a gulp and tears clouded her eyes, though they didn't fall. She wouldn't let them.

"Honey, you're missing the point. Bernie's most worried that people will put two and two together because I'm not getting hurt when I should."

With a show of exasperation, Lois pulled her arm from under Clark's hand. "No, Clark. You're missing the point. You're not totally invulnerable, which in my book means you could be killed. If that shard of glass had pierced your chest instead of your cheek ... I lose you again ... and I don't know if I could survive that."

"Oh, Lois," he whispered, gathering her into his arms. For a moment she resisted, and he felt a lump form in his throat, then she collapsed against him. "I'm sorry I made you worry, and I do realize I have responsibilities, to you and to the kids. Believe me,

I have no intention of going anywhere."

"But?" she groaned into his chest, her quickened breath wafting against his skin, threatening to distract him.

"But what?" he asked, closing his eyes, pretending not to know where she was heading.

"But you can't control yourself, Clark. You have to help whenever and wherever you can. Having powers has nothing to do with it. They never did." She pulled back and looked up into his face, her gaze wistfully sad and yet filled with understanding; the understanding he'd shared with no other person but Lois.

"You know me much too well, Lois Lane." His smile was still one-sided, while, tenderly, he smoothed away the glistening path of tears which had spilled onto her cheeks. "But I meant what I said about my responsibilities. Believe me, I value my family's happiness more than my own gratification. I can't go placing myself in jeopardy whenever I feel like playing the hero. I can't promise not to help at all, Lois, but I do promise to be careful."

"That was all I was prepared to give you years ago when Superman saved me on a weekly basis." Lois found the courage to return his smile. "It would be hypocritical of me to expect more of you."

"A weekly basis? Make that daily!"

"Clark Kent, don't you exaggerate!" He received a slap on his chest for his tease and the fact that he jerked instinctively was further proof he was not yet invulnerable. There was silence as both acknowledged their latest dilemma. "Bernie has a point, though."

"Unfortunately, I agree with you. This in between stage could be pretty difficult to manage. I am not looking forward to wearing stage makeup, but I don't see any other choice. At least I don't have to pretend I'm feeling stiff and sore. That whack you gave me hurt." His bottom lip pouted and he gave her one of his best soulful glances.

"Don't you play games with me, Clark," she said sternly, though her eyes gleamed, and this time not with tears.

"You could offer to kiss it better," he answered archly. "And I have pains in quite a few places, so I'll probably need a lot of kisses before I'm better."

Lois' hair twisted and tangled about her face as she shook her head. "But you're injured. I'm afraid I'd only hurt you."

Her sultry gaze, from beneath the strands of her hair, set his blood rushing through his veins to congregate in one very central core. "But I know you can be very gentle, and I'm in need of tender loving care."

He leaned up and pressed a kiss where her pulse now beat languidly in the graceful column of her neck. Lois tilted a little away from him to grant him better access, smiling into the darkness. Clark could feel her body melt under his touch.

"I think I might be able to accommodate you." Her words came softly from above his head, where his hair stirred in the warm channel of her breath. "And I'd love a little of that myself."

Clark rose on his elbow to stare intently into her face. He never tired of watching her, she was so beautiful, so full of vitality and courage. And she was his to cherish.

"Anything you ask, Lois."

His lips descended on hers and for a time there was no need for words.

Chapter Six: Healing Retribution

While Lois and Clark made peace with each other, Thomas Timmons was plotting vengeance. He'd been fairly pleased with the latest stage of his plans, yet it hadn't gone quite as far as he'd hoped. By now, someone should have died at his hands, but thanks to the heroics of some Daily Planet reporter, all the bank employees were alive. It didn't give him much solace to know that the head teller was badly injured in the hospital.

Now, if it had been the reporter, Thomas would have been more satisfied. Not that he had anything in particular against that Kent guy, but the beacon of truth and justice that The Planet professed to be hadn't been interested in helping him get justice for his wife.

Like every other institution, they'd ignored his letters and emails, begging them to highlight Mary's lack of competent medical treatment. When he'd shown up at their offices in person, they'd eventually had him thrown out, and had the police move him on when he'd single-handedly picketed the pavement outside, waving a placard saying 'Decent Health Care for the Needy'.

OK, he vaguely remembered the newspaper had been mourning its own loss. A reporter, missing, presumed dead, with Superman in North Korea. In fact, if he wasn't mistaken, it was the same reporter who'd interfered at the bank today.

Clark Kent, one member of the Hottest Team in Town, the pair he'd thought might actually take up his fight for Mary's rights. Hadn't they helped the little guy in the past? Why did the one person who might have publicized his campaign to save Mary go and get himself lost at the very moment when Thomas needed him?

So maybe he did have an axe to grind with Kent. After all, the reporter hadn't really been dead. He'd come back to his wife and family ... but Mary was gone forever. Rubbing the tears of frustration that clouded his eyes, he fervently hoped Kent was suffering for his actions now.

Never once did it occur to Thomas that his thinking was irrational. The only person he'd loved in the whole world, who'd loved him back and made life bearable, was robbed of her life by a society which turned its back on those less fortunate. Well, he'd make this society pay.

Thomas opened Mary's well-worn sewing box and gazed dreamily at the contents. The box reminded him of happier days, when Mary had spent her time making and altering clothes for a living. She'd been good at it too; the best seamstress in the district. He'd been so proud of her.

Like a ritual, he picked out one of her dressing pins, staring at her framed picture by his side. It was only right that Mary should help him choose.

Blindly, Thomas thrust the pin into the rumpled paper and peered at his next target. The wrinkles and the dim lighting in the room made it difficult to read his own handwriting, but when he eventually made out the name, a shiver of something akin to regret ran down his spine. He'd been hoping for someplace else. His narrow shoulders hunched over the table. Yet why should he feel bad? He'd already attacked a school. Besides, this institution's terrible misdiagnosis had condemned Mary to death, and their ensuing lack of care and attention had been the final nail in her coffin!

Straightening his spine and hardening his broken heart, he dismissed any qualms he might feel about bombing a hospital.

Clark balanced his chair on its back legs and reviewed his story notes. He was feeling pretty good. It had only been a few days since he and Chris had met their sources on the sports corruption story and their leads were already starting to pan out. They'd even managed to put a name to the mystery man offering bribes to the players, and with a bit of luck and some digging, they were close to revealing who was behind the whole scam. The story was almost a wrap and Clark was confident he and Chris would have a Front-page headline.

If Clark could have the same success finding the illusive bomber, he'd consider himself a happy man.

As if on cue, Sergeant Peterson exited the elevator, his hands buried deep in his winter coat pockets and walked toward Clark's desk. "Hey, Kent, I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop

these back to you." Peterson fished out a plastic bag containing a pair of mangled glasses. "Not that they'll be much good to you in that state, but forensics are finished with them."

"Thanks, Jed," Clark said, taking the bag and studying the contents with a grimace. "Yeah, definitely defunct. Did they find anything?"

"On them? Nothing." The detective hitched his hip on the corner of Clark's desk. "Though they did mention that the remaining lens seemed to be made of plain glass. Kinda odd, don't you think?"

Clark swallowed and his chair came back to Earth with a thud. "Odd? Not really." He waved his hands in front of his face, hoping he didn't look nervous. "It's just that I'm poor-sighted in only one eye."

"No kidding! It's not a crime." Jed shrugged, seemingly satisfied. "Have you ever thought about getting contacts?"

"I did once. A long time ago, but I was allergic." Clark cleared his throat. "Did forensics find anything else?" he asked, changing the subject.

"That's too bad, but you should give them another try. My wife swears by the latest daily disposables."

"Maybe ... Yeah, I should check them out. One of these days when I have more time," Clark prevaricated, dropping the bag on his desk, then, his eyes dark with remorse, he glanced back up at the lanky policeman. That day in the bank, he hadn't been fast enough. "I heard the teller lost his sight and one of his hands. We have to find this guy before he strikes again."

"You think I don't know that!" Peterson replied defensively. "The explosive was the same as the one at the school, only bigger. Other than that ... nothing. This guy knows what he's doing."

"Have forensics found any clues?" Clark repeated his question.

Peterson stood up. For a second, he returned Clark's stare, then his eyes shifted to look around the newsroom. "The department has all the manpower on the case we can spare. We're cross-checking links with the bank, the school and the bus company, and even the delivery services, like you suggested, but it's like looking for a needle in a hay stack. How about you?"

"Nothing either, though I haven't been able to work on it as much as I'd like," Clark admitted. "I've had other assignments. But, believe me, I'll keep doing what I can, and I'll pass on any information I find."

"Be sure you do, Kent. My boss isn't too happy that I'm sharing with you." Jed turned to go, but quickly took another package from his pocket and leaned over Clark's desk. "He's not too keen on me giving you this recording either." he said quietly. "He told me to give you a copy, but since you're letting Jor-El listen to it, I thought it would be better if he heard the original. I'd be grateful if you didn't contaminate the evidence anymore than the news station already did, or my job will be on the line."

"Jed, I'm sorry. You're sticking your neck out here, and I'm complaining." Clark grimaced in self-derision. "You must be under a ton of pressure to nail this guy, so I really do appreciate this," he added, more sympathetically, as he studied the small brown package. "Believe me, I'll treat this like gold, and I'll get it back to you ASAP."

"You have no idea how much pressure. But I hear you've never ruined a crime scene before, and I doubt you'll start now." Jed looked a little mollified and with a something that resembled a grin, he strode away. "See ya!"

Clark felt like he'd been buffeted by a strong wind. Was Peterson just being conversational about the glasses, or had he suspected something? Hopefully, the detective had accepted his explanation. After all, it was plausible, wasn't it?

This was the way he had always lived; making excuses, telling white lies. He knew it was necessary, but, once again, he

found himself thinking that life in Jilin had been simpler.

“Lois, you got a minute?” Clark asked, opening the door and sticking his head around the edge.

For a second or two, it seemed Lois hadn’t heard him, then she pushed her glasses up to the top of her head and regarded Clark with just a smidgen of impatience.

“Come in.” She beckoned to him with the tiniest, welcoming smile. “I can only spare a moment, though. I’m not free for lunch,” she added, giving the Elvis clock on the wall a threatening glance, as if daring time to move on too quickly. “Do you know I have more trouble trying to get the online layout to fit than I do with the ‘real’ paper?”

A sympathetic grin flashed across Clark’s face. “I guess that makes sense.” The door behind him closed with a forceful click and he quickly seated himself in the chair opposite her desk. “I wouldn’t interrupt, but this is important,” he explained, lifting his little package in the air.

“Your glasses?”

“Well, those too, but they’re not important, though Jed did remark that the lens was plain glass.”

“He did?” Lois’ gaze narrowed with interest, and Clark could almost see her thought process mirrored in her eyes.

“Yeah, but he accepted my explanation that I have one good eye,” Clark said dismissively. “Lois, forget about my glasses ... this is the recording from the bomber.”

That got Lois’ full attention. She leaned forward, her arms resting on her desk and stared at the item in question. “Good! Jed remembered we’d asked for a copy. Remind me to send a donation to The Policemen’s Benevolent fund this Christmas.”

Clark’s grin grew wider. “Not just a copy. The real thing. But that’s just between you and me.” He stared pointedly into Lois’ eyes. “Jed could get himself in big trouble if his bosses discovered he was handing out vital evidence to the media.”

“Why? The bomber sent it to the media not the police department!” Lois huffed, before shrugging apologetically. “But you don’t have to remind me. I can protect my sources.”

“Yeah,” Clark nodded, his eyes glazing over slightly. “I remember that almost got you killed a couple of times.

“Don’t go there!” Lois shot back, always ready to defend her work ethic, but still, her lips twitched with amusement. She had missed their sparring; no one else could match her quite like Clark. “The only reason you didn’t get almost killed was because you were invulnerable.”

“Yeah. Only sometimes ... and not anymore.”

Suddenly, there was another one of those pertinent silences in the room, then Lois spoke softly, meeting his eyes. “I love you, Clark Kent.”

“And I love you, Lois Lane,” Clark whispered.

The moment stretched on, until Lois took a deep breath and brought the conversation back to the here and now. “So, what have we got here?”

“I didn’t want to listen to the tape out in the newsroom, and I spoke to Matt.” Clark tapped his temple, informing Lois he hadn’t used the phone. “Told him to look over here during his lunch hour. He’ll be here soon.”

“We have to wait for Matt?” Lois asked, her brows drawing together in dismay. She’d never really cultivated patience in her working life.

Clark opened the little package and stared inside.

Immediately his senses were assailed by a faint, but fairly distinct, smell. He breathed deeply.

Seconds ticked by. Yes, there was definitely something there.

Lois stood, unable to contain herself. “Clark! What?”

Interrupted from his deliberations, Clark looked up at his irritated wife. “Sorry, honey. It’s just this smell.”

He held the open bag toward her and Lois came around the

desk, sticking her nose gingerly over Clark’s offering, expecting to be overwhelmed.

“What smell?” she demanded.

Clark’s eyebrows rose. “You can’t smell that?”

“Obviously not. I’m not the one with super powers!” She folded her arms over her chest, but she did lower her voice.

“I didn’t think I was either,” Clark said, sliding back into wallowing mode.

“Clark, would you stop doing this. We know that’s not true ... not completely. Now tell me. What smell?”

Once more Clark inhaled. He wanted to get it right. “Grease! Or cooking oil ... old cooking oil. It’s not pleasant.”

Wrinkling her nose, Lois was actually thankful for not having super smell. “So, someone at the TV Network was eating a burger when he opened the mail, or even the forensic team?” Lois mused. “Though you’d think they’d know better.”

“There’s a report in here too.” Clark removed the sheet of paper and scanned it quickly. “It lists what the technical staff have been able to hear from the tape, which is pretty much what Jed told us, but nothing about what they smelled.”

“Maybe they didn’t smell anything.”

Clark crossed to the phone. “We can always check with Jed.”

“Don’t, Clark.” Her hand reached out for his arm. “Maybe we should wait till Matt comes.”

A hurt look appeared in Clark’s eyes and his bearing slumped a little as he moved away from her hold. “You don’t trust me?”

Lois bit at her bottom lip, realizing she’d undermined his confidence again. “That’s not it at all. I just think we should listen to the tape and get all our ducks in a row before we approach Peterson.”

“Makes sense, I guess,” Clark conceded, raising his hand in a conciliatory manner.

“Can I take a look at the report ... please?” Lois decided that she should be just as magnanimous.

Clark relinquished the paper and waited as Lois read, trying to regain his composure. He really didn’t mean to bristle at Lois’ every slight disparagement. For heaven’s sake, they’d had this out repeatedly and they’d agreed to be more careful when it came to each other’s sensitivities. He hated walking on egg shells with his wife and he knew that Lois felt the same. Besides, neither of them was very good at it.

“You know, this is a pretty comprehensive list. A male adult voice, disguised by a muffler, but no discernible accent, except perhaps East Coast America. Well, that narrows it down somewhat,” she said with a deal of sarcasm. “Look, they’ve even included a computer trace of the voice. Though correct me if I’m wrong, they have to catch this criminal before they can match that.”

“Exactly!”

Clark leaned his head a little to one side and his eyebrows rose, waiting for her to continue. It was a look which melted her heart, and not one which was really appropriate in the office. With an effort she returned her focus to her reading.

“A distant sound of intermittent traffic.” She raised her head. “So the guy lives in the suburbs?”

“Or maybe he recorded it at night, when there aren’t so many cars on the streets,” Clark suggested.

“You could be right. Villains have a habit of operating at night.” She pointed her free hand toward him, then her eyes went back to the papers. “A cat meowing. Oh, they even have a computer print out of that too ... and, listen to this. It seems there are two cats. Our bomber hates people but loves his pets.”

“It’s possible.” Clark folded his arms and stared at no where in particular, thinking. “That villain in one of the Bond movies was a psychotic, yet he loved that white Persian.”

Lois rolled her eyes. Clark had a habit of comparing their investigations to ancient films. Totally inconsequential, but she

loved it.

“You remember those movies?”

Clark shrugged, though more lightheartedly, since it seemed their easy rapport had returned. “Can I help what surfaces in my head?”

She smiled, remembering all the other more personal things which had surfaced from his past. “I’m not complaining,” she answered with a sexy smile, her body undulating toward him instinctively.

“Lo-is,” Clark purred, but with a large measure of regret. “Now is not the time. The list!” He pointed at the paper, forgotten in her hand.

“Right. The list.” She composed herself. “That’s all. It seems in real life ‘CSI’ isn’t quite so efficient as on TV. And it certainly doesn’t mention anything about a smell.”

“What smell?” The door opened and their son sauntered through. “I got your message, Dad, and came as quickly as I could. You know, I was in the middle of a physics test ...”

“Sorry, Matt, but this is kind of urgent. We got the tape we spoke to you about from Sergeant Peterson,” Clark explained, shaking the little cassette carefully onto his open palm.

“The one of the bomber?” Matt forgot about his science test.

“Yeah.” Clark studied the cassette. “Lois, have you still got that little tape recorder? This guy is clearly not into state of the art audio recording.”

“Sure. Somewhere, I think.” Lois went back to her side of the desk and started rummaging through the drawers. “It should still be here.”

“You kept that old thing?” Matt asked, amazed. “It’s a museum piece!”

“Yes. Why not?” Lois replied, though her cheeks flushed a little. “It has sentimental value. You have no idea how many thousands of scoops that museum piece earned your father and me.”

Matt caught the look that passed between his parents, and sighed loudly. “Look, it’s my lunch break. I hope you two aren’t going to wander down memory lane again. Not that I don’t like hearing some of those stories, but I’m on the clock here.”

“No, no!”

“Of course not!”

His parents answered in unison.

“We’re not that boring, are we?” Clark added, obviously vexed. “It’s just some of these memories are new to me.”

“No, Dad,” Matt jumped in. These days he was very careful of his father’s state of mind, but in his opinion, his dad was growing stronger, both mentally and physically. Sometimes he wished his mom was more aware of that. “It’s good hearing about the old days from your point of view. It’s usually different from Mom’s, though.”

Lois rose from behind her desk, her gaze eagle-eyed. “Are you suggesting my memories are slanted in my favor?”

Matt guffawed. “Hell no. You think I’d be that dumb? I might be invulnerable these days, but you still scare me silly, Mom.”

Looking a little mollified, Lois returned to her search, missing the empathetic glance that passed between father and son. “Just as long as you both remember who is top banana in this family. Oh, and watch your language, Matt.” She leveled another fleeting stare at her son, before disappearing behind the desk again. Seconds passed, then Lois called triumphantly. “Got it! And, I’m not wholly sentimental, Matt. I just don’t throw out anything which might happen to become relevant in future investigations.”

“Yes, Mom.” Matt strained to hide a grin, then became totally serious as he prepared to listen to a madman. “So this crazy knows how to build bombs, but uses a really old tape recorder. Isn’t that a contradiction?”

“Not really,” Clark answered. “You’re probably too young to

remember, but back in the 1990s and early this century terrorists were blowing themselves up in trouble spots all over the globe. Not that our guy is a suicide bomber. He’s working from an agenda.”

Again, Lois’ eyes narrowed speculatively. “You think so, Clark? You don’t think he’s choosing random targets?”

Slowly, Clark shook his head. “Definitely not. But don’t ask me to prove it, because I can’t, so far.”

“Yet there doesn’t seem to be any obvious link between his victims,” Matt said, becoming totally embroiled in the argument.

“Just because it isn’t obvious to us, doesn’t mean a link doesn’t exist.” Clark was calm now ... confident. He had no idea why he was so sure. He just was.

“OK. I can live with that,” Lois said with more conviction. She’d once had total trust in his judgment, and her faith was returning. “So lets see if we can find some proof.”

She passed the recorder to Clark and watched as he used his handkerchief to load the tape, his movements deft. The three Kents closed in on the machine and listened carefully. Once, twice ... and a third time at Matt’s request. Then he read the police report, comparing in his mind what he had heard.

“I get everything they’ve noted, but those cats aren’t together ... and there’s a rustling noise. Maybe like the guy was looking for something. Play it again, Dad.”

Clark complied and again there was silence in the office, except for the disembodied sounds emanating from the recorder.

“Yeah, definitely a rustling,” Matt mused. “Like among old paper ...”

“Or old trash.” Clark’s senses were sharpening. “Feral cats that are rummaging among trash ...”

“I think you could be right, Dad,” Matt complied, looking at his father with respect. He might hear things just as well, but his father could put the sounds into context.

“Scuffling,” Clark continued. “Smaller feet ...”

“Rats!” Lois shuddered to the very tips of her toes. “Oh why does it have to be rats? I hate rats.”

Matt grinned at his mother. The whole family knew that rats were Lois’ Achilles Heel.

“And, Dad, I agree. There’s a nasty smell coming off that tape. I’d guess something greasy.”

Now Lois was looking at her husband with approbation. She’d never doubted him for a second ... well, perhaps, a nanosecond.

“So, what are we talking about. Distant traffic, cooking oil, grease ... trash, cats ... and rats.” She ticked each item off on her fingers.

“A restaurant,” Clark considered. “Probably a dirty one, not in the best part of town. One that’s open late at night, because of the lack of traffic noise.”

“Oh, boy,” Matt said, though not with total disapproval.

Clearly, he liked the idea of joining his dad’s investigation. “I get the feeling we’re going flying tonight.”

“Yes. But it won’t be easy. There are probably thousands of these places all over Metropolis.” Clark set his jaw. “We don’t have any definitive sound which could narrow our search down.”

“Yeah, I know. No bad guy with a pacemaker. No foghorns across the bay. How inconsiderate can a villain be?” Lois sat herself down behind her desk with a wistful grin. “But, for now, I still have this Web site to update, and don’t you two have work to do?”

“You’re right,” Clark said, turning to leave. “I better call Jed and let him know what we found.”

“Clark!” Lois’ tone stopped him dead.

“Lois, I told him I’d cooperate,” Clark groaned, that old, disapproving look spreading across his face, which he always got when Lois suggested something even the slightest bit unethical.

“And I’m not objecting. It’s just ... can’t it wait a bit? It’s

only been an hour since Peterson dropped the tape off. Doesn't it seem a bit suspicious that you could have gotten hold of Jor-El quite so quickly?"

"Probably." Clark stuck his hands in his pockets and stared at the ceiling.

"Right! I'm out of here." Matt glanced from his father to his mother, suspecting another disagreement might be brewing. "My class starts in a half-hour and I want to grab some lunch ... and you know how you hate me to inhale my food! See you later. And, Dad, we'll go flying tonight."

With that Matt scuttled out, leaving his parents to thrash out their differing points of view.

"Clark, don't you think you should wait until after tonight before contacting Jed? Who knows. Maybe you'll get lucky and have something more concrete to tell him."

"Lois, if I told him this afternoon, he could put his men on checking out cafes."

Lois sat back in her chair and viewed Clark skeptically. "Do you seriously think the MPD is going to act on such a flimsy piece of evidence? I'm sorry, honey." Her voice and her gaze both softened. "But I doubt that's going to happen. Even if Jed approved, he's only a sergeant, and his boss is certainly not going to back him. He didn't even agree to you having the original tape, so how would Jed explain a smell?"

Clark looked totally dejected, yet he couldn't disagree with Lois' argument. "As usual, you're right. I'm just anxious about catching this bomber. I could be wrong, and, believe me, I hope I am, but I have a very bad feeling."

Lois watched him leave her office, her heart heavy. She'd been in his position a number of occasions before, when her instincts were screaming that something horrible was about to happen, but the proof remained out of reach. In the past, they'd relied on each other's strengths, and when all else failed, there was always Superman as backup. Now the hero was just a shadow of his former self, or so Clark believed, and she didn't know how to convince him that he was just as capable as ever.

If only he could solve this case. It would do wonders for The Planet's circulation figures, but more importantly, it would give Clark back his belief in himself. There was a chance that tonight he and Matt might find some sort of clue ... but that was a stretch, and, unfortunately, Clark was well aware of that fact.

The days shortened and sped by, hurrying toward the Christmas holidays, while Clark and Jor-El continued their search, but without success. They'd checked a lot of all-night cafes in the city and even some further afield. After all, the tape had been mailed in New York City. Yet, for all their hard work, they'd found no sign of any bomb-making equipment, or even ancient tape recorders ... and though they'd spotted many feral cats, they'd discovered these animals like to roam around. Besides, not being experts on felines, they couldn't quite distinguish the different meows.

Another unwanted finding of their investigation was that most dirty little snack bars smelled pretty much alike, and Matt swore he wouldn't eat another burger for the rest of his life. They were getting nowhere fast.

At work and at home, Clark was wading through research on the owners, the staff and even some of the customers of these establishments, though the latter had proved impossible as most were transient. Many owners also used casual staff, workers who didn't show up on any records, so it wasn't entirely surprising that his research had yielded nothing to pin down any culprit. A few had criminal records, but mostly for minor offenses — certainly nothing to suggest they'd embarked on a second career as a terrorist.

With each passing day, Clark became more frustrated with his lack of progress. Even Matt had grown more reluctant to

accompany his father on his nighttime searches, and he really couldn't expect his son to give up all his free time for what was fast becoming an obsession. If only he could fly himself ... but that was a hopeless dream.

On the nights he was alone, Clark visited some of these places on foot, but it was like looking for a needle in a haystack ... and he couldn't even be sure what the needle looked like. Yet, with a mounting sense of dread, he couldn't ignore his fear that time was running out.

Meanwhile, completely unaware that someone was on his trail, Thomas was still having problems deciding how best to carry out his next mission. Choosing to bomb Metropolis General Hospital was proving far easier than the actual deed.

The letter bombs, his preferred modus operandi, had hurt an assistant secretary and a bank teller — so far. Though he wasn't particularly fussy about which member of staff was injured, he felt the police and the media might take him more seriously if he took out someone of importance. Chiefs of staff were unlikely to open their own mail, nor were the chief administrators. He had to think of another way, one which meant he had somehow to infiltrate the hospital and plant a bomb which wouldn't be found before it had a chance to go off. And, considering what was coming up, that would be no mean feat.

The late, great Superman was about to spoil his plot; he and that son of his. While Thomas had no real quarrel with Superman or Jor-El, he was angered by the fact that a new Cancer Treatment Unit was being opened in just over a week, courtesy of The Superman Foundation; a center where anyone, regardless of financial status, would be treated and hopefully cured.

Once again, Mary had missed out. The Man of Steel had been too busy getting himself killed when Mary had first been diagnosed. This new wing had been a co-operation of the Superman Foundation, the U.S. government and Metropolis City Council; a tribute to the hero, and planning for it had begun shortly after the first anniversary of his death. Many charitable projects had been initiated around the world, but Metropolis had been more generous than elsewhere, since Superman claimed the city as his home.

Thomas was certain there would be crowds of people at the opening ceremony, especially as Jor-El was going to perform the ribbon-cutting in front of the Chief of Staff and his team. The Mayor was giving a speech, and local entrepreneurs and the district congressman were also to be present. Though Thomas doubted he'd get close enough to the dignitaries, he did believe he could do a good deal of damage.

The superhero might manage to rescue some of the victims, but hopefully he wouldn't be able to stop the explosion, if Thomas' idea worked well. He didn't have much time to prepare, but he did have a plan.

The air was sharp and cold, an icy chill which pierced even the thickest of winter attire. Heavy rime coated the square in front of Metropolis General Hospital, edging the potted shrubbery with white and making the ground underfoot, which had been missed by the scattered salt, dangerously slippery. The glass front of the new wing twinkled with jagged patterns of frost, despite the warm interior of the hospital.

The small man, standing on the edge of the square, watched his breath cloud hazily upward as he sighed hugely in satisfaction. Despite the weather, a large crowd had postponed Christmas shopping in the downtown malls on this Saturday morning to attend the celebrations, hoping to see the mayor and local officials, but more eagerly anticipating the arrival of their superhero.

He'd watched as the policemen, many with their bomb-sniffing dogs, swept the square and surrounding buildings one

final time, the mass of people making it difficult to carry out further checks. They did, however, continue to stand sentinel at various points around the area, the dogs still snuffling at passersby who were jostling for positions nearer the stage. Thomas would have liked to target the stage, but that had proved impossible. Guards had lined the edge of the dais since it had been searched thoroughly earlier in the morning.

Another sigh, more anxious than the last, broke from Thomas' mouth. Would any of these policemen and their dogs foil his plot? If they did, it would probably be their last action on Earth. His bomb was set and he needed only to press a button on his cell phone for it to explode instantly, and surely he could slink away in the panicked confusion which followed, his phone dropped into the drain close by his feet. What frustrated him most was the thought that the bomb wouldn't get sufficiently close to the crowd.

It only took one diligent cop to check that the mobile concession stand by the edge of the crowd, selling soup and hot drinks, actually had a license. It shouldn't matter to Thomas that only a cop, the seller and a few members of the public should be killed or injured, but it did. He was tired of playing softball, of being the bomber who never quite succeeded. He wanted others to suffer as he had done at the loss of a loved one.

Fortunately, his cause was aided by the times. Ten years ago, he doubted explosives would have gotten anywhere near this assembly. But Superman had made the world a safer place, and his sad — though it depended on your point of view — demise had prompted governments around the world to face up to the problem of ethnic and religious divides, and to build bridges between the different cultures. The world wasn't yet a Utopia, but it was less violent. Jor-El's subsequent appearance had cemented the building of these bridges; peace treaties had been signed and many countries had slowly felt able to downsize their anti-terrorist forces.

Thomas' letter-bomb campaign had been investigated only by the MPD simply because the authorities no longer expected imminent terrorist attacks. It had been quite a few years since a disaffected group had taken such extreme action and armed forces all over the world had been lured into a sense of security. Thomas was about to prove that such optimism was misplaced, at least, here in Metropolis. If only everything went according to plan.

The bomb had been easy enough to make, since many of the ingredients were household items and others easily obtained. Of course, he'd had to increase the measurements, as this was his biggest explosive to date, but the principles were the same. Only he'd had to shop around for those ingredients, not wanting to alert the authorities by buying in bulk in one place, so it had taken more time to assemble all that he needed. Yet his biggest problem had been how to place the bomb in the position which would cause the optimal carnage.

The obvious way would be to stick the explosives container into a backpack, strap it on his back and wire the detonator to himself. The trouble was, he wasn't a suicide bomber. Not yet, anyway. Not until he had completed his mission.

He could've hired a patsy to carry the backpack, yet he couldn't think of a plausible reason to give said employee which wouldn't alert suspicion. The people he came in contact with weren't exactly reliable, either. What if the person looked inside the bag? The jig would be up. They could go to the cops, or, at least, refuse to die for his cause. They might even try blackmail and Thomas didn't have the wherewithal to pay. He'd have to kill the blackmailer, but he doubted he had the stomach or the strength for face-to-face murder.

A sly grin broke across his face, as he congratulated himself on his stroke of genius. His patsy hadn't the slightest idea what was about to happen, and Thomas hadn't had to pay him much

either, just promised him a percentage of the takings. The guy was even more of a loser than Thomas. A down and out who came into the cafe where Thomas worked, looking for something hot to eat whenever he'd scraped together a few dollars. Thomas had needed to clean him up for the job almost as much as the apparatus.

He'd found the old mobile coffee stand lying, dusty and forgotten, under a pile of cardboard boxes and trash in the back room of the cafe. It had taken him over a week, working like a demon every night, to get the thing presentable for use, while fretting about discovery by his boss. But Kinski never ventured past the kitchen into the dingy, once-upon-a-time, stock room. The amount of rubbish piled high bore testament to that. Thomas doubted his boss even remembered what was actually in the room, and, since the lazy pig hadn't worked a night shift in years, he'd remained totally unaware of Thomas' undertaking.

Every night at nine, Kinski would hand the running of the joint over to Thomas, and, as long as there was a reasonable amount of money in the till when Kinski's similarly slothful daughter took over in the morning, Thomas worked without interference. One day, Thomas was sure, Kinski's All Night Eatery would be shut down by the Health Department, but for now, his unsupervised status suited him just fine.

Thomas' shoulders tightened and he drew himself up to his full height, pulling his hood over his head against the chill wind. A flurry of activity was taking place in front of the hospital's entrance as the mayor, his entourage, and the hospital executives filed out onto the platform.

It was show time! Taking a large plaid handkerchief from his pocket, Thomas loudly blew his nose and watched in satisfaction as the coffee stand was wheeled nearer the audience, just as planned. He held his breath for a moment, waiting to see if his partner-in-crime would be apprehended by the police, but no officials approached the little stand, though a few members of the public quickly lined up to buy a hot drink on this freezing cold day. Good! As far as Thomas was concerned the higher the body count the better.

Now all it needed was Jor-El to appear, and true to form, always in the nick of time, the black-clad hero alighted on the stage to rapturous applause and cheers. Thomas clasped the phone in his gloved hand and pressed the key.

The cell phone, hidden in the bottom of the concession stand and wired to the evil contents of Thomas' chicken-soup container, detonated. In a blinding flash and a thunderclap that reverberated across the city, the little coffee stand, its vendor and a large number of Metropolitans disappeared from this plane of existence forever.

Jor-El had barely touched down when he was off again, flying into the searing heart of the fireball, his ears hurting with a cacophony of sounds, his body bombarded by red-hot metal shards, disintegrating concrete and something else ... something soft and sickening which his young mind refused to process. He had work to do.

The world receded as he concentrated all his senses on finding the tiniest trace of life. Yet surely no one could live through this blast ... this heat ... this nauseating cloud of gas and dirt. Here, at ground zero, there was utter silence.

Then, slowly, the moans rose up to him, the frightened, pain-filled groans of people with no strength to cry aloud. And further off in his consciousness, the screams of a terrified stampeding crowd.

Perhaps he should concentrate on helping the authorities gain some sort of order outside this cloying haze. There would be injured people out there too. People who would benefit from his help. Yet, Jor-El hadn't donned his father's mantle just to do the easy rescues.

If only Dad were here now. He would know what to do. But Mom had decided to send Uncle Jimmy instead, not wanting to encourage an association with Clark Kent and the new superhero in this era.

A single faint cry reached his ears ... then was repeated. Someone was calling for help. Matt focused his vision on the source of the sound, and he retched. Oh God, was every survivor in this condition? He'd never seen so much blood. So much ...

<Matt?> Another voice erupted in his head. An assured voice, but with a hint of empathy. <Son, I know it's bad, but these people need you. You're the only one who can help them stay alive.>

<Dad? You're here?>

<Not yet. But I am on my way ... probably your mother too, though right now she's trying to contact Jimmy.>

Matt latched on to the latter information. <I think I saw him with the press core at the other side of the stage, but I'm not sure. I'm not sure of anything, Dad. How can I help these people ... I'm just a kid.> Yet, despite his insecurities, Matt was drifting toward the sound of the voice.

<No, Matt.> His father sounded stern, but not unfeeling. <Your mother tried to protect you from this. But when you decided to don the cape, you made a choice to grow up. You made that choice, Matt, despite Mom's advice. You won't give up now.>

A wretched, almost hysterical laugh burst from Matt's tight lips. <How can you be so sure? I'm not you, Dad.>

<No, but you are Lois Lane's son, and she never gives up on anything. She doesn't know how, and you have her determination ... even when you were a little boy. You can do this, Matt, and I'll be with you every step of the way. Remember Jilin. People are alive today who wouldn't be if it weren't for your intervention.>

<This isn't Jilin, Dad. This is hell!>

The telepathic link weighed heavy with silence. Clark wasn't quite certain what to say. Would he have been able to cope with such a nightmare scenario when he was a kid? It's easy to be a hero when you don't have to confront the degradation and cruelty that man visits upon man. Yet, he recognized a vibration coming from Matt. His son was weeping, but there was steel, too, beneath the humanity.

<Dad, I've reached a survivor. I think it's a woman, but it's hard. There's so much blood.>

<Matt, use your X-ray vision. See how badly she's injured before you try to get her out.>

But Matt was already at work, scanning the survivor's body. <It's amazing. She's got a bad gash on her head, and her legs are trapped beneath some rubble, but she doesn't seem to have any internal injuries. I think I can rescue her.> Excitement was bubbling through the link.

<Matt, wait. Check again. She may have injuries to her legs which would be made worse if you removed the debris.>

Clark had reached the street and was searching for a taxi, but with little success. It seemed they'd been swept away by a giant tidal wave. He began to stride down the street leading to the hospital, fighting the crowds who were either going in his direction to rubber-neck, or hurrying in the other direction to safety. Surely no one could be unaware of the mountainous noise which had emanated from Metropolis General Hospital.

<How did you know?> Matt asked, awed by his father's perception. <She has a metal strut from the concrete stuck in the under part of her thigh.> There was another second or two of silence as Matt searched around him. <Maybe there's someone else here I could get out easier.>

<No, you can help this woman, Matt. Use your heat vision to cut the metal, but don't remove it ... you could start a bleed. Leave that to the medical staff.>

Clark was unaware he was running now, almost a blur as he threaded through the ebb and flow of people. Thankfully, most of the horde was too numb to notice.

<Matt, how are you doing?> he asked, worried by his son's lack of response.

<Give me a second.> Matt replied, clearly concentrating on the job at hand. He'd had to reposition himself to get at the piece of metal, but still the woman clung to his hand, her fingers like claws. <I've done it.> Both Matt and Clark experienced a wave of relief. <It wasn't too difficult. I just have to remove this stuff, then I can get her out.>

Recognizing Matt was no longer panicking, Clark decided to focus all his energy on reaching the scene. <Matt, I think you've got things under control for now, so I'll close the link. But, you call me if you need me.>

<Dad?> It was the terrified call of a boy again.

<No, Matt. You're doing good. Really good. Trust your instincts. I'll be with you as soon as possible.>

Jor-El felt the link physically close, but he no longer felt alone.

"Am I going to die?" The hoarse, whispered question came from the woman beneath him.

Matt heard no urgency in her voice. It was almost as if she'd resigned herself.

"No. We're getting out." He'd been frantically shifting the rubble from her body and with one last check of his X-ray vision to make sure he hadn't missed anything else, he lifted her gently into his arms. "Are you ready?"

The woman tried to nod, not trusting her voice, but she had no strength. She let her head fall onto Jor-El's shoulder, and felt herself drifting, though the pain in her leg informed her she wasn't unconscious.

He fought his way out of the roiling smoke. There were strangely shaped figures there. His eyes stung, though whether from smoke or tears, he couldn't tell. The shapes coalesced into huddled people ... frightened, clinging together for support. But people meant aid.

"Can I get some help over here? This woman needs medical attention." Jor-El called out, sounding like a lost soul. Pretending to act like a superhero didn't seem important to him right at this moment.

Then there were people around him. Policemen and medics who'd spilled from the undamaged parts of the hospital. The people with the white coats tried to relieve him of his burden, but, perversely, he was loath to give the woman up. He'd saved her ... and yet, she'd saved him, too. She and Dad.

"Please, Jor-El. Let go."

Matt turned toward the sound and almost cried out at the familiar face. Uncle Jimmy!

"You've done your part. Let the doctors do theirs."

There was sympathy in Jimmy's eyes. Matt looked around him, seeing stunned awe on everyone's faces.

A uniformed cop spoke up. "I'm amazed you found anyone alive in that inferno." The policeman was older and on his creased face he wore a lifetime of hard experiences, but his gaze was kind.

The medical team had placed their patient on a gurney and were wheeling her away, their eyes already assessing her injuries, treating the most obvious ones. But the woman grabbed hold of Jor's hand again. "Thank you." Her voice was almost inaudible, but Jor heard it ... with his head and with his heart.

"No. Thank you," he said as the cluster of triage staff hid her from view. Then he faced the group surrounding him. "There are others still alive. I heard them. I have no idea how many or how badly hurt they are." Jor-El discovered his voice and his stature were growing in confidence. He could do this. "I need to go back."

“Yeah, but not alone.” This from the older policeman.

Another doctor spoke up. “You’ll need some medical help.”

Jor-El was tempted to refuse the help. “It could still be dangerous. The rubble is unstable, and there could be another bomb,” he explained to the volunteers who were lining up to join him. “I’m not sure I could keep you safe.”

The cop and the doctor grinned starkly, but the cop chose to be the spokesperson. “We’re not asking you to, but we don’t intend to let you do this on your own. Lead on.” The policeman pointed behind Jor. “Your eyesight is a whole lot better than ours. We’ll do what you tell us and we won’t get in the way.”

Giving in gratefully, Jor-El turned, and the little group entered the gloomy miasma that hung above the blast-center. The precarious surface grumbled and shifted beneath their feet, as if Mother Nature was displaying her disapproval on the violence humans had visited on her domain.

The air thickened, darkened. Jor chose to float above the surface, while the others tread carefully. Putting a hand to his lips, Jor signaled for silence, and once again his ears were assaulted by weak cries for succour. He pointed in the direction of the call and his helpers followed him closely. Their eyes watered and their lungs were choked by the smoke, but they did not falter. Soon the hero brought them to a man and a child, half-buried in the broken ground. It was the child who was crying. The father would never utter a sound in this life again.

With no words, but with stoic determination, the rescuers set about sustaining whatever life they could find in this nightmarish place.

Clark reached the square at a run ... and froze. It had been so long since he had confronted a scene of such immense criminal destruction, and neither his experience at the bank, nor the picture Matt had painted prepared him for the horror.

Through the drifting cloud of dust, the stage clung like a drunken shed to the front of the hospital, while many of the windows were gaping holes, some strung with giant, shark-like teeth. Building regulations might have been tightened over the years, but no glass could withstand such an explosion.

The ground itself was fractured ... torn, littered with large chunks of broken concrete, while the well-tended shrubbery of earlier days was razed and scattered; dirty, burnt shadows of their former glory.

Terrified onlookers escaped by any route possible, while others wandered aimlessly in shock, walking wounded scarcely comprehending what had befallen them.

A few more hardy souls were joining the medical teams in trying to help the wounded; too many innocent victims who had never dreamed of being assaulted on this sunny, auspicious occasion.

An eerie silence had fallen over the stricken arena, punctuated, now and then, by the agonizing scream from a survivor, or the soft barking of the police dogs as they went about their work, searching for the dead and injured. Further away, the sirens of the fire engines echoed through the canyons of downtown Metropolis, increasing in volume as they converged on the site.

Chaos reigned.

All around him, policemen, who had not themselves been injured, were desperately trying to bring order to the mayhem, and recognizing one particular officer who’d been at the bank, Clark went to offer his assistance. He couldn’t offer super help, but today, he was pretty sure he was strong enough to make a difference to his stricken city.

The mystery bomber had struck again. There was no doubt in Clark’s mind ... and this time, the brooding psychopath had unleashed all his fury. Clark clenched his jaw and his brows drew down, locking away his anger and revulsion. There would be

time for those emotions later.

Standing amid the rubble in a business suit, he couldn’t see it for himself, but never before had he looked more like Superman.

The morning sun crept reluctantly across Metropolis’s skyline, shrouded in dark clouds which held the promise of rain, communal tears suspended in a bank of freezing fog.

Inch by inch, an eerie half-light bathed the wrecked square in front of the hospital, illuminating, like wraiths, the members of the MPD detectives who’d taken over the tedious task of piecing together every tiny clue.

The injured had long since been removed for treatment to this or other hospitals, given the high numbers of casualties, and the fact that Metropolis General’s staff was somewhat demoralized.

The dead had been taken to the city morgue, where the painstaking duty of identification would begin. In the aftermath of such a tragedy, many government workers were just beginning their gruesome tasks, but for one young hero, there was some measure of relief. He’d been told there was no more he could do but go home to rest ... for now.

Yet, at home, Matt sat in a large armchair, his head in his hands, his shoulders rigid — not exactly an image of relaxation. His eyes were closed tightly, as if shutting out images he didn’t want to revisit.

“Matt, don’t,” Lois said softly, sitting on the arm of his chair, letting her hand run smoothly up and down his back, as she had consoled him all the days of his life. “It wasn’t your fault. You couldn’t know what was going to happen, and you did the best you could. Uncle Jimmy said your speed in getting people from beneath the rubble saved their lives.”

At first, he didn’t reply, and Lois wasn’t sure if he had even heard her. But then, a quiet, but fierce accusation — thrown solely at himself.

“Two, Mom. I saved two!”

“From the blast zone, yes, but I doubt there was much you could have done for those close to the bomb. And you did save others who were caught outside the area.” She pulled him into a hug, resting her chin on the top of his head. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it as often as you need ... you do what you can. No one expects you to be God.”

“But I should have known.” His voice was as bleak as a winter’s sky, yet he didn’t move away. “Dad knew.”

“No, your dad suspected there would be another incident, but he didn’t know where or when. He isn’t a psychic either ... and he certainly didn’t know the bomber was capable of such carnage.”

Actually, Lois suspected her last statement might not be true. Certainly, it would explain Clark’s preoccupation with catching this villain.

“Dad did know. And he was right all along.” Matt’s voice was muffled by her embrace, but there was no mistaking his despair. “He knew the guy had something to do with cooking. All the witnesses said a fast-food stand blew up. So, he was right, and if I’d only listened and helped him search more ...”

“No, Matt,” Clark interrupted, grimly, as the outside door closed with a definite click behind him. “We were looking at cafes, not street vendors. So I didn’t get it exactly right.”

Lois turned and saw both Clark and Jimmy come into the room. Both were dirty and disheveled, but abject misery seemed to cover Clark like a blanket. She rose from her seat, but didn’t let her hand fall from Matt’s shoulder.

“Clark, you were as close as anyone could be, and who’s to say that that stand wasn’t connected with a cafe; they’re both in the catering business. Please don’t castigate yourself ... either of you.” She tightened her hand on Matt’s shoulder as she glanced between her husband and son. “Those backdoor cafes are all over Metropolis. You just didn’t have time to check each one.”

“Yeah, and it’s probably immaterial now, CK,” James added, sounding demoralized and exhausted as he crossed the room and let himself fall onto the couch. “The guy just blew himself up.”

“We don’t know that.”

James narrowed his eyes as he looked up at Clark. “The police are staying very closed-lipped about this explosion, but I did get something from Jed. According to what he’s hearing, his bosses aren’t even looking at a link between the bombings. Completely different methods of delivery ...”

“That’s crazy,” Lois declared, watching Clark carefully as he digested that piece of news.

James shrugged, wiping a dirty sleeve across his face. “Most profilers believe that a criminal doesn’t usually change his modus operandi.”

“But it’s not unheard of,” Lois said disdainfully. She kept her gaze on Clark, but his expression was closed and she couldn’t read it. “So, after years free from terrorist activity, the police department believes that two completely unlinked crazy people decide to target Metropolis at the same time?”

Again James shrugged. “They’re willing to consider a copycat.”

“But they aren’t copycats!” Lois’ lips tightened in exasperation.

“No, not quite. But it’s possible the first guy set the other one off.” James squirmed a little under Lois’ scornful stare. He sat forward, giving Clark a sideways glance, as if he expected his partner to jump into the conversation, but the veteran reporter remained totally silent. “Lois, I’m only relaying what I heard. To tell the truth, I’m with Clark here. It seems too much of a coincidence that there are two bombers ... and the police aren’t ruling that possibility out.”

“Though their investigation seems to be leaning toward this latest explosion being a suicide bombing?” Clark eventually spoke up, though his voice gave nothing of his thoughts away.

“I guess you spoke to Jed too?” James asked.

“Yeah, briefly, but I also overheard some other conversations.” Clark touched his ear.

“Oh, I forgot some of your senses are coming back. Way to go, CK.” James gave a quick smile, his teeth gleaming whiter in his blackened face. “That’s a handy skill for a reporter to have.”

Clark didn’t return Jimmy’s smile, and Lois’ heart sank, but she said nothing, as her husband continued to speak.

“The investigations are still going on, of course. But you’re right, Jimmy, they’re definitely focusing on the fact that the vendor blew himself up along with everyone else.”

“You don’t think that?” Lois asked.

“Not really. It is possible it was detonated remotely.” Clark’s brow crinkled in thought. “A cell phone, perhaps?”

With a spurt of energy, Matt stood up. “Someone was using a cell phone when I landed, but then there was the explosion, and I forgot all about it.”

“That’s not surprising, Matt,” Lois said, crossing her arms before her as her son moved out of range. “Your first priority was to help those who were hurt.”

“But what if I could have contained the explosion?” Matt’s expression was stark. “I should have been able to stop it, somehow.”

“Son, don’t torture yourself with ‘what ifs’. You couldn’t have foreseen what was going to happen.” Clark flexed his back stiffly. “Even Superman could only react to disasters. Sometimes he got lucky and managed to preempt them, but he had to know about them first. And that wasn’t always the case.” An edge of emotion had crept into his voice as he tried to comfort his son.

“Exactly, and I’m sure there were lots of people using cell phones among that crowd,” Jimmy added with conviction. “The one you heard could just have been someone about to show their friends a video of Jor-El’s arrival.”

“It’s impossible to tell right now. But it’s something to investigate ... later.” Clark turned to the stairs. “We’ve been on the go for hours now and I think we could all do with some sleep. The police are holding a press conference later today, and I’d like to rest up before I have to cover that.”

He started up the stairs, and Lois felt her anxiety mount at his hunched shoulders, his heavy tread on the steps. Some of his superpowers might be returning slowly, but she knew he still tired more easily.

“I could go check it out.” Matt wasn’t prepared to give up on one possible lead.

That brought Clark up short. “No, Matt,” he said, looking over his shoulder. “Finding one small phone in that carnage is going to be difficult. Besides, if Jimmy’s right, then the owner has probably taken it home with him.”

A shudder shook Matt’s frame. “If they ever made it home.”

“Matt, a lot of people escaped,” Lois said, with a wealth of understanding. “And a lot of those who didn’t at least made it into the hospital, thanks to you, the emergency services and a lot of very brave members of the public.” She linked her hand through her son’s arm, while her eyes rose to encompass Clark and James. “The injured aren’t going anywhere, so a few hours sleep won’t hamper our investigation.”

“Our?” Clark locked onto Lois’ stare, searching ... hoping.

“I think perhaps I should have paid more attention to your concerns earlier, Clark.”

Nodding his head, Clark’s expression lightened just barely. “I doubt we could have stopped this, though.”

“I agree.” Lois walked her son toward the stairs, almost forcing him to begin the ascent to his bedroom. “But if your suspicions are right, maybe we can stop this from happening again.”

“Thank you.” Clark’s voice was a tired whisper. He stood up a little straighter as he addressed their guest. “Jimmy, you’re welcome to stay in the guest room for the rest of what’s left of tonight.”

“Sounds good to me. I’m so exhausted, I doubt I’d make it home in one piece.”

With those final words, the group filed up the stairs, Clark giving each a quick glance. They were bowed, but not broken. Jimmy might need a little more persuasion to see things his way, and Matt ... well, he was probably biased in his favor. But Lois ... As she met his eyes, she smiled and gave a tiny nod of her head. Clark felt a spark of energy flow into his weary mind and body. Lane and Kent were once more a team, united in their determination to put this monster behind bars, to find justice for those he had killed and maimed.

While the group said goodnight, he felt Lois slip her hand into his and knew he would find peace in her arms, if only for a few short hours. He just hoped Matt could sleep and wouldn’t be haunted by nightmares.

Matt was resolute and strong, but so young to be a hero. He hadn’t had time to find his anchor.

In the meantime, Clark resolved to keep a close watch on his boy.

Chapter Seven: Frustration

Thomas Timmons stared at the large TV above the bar, grinding his teeth in mounting shock and fury while he listened to the police commissioner’s spew. How could the morons at the MPD have gotten it so wrong?

He’d chosen the dimmest booth in a bar near City Hall, where no one could spy on him or his reactions to the press conference. Preferably, he would have been there in person, but wasn’t about to risk openly associating himself with the bombings.

His head jerked nervously around the busy room and he took

a gulp of his beer, spilling some on the plastic tabletop. He blotted it quickly with a napkin, praying his anxiety wouldn't be noticed. Yet, most of the customers were glued to the TV screen, and judging by their outraged expressions, he doubted his behavior was odd.

No need to worry.

Regardless, he was still frustrated. Very frustrated. The police actually believed that drunken idiot, Bob Tanner, could plan and carry out such a complex mission. Mind you, they didn't know it was Bob, and maybe never would. He doubted there was much left of his partner ... and even if there was, there was little to link the man to himself. He was just an occasional punter in the cafe where Thomas worked.

Thomas had always been very cautious in his few short dealings with Bob, making sure there weren't any witnesses to their private talks, and his final link to Bob was gone. As soon as he'd left the square, along with the panicking hordes, he'd dropped the man's cell phone down a drain. No one had noticed; they'd all been too hysterical and determined to escape.

People were blind and stupid. Take Bob! He'd never realized Thomas had stolen his phone the night before the bombing, nor dreamed his phone could kill him. Thomas was sure Bob hadn't been exactly sober. It had given him a sleepless night, worrying if the fool would screw up his plan, but it had gone like clockwork.

Now all he needed was the rain to arrive and wash the incriminating evidence right into Hobbs Bay ...

"Clark Kent, Daily Planet. How can you be sure this was a suicide bombing?" The voice came from the TV.

What?

Thomas' glance swung back to the TV.

Hey, good on you, pal!

He almost shouted the words aloud, but he quickly doused his enthusiasm and paid closer attention to what was going on at the press conference.

The commissioner cleared his throat, buying himself a few precious seconds. "Mr. Kent," the large man said politely, "we haven't yet reached any definitive conclusion, but, from the witnesses whom we've been able to question and from the site of the blast, it's a fair assumption that the concession stand contained the explosives. At this time, we have no reason to suspect the bomber was working in conjunction with anyone else." He paused, glancing at the rest of the crowd, then continued calmly. "But it is far too early in the investigation to be certain. I don't need to tell you that the police will explore every avenue. If the unknown bomber had an accomplice, we will find him or her."

"Do you have a motive?" Clark asked again. "Most suicide bombers like to lay claim to their work."

Now frowning in Kent's direction, the commissioner replied, though his tone was sharp. "No group or faction has been in touch with us or any of the media, to my knowledge, laying claim to this atrocity ... and we haven't received a suicide note from the bomber. But again, it is early. If it's out there, we'll find it."

Turning in the other direction and pointing to another member of the press, the commissioner dismissed Clark, but the veteran reporter was not so easily silenced, and adopting his Superman tone, he continued, undeterred.

"What about a link to the letter bombings? Have you considered this might be the same perpetrator?"

There was a hushed silence as the reporters present waited to see if the commissioner would deign to answer. It was clear by the mounting color in his cheeks that he was becoming irritated.

As Thomas watched, mesmerized, Metropolis's top policeman coughed and sent a dagger-eyed glare at the reporter. The cameras scanned the crowd and found Kent, giving Thomas his first real view of the man who might be on the right track.

"Again, Mr. Kent, there is a slight likelihood, but those letter

bombings were on a much smaller scale, and our profilers generally agree these criminals seldom change their method."

"But not impossible?" Clark came back quickly.

"No, not impossible," the commissioner conceded, and, as the cameras swung back to the podium, Thomas could see the commissioner's expression had turned hard as stone. "Mr. Kent, we called this press conference today to assure the people of this great city that the police department and federal officials are doing everything in their power to prevent further atrocities, not to discuss the details of our investigation. Perhaps, now, you would allow your colleagues to ask their questions. I believe I have given you a fair hearing."

The cameras swept across the assembled journalists until they focused on the source of the next question.

"Lara Morgan, Star Online," a blond woman introduced herself. "Have you been able to discover the identity of the suicide bomber?"

"Ms. Morgan, if you mean the person manning the coffee stand, not yet." The commissioner shot another quick black look at Kent. "I'm sure you can appreciate that identification will be a difficult process, and not just in the case of the bomber. That's why we are asking relatives to come forward to report anyone who has not returned home from the opening ceremony at Metropolis General."

The rest of the conference was of little interest to Thomas, but an eerie grin twisted his lips, while Kent's determined face remained imprinted on his mind. Finally, he had someone who believed in him.

This man might be his nemesis, but Thomas was up to the challenge.

The press conference had scarcely finished when the gray skies above Metropolis doused the stricken city in a deluge that continued for days, hampering the teams still searching for clues, yet delighting Thomas, holed up in his basement flat. Neither the constant leaks nor the buckets he continually tripped over could dim his sense of achievement. Even the weather was playing into his hands.

In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, the city was quiet, its streets empty of those who had no reason to be outside. The population was collectively nursing its wounds, but the indomitable spirit of the people refused to be cowed. Within days, despite the downpour, candlelight vigils were held all over Metropolis, culminating in the largest in Centennial Park.

As darkness fell on the night of the service, the rain eased to a chill drizzle, blown in from the bay, yet it failed to prevent the people from gathering. They poured in by the thousands to remember the dead, to grieve with those left behind, and to pray for those lost and maimed by the madman who had dared to attack their beloved city.

Believing himself anonymous in the vast crowds, Thomas Timmons came to Centennial Park. He adopted the same mournful posture as those around him as he shielded his homemade lantern from the dampness ... some of its frame made from the leftover materials of his bomb. He was rather pleased about the irony of that.

Wandering through the throng of people, listening as they sang hymns and were led in prayer by various religious leaders, he rejoiced inside. They now knew the grief that he had felt constantly ... for years.

And he had made it happen.

He joined his voice with that of the crowd, allowing his enthusiasm to manifest itself in song. No one could object to him singing hymns. After all, thanks to his holier-than-thou Aunt Ina, he knew all the words, and even she had admitted he had a decent singing voice.

The thought of Aunt Ina threatened to spoil his ebullient

mood. Perhaps it was time to take revenge on the old witch.

Lois and Clark, flanked by their three children, all holding their light-sticks aloft, edged slowly closer to the fountain in Centennial Park, a place that had witnessed many private milestones in their lives, and was now the hub of the remembrance service. Tonight, the park, with its myriad of lights, had become an open-air church, and the family was subdued as they passed through the congregation.

Lois noticed Clark's free hand resting around Vicky's shoulder, offering comfort and support, while Sara walked close by Lois' side. Both girls were crying, but Matt was silent, his face set in harsh lines ... too harsh.

Should they have allowed the kids to attend? Lois shook her head slightly. Matt had insisted on it, and she knew she couldn't protect her daughters from the world. Besides, she was shedding a few tears herself ...

All around her, emotions seemed to mingle with the light rain, becoming almost tangible, as the people of Metropolis shared the pain and sadness of the bereaved. Compassion had united them ... but beneath the mourning, there was a determination to show those who attacked them that they held no dominion over their city.

At times like this, Lois was proud to be a Metropolitan. She was not, however, so pleased with the Metropolis Police Department ... or certain officers. From that first press conference, it had been obvious that its investigation was following the assumption that the bomber had intended to kill himself along with a number of his fellow citizens, and injure many more.

She was honest enough with herself to concede the police could be correct, but she did believe Clark's gut instinct. And yet, Clark had done himself no favors with his pointed line of questioning at the press conference. The commissioner had told his staff not to cooperate with nosy reporters, and particularly with one who was looking to regain a name for himself. There had been almost a news blackout on any positive results of the investigation.

But Lois was determined to put an end to the logjam of information. While she'd been a reporter, she'd had a provocative but civil relationship with Inspector Henderson ... she and Clark. Now Henderson was their friend. One of the few who was in on the family secret, and had sworn to protect it.

Earlier in the day, Lois had asked James to set up a meeting in his apartment for after the candlelight vigil. She and Clark would leave the two girls with their grandparents and head over to James' place, where they'd meet up with Henderson, and hopefully Jed Peterson. She'd chosen James' apartment, because she doubted Jed would have come anywhere near The Planet or the Kent home.

There was also a friendship between James and Jed; she'd heard they had similar interests in computing science. Plus, she was fairly certain Jed would have heard about Henderson's reputation as a good cop, if he'd never actually met the inspector. Maybe the young sergeant would open up in the company of friends and old colleagues.

Her attention was diverted by the Archbishop giving his final blessing, and she dropped her head in prayer, more of a believer than she once had been. Standing close to Clark, she could hear him murmuring the words and felt warm inside; he, too, believed divine intervention had brought him home safely.

The benediction completed, there was movement by the fountain as a Presbyterian minister came forward to ask the congregation to leave the grounds in a respectful and orderly manner, while singing the closing hymn.

Nearby, at the close of the service, Thomas' frustration

mounted. He wasn't ready to go home, yet he was a little mollified as they announced the last hymn, Abide With Me — one of Mary's favorites. He threw back his head and sang for his wife, hardly registering the glances of appraisal being sent his way. Stepping sideways without looking, he felt himself come up hard against a solid body — and his singing ceased abruptly.

"Sorry," he said, turning around. His manners had been drummed into him by Aunt Ina, and he couldn't break the habit.

He came face to face with the reporter he'd last seen on TV. Clark Kent. Thomas' breath caught in his throat as the guy looked back at him, smiling faintly in glow of the lantern he held.

"No problem," came the answer, the tone friendly. "It's a bit crowded around here. There's no harm done ... if you're OK?"

Taken aback, Thomas found it difficult to speak.

"Are you OK?" Kent asked again, sounding concerned.

"Yes," Thomas said, quietly. Then his power of speech returned. "Oh, yes. I'm fine, thank you." He had to keep his wits about him, had to act naturally. "How about you?"

Kent was nodding. "I'm all right."

"You're right about it being crowded." Thomas added, feeling that a few neighborly words wouldn't seem out of place.

"I'm glad so many people turned out. I was afraid the weather might put them off, but it's good to know that the people of Metropolis care what happens to their fellow citizens and are so generous to a good cause."

Thomas' eyes narrowed. "Good cause?"

Sending a glance toward a group of people who were standing along the path leading out of the park, holding collection baskets. "They're taking up a collection for the families of those who died, and for the people who were injured in the explosion."

"Oh, right." Thomas hadn't known, and he didn't have much money, but he couldn't alert suspicion. His lantern dropped to his side, almost forgotten, while with his free hand he fished around in his pocket and found some change. "Thanks for reminding me. I'll go and donate right now."

He backed away toward one of the collectors. "See ya," he cried over his shoulder, dropping his contribution into the bucket and heading into the throng of people, desperate to make a hasty exit from the one man in Metropolis who could be looking for him.

It was weird. Fate had brought them together.

Clark's eyes followed the strange man as he disappeared from view. There was nothing remarkable about the stranger — average height and weight, thinning hair and narrow face — just a middle-aged man in an old gray-and-maroon raincoat and dark trousers, paying his respects to the dead and injured. Even so, Clark would swear the man's heart rate had quickened when they'd bumped into each other.

Still, Clark couldn't be sure. His super-hearing was coming back, but was fairly unreliable in such a crowded place.

"Who was your friend?" Lois asked, leaning as close to his ear as possible, so she could be heard above the noise.

"I have no idea — just someone I bumped into. I don't think I've ever met him before. Not that I remember, anyway," he said, his brows knitting together in concentration.

"I don't remember you meeting him either," Lois agreed, absentmindedly switching off her light-stick. "Though we did work on our own occasionally ... or you could have met him as Superman." She looked in the direction the stranger had taken, but he'd been swallowed up by the dark. "What makes you think you know him?"

Clark shrugged evasively. "Nothing really. But he kind of reacted strangely."

"Strangely?"

"I'm not exactly sure, but when he saw who he had collided with, his pulse seemed to start racing."

Lois' eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Maybe he was startled, bumping into you unexpectedly. Your dense molecular structure is on its way back, you know." She ran her hand down his arm, over his firm muscles, her voice becoming softer. "Not that I'm complaining."

"I'm glad I meet with your approval, honey." He took his wife's hand, smiling into her upraised face, but he wasn't totally distracted. "Matt, you didn't happen to notice that guy?" he asked, looking past Lois at their son, who was obviously feeling better and was chatting with a group of teenagers. Clark figured they were friends from Matt's school.

"Matt!"

His son turned around at the sound of his name, but it was clear from the puzzled look on his face that he'd been too busy with his friends to even know what his father was talking about.

Matt reluctantly stepped away from the group, no longer holding his light-stick. "Sorry, Dad. Did you want something?"

Given the events of the past few days, Clark was happy to see his son smiling. "It's OK, son. Go back to your friends."

"No!" Lois interjected, with a quick glance at her watch.

"Actually, Matt, I'm sorry, but we have to be at James' soon, and we still have to drop the girls off at your grandmother's house."

Matt's face fell — and so did that of a young girl standing next to him. "Now?" His head jerked in the direction of his friends. "Uh, we were all going to grab a pizza over at Mario's."

"Matt, this meeting is important," Clark remonstrated, though he felt some sympathy for his son. A teenager should be spending time with his friends and not discussing the progress of a criminal investigation. But Matt was no ordinary teenager. "I'm sorry. Perhaps another time."

Yet, Matt wasn't giving up so easily. "What if I meet you at Uncle Jimmy's? If you have to drop Sara and Vicky off, you'll be a while, anyway, right?" He moved closer to his parents, his voice dropping to a whisper. "I'd really like to spend some time with Melissa. I didn't think I stood a chance with her, but ..." He blushed a little. "I'd really hate to mess this up ... and I promise I'll be at the meeting on time."

Clark glanced over at Melissa. She was a pretty girl with dark hair and big, serious eyes that reminded him of his wife. But Melissa definitely looked shyer than Lois. Shy and sweet. Clark shook his head silently. He hadn't realized his son was taking an interest in girls. Maybe Matt was more ordinary than he had expected.

He caught Lois' glance. She was smiling almost with relief and nodding her head.

"I guess that would be OK," Clark said, sending an encouraging look at the waiting girl. "Right, Matt. We'll see you ... say, about an hour."

<And remember, you'll be there as Matthew Kent ... not Jor-El.> Clark changed smoothly to telepathy.

Momentarily, Matt's eyes glinted like granite. "Don't worry, Dad. I won't forget." Then the grim look faded and he was just another youngster looking forward to spending some quality time with his friends. "Bye, Mom. Bye, guys!" He waved at his sisters. "See ya soon!"

Matt grabbed Melissa's hand and took off like a bullet for the edge of the park, the rest of the group hurrying behind him.

"Did you know Matt had a girlfriend?" Clark asked Lois.

"I think the term girlfriend might be a bit premature, but it's nice to know he's normal. I used to worry he spent too much time at home ... and he sees too much of the bad side of life. Like last week ..." Lois trailed off as she turned up the collar of her wool coat to ward of the cold.

Clark stepped behind his wife to shield her from the icy wind, smoothing his hand up and down her back. "I worry about him too, honey. But I think he'll be fine."

She looked up at him over her shoulder, her eyes searching

his features. "You think?" she whispered. "He's putting on a brave front, pretending nothing is wrong."

Clark schooled his expression to exude more confidence than he really felt. This was his son, and he couldn't help obsessing over Matt's welfare. "Just like you used to do." That memory brought a smile to his face and a warm sense of assurance. "Matt will get through this, just as you did. Lois, you brought him up well. You took care of him and gave him the love and strength to do this job. You still do."

He leaned closer, adding gently, "You sustained Superman and you'll be there for our son. I've never doubted that for a second."

"Oh, Clark. You always know the right thing to say." She returned his smile a little tearfully, then she rallied, looking around her. "You know, I think we can dispense with the light-sticks now," she said, collecting each one and placing them back in her bag, before linking her arm through her husband's.

"Melissa's sweet, don't you think?"

"She looks nice," Clark responded somewhat evasively, still coming to terms with the fact that his son was growing up in every way.

"You know it's not fair," Sara interrupted huffily. "Why does Matt get to have all the fun and we have to go stay at Grandma and Grandpa's?"

"Because you're both too young to be alone in the city at night, and I doubt our meeting at Uncle Jimmy's will be fun," Clark replied, shepherding his girls toward the street where the Jeep was parked. "Besides, you always have a good time with your grandparents."

"Yeah, Sara. They always let us stay up later than we get to do at home," Vicky announced, almost skipping along the paths, which were beginning to empty of people. The rain was falling in earnest again, sending people scrambling for the warmth of their cars and homes, eager to get out of the storm.

"Perhaps I need to have a word with your grandparents," Lois said, shaking her head disapprovingly, though Clark noticed the tiny smirk turning up the corner of her lips.

Both girls spoke at once, sounding horrified. "Mom, don't!"

"Then be good, and we won't have to," Clark said strictly, trying not to let a grin escape and spoil the effect. Tory could wind almost anyone around her little finger and her grandparents were putty in her hands, even if her mother wasn't always. Taking his youngest daughter's hand, his brisk pace became a run. "Come on, lets get out of this rain."

The family had almost made it to the car when Clark felt a tingle run down his spine and he turned quickly, searching. Behind him lay only the dim and nearly deserted park. He frowned. Had it just been a trick of the light, or had there been someone standing in the shadow of the trees, watching them? If only he had the benefit of his X-ray vision, but that was one power which hadn't yet returned.

Lois pulled into the neat little parking area in front of James' condo, the complex he'd lived in since he split from his most recent girlfriend over a year ago. It disappointed Lois that her friend had never married, his relationship with Penny Barnes having been the closest he'd ever come to marriage. The two had even gotten engaged, but somewhere along the way the liaison had stalled and Penny had grown impatient.

The leggy blond had gone back to college for her master's in language studies, opting to study in San Francisco. Penny had asked Jimmy to go with her, but the timing had been all wrong, since his career at The Planet was taking off. The couple had tried to hold things together, but the long-distance relationship had sounded a death knell for their romance, and they'd simply drifted apart. Penny now worked overseas and had married another translator some time ago. Lois had been sad to lose her

friend, but was happy that Penny had eventually found happiness.

Through the years, James had dated a number of women, and Lois had been hopeful when he'd moved in with Caroline, an IT worker at The Planet; after all, they shared a common interest. But it seemed that relationship, too, had been doomed, and Lois wasn't sure whether it was James' upbringing which had led to a fear of commitment, or the fact that he'd spent too much time trying to be there for her and the kids while Clark had been missing.

Whatever the reason, Caroline had left The Planet and moved out, leaving James on his own once more. Yet Lois couldn't deny that James seemed to take the break-up fairly philosophically. At Thanksgiving, she'd thought that James and Lucy might ... but nothing had happened since, so perhaps he was just destined to be a single guy.

"Nice digs," Clark said approvingly, looking over the modern building with its balconies and large glass windows. "A big improvement on where he used to live."

Clark's comments drew Lois from her thoughts. "I'd forgotten you've never visited James at home since you got back. You'll be amazed." She laughed as she made her way to the entrance. "He even keeps the place clean and tidy these days."

"Jimmy keeps asking me over to watch a game, but somehow it's easier for him to come over to our house. I should make the effort though." Clark watched Lois enter the code to unlock the door and followed her through. "I guess Jim has finally grown up ... but I'm surprised he's still single," Clark echoed her thoughts. "Wasn't there a girlfriend before I disappeared?"

"Yes. Caroline Davis. I thought that might work out, but they broke up about a year ago. Don't ask me why, because he didn't say ..."

Clark's eyes twinkled as he leaned close to whisper in her ear. "Perhaps he's still hankering after Ultrawoman."

Lois almost choked. "Bite your tongue, Kent. James was just out of his teens back then. He had a crush on someone unattainable ... and I know how that goes. To tell the truth, I think he is happier playing the field."

"What's this about Uncle Jimmy and Ultrawoman?" An inquiring voice came from the shadows of the foyer as Matt approached.

Lois turned to face her son. "Nothing important. Your father's just teasing."

"But it's true," Clark remarked, sounding affronted. "Jimmy, along with half the male population, had a crush on Ultrawoman."

"Don't exaggerate!" Lois threw a narrow-eyed look at Clark. "People were just grateful she was there to help. Besides, Ultrawoman wasn't real."

"She was real to me, honey."

"Yes, but you knew the woman behind the costume. Those others were just dazzled by the powers."

Clark laughed again. "I doubt it was the powers that attracted them."

"Mom looked hot?" Matt had seen the pink suit, and while he thought it was cool, it was clear by his wide eyed stare that he had difficulty imagining his mother wearing it.

Clark flashed his wife a broad grin. "Yes, she did!"

Walking quickly toward the elevator, Lois decided to put an end to this inappropriate conversation. "Would you two stop? In case you've forgotten, we're here to work." She hid her smile. "I'm glad you got here on time, Matt. Let's go see if the others have arrived."

Chapter Eight: Puzzle Pieces

James' apartment lived up to Lois' description, but it was more comfortable than pristine, with sports memorabilia displayed around the room, while a large desk with a high-tech

computer sat near the window and computer-science magazines were stacked on the coffee table. Clark found himself agreeing with Lois' theory that Jim actually preferred being single.

"Hi, guys. Come on in and sit down." James gestured to the various chairs and couches. "Bill and I just got back from the park and Jed called from his cellphone to say he was on his way. Can I get you anything to drink? Coffee? Beer?"

"Beer would be good," Matt said, perking up, clearly forgetting who was listening.

"Coffee, thanks," Lois said at the same time as her son, then turned her head as she glared at Matt. "What? Have you been drinking?"

Matt's complexion reddened, but his chin set in a firm line. "No! I've had a pizza and a milkshake. That's it. And what's the big deal anyway? Beer doesn't affect me!"

Lois' brow wrinkled in a frown. "And how would you know that?"

"You told me it doesn't affect Dad," Matt said, busily trying to explain, yet there was a mulish sound to his voice.

"I don't remember mentioning that." Lois was looking skeptical and glanced at Clark, as if inviting him to jump into the conversation.

Clark's lips quirked as he tried to stifle a chuckle. Lois would not be amused, but he was remembering a time when he was fourteen years old and he and Billy Irig had sneaked into Billy's father's stash of beer which they'd found in a cooler in one of the outhouses. They'd watched their fathers sit in the yard and quench their thirst many times on a summer evening, and like all adventurous boys, they'd decided to sample the forbidden fruit. Billy quickly became inebriated, but even then, alcohol had little effect on him — except a slight headache the next day.

Playing the outraged father would seem a bit hypocritical now, and Matt was right — it wasn't like he'd get drunk. Lois, however, wouldn't see things that way. She had a thing about alcohol, and knowing her upbringing, Clark didn't blame her. She might have a glass or two of wine, but she didn't indulge in drinking sprees, and would certainly not encourage her children to do so.

Meanwhile, Matt was still defending himself.

"Come on, Mom. You've told us so many stories about Dad, you have to have mentioned that sometime. You've just forgotten."

Lois looked over at Clark again, her stare becoming more irritated and he decided that cooperation was the best course of action for now.

"Matt, that's not the point. Answer your mother's question. Have you been drinking beer ... now or at any time in the past?"

Matt shifted from one leg to the other, quite aware that lying to his father wasn't exactly an option. "Not tonight. I might have had one or two before ... but I don't drink, Mom. Not often. My friends do it from time to time, but I don't ... there's no need to worry about me."

Lois wasn't giving up easily. "It's illegal to sell alcohol to minors."

Matt looked horrified. "We didn't buy it, Mom. Mostly I just had a beer at ... my friends' houses."

Clark couldn't help but notice the furtive glance that passed between Matt and Jimmy, or Jimmy's blanched face, giving him a fair idea which 'friend' Matt was not mentioning. He'd have to have a word with their longtime friend to make sure he wasn't leading Matt astray, though Jimmy was surely a more responsible teacher than some of Matt's school friends.

"I think I need to speak to your friend's parents ..." Lois remarked dangerously, making it clear to Clark that she'd missed the nuances. He would hate to be in Jim's shoes once she found out, so perhaps it was better that he dealt with this particular problem.

“Lois, come on.” Henderson joined in the conversation, preempting Clark. “If it’s only the odd occasion, Matt isn’t doing anything more than most of his peers. They’re kids, and kids experiment. Believe me, there are worse things they could be doing.”

“Honey,” Clark said, laying a soothing hand on her arm. “Bill’s right. Besides, this isn’t the place to hash this out.”

Lois nodded, but didn’t look totally convinced, and Matt swallowed, guessing he’d only dodged his mother’s bullet for a time. At least the vibe he was getting from his father didn’t seem too threatening.

“OK,” James said, a tentative grin hovering on his mouth. “Coffees all round, or would you like Pepsi, Matt?”

“Pepsi ... if Mom approves ...”

Clark’s shoulders tensed at his son’s show of defiance. He was happy to give Matt some slack. After all, the boy hadn’t been in the best of places since the bombing, but he wasn’t prepared to see him mouth off to his mother. “Matt, don’t push your luck.” He was mollified to see Matt blush guiltily.

“Sorry. Pepsi will be good, Uncle Jim.”

Thankfully, while James was playing host, the buzzer on his intercom sounded. Jed Peterson had arrived, and Matt’s transgressions were pushed aside for more pressing matters.

Sergeant Peterson strolled into the room, his loping stride at odds with his quick gaze as he scanned the people in the room. Over the last few weeks, Clark had learned there was a very intelligent mind behind the policeman’s easy manner.

He tensed, and it was clear he wasn’t totally pleased.

“OK, I don’t mind talking in front of Inspector Henderson. If we’ve never met, at least his reputation preceded him, but who’s this?” Jed nodded in the direction of Matt, who was moodily staring into his Pepsi.

Lois rose, bridleing at Peterson’s tone. She’d called this meeting and clearly felt it was her prerogative to invite who she chose, but then, it was Jed’s privilege to leave. Clark decided to jump in before matters got out of hand.

“Jed, this is our son Matt.” With a slight shift of his head, Clark gestured for Matt to stand. “He was present at the ceremony when the bomb went off, and Lois and I felt another pair of eyes would be useful. He’s a responsible kid, and you can trust him to treat everything he hears as confidential.” Clark was praying that Matt would drop the sullen teenager mode.

<Come on, Matt. Work with me here. This is too important to mess up,> he added through the mind link and was thankful when Matt stood up and held out his hand to the detective.

There was a slight shrug of Jed’s shoulders as he shook hands with the boy, but he wasn’t ready to give up his suspicious attitude so easily. “You do realize that I’m way out on a limb here? If my bosses knew I was talking to the press, and particularly you, Kent, I’d be on suspension quicker than you could blink. I can’t afford to have anyone blabbing about this meeting.”

Matt offered Jed his most trusting smile. “Sergeant Peterson, I might just be a kid to you, but I’ve lived all my life with Lane and Kent. Believe me, I know how and when to keep a secret.”

Clark relaxed as Peterson seemed to accept his son’s word. Like his mother, Matt could be very persuasive when he chose, and even Lois looked satisfied as she sat back down.

“OK, if we’re all agreed,” Lois said, checking everyone’s response, “Let’s get this meeting on the road.” And without any more preamble, she turned her stare on Peterson. “What have the police discovered?”

“I’m not sure I can divulge anything, Ms. Lane,” Jed replied woodenly, sitting down in the nearest chair and staring out the window. His long frame appeared hunched in the spindly seat.

“No?” Lois’ eyebrows rose and her mouth tightened in the firm line Clark recognized as foreshadowing a tirade. Yet she

held herself back. “Then why are you here, if not to help find out who is bombing our city?”

“My bosses think they’ve already done that.” The policeman still didn’t look Lois in the eye.

But Lois was sharp as a tack. “Oh? That means they’ve identified the street vendor. That was quick ... for the police.”

Those words brought Jed’s head around to Lois, and irritation, edged with grudging admiration for her quick understanding, glinted in his eyes. But still he didn’t answer.

“Jed, would you tell us what you can?” Clark mediated, keeping his voice calm, though neither did he relish the idea of dragging information out of Jed like pulling teeth.

Bill Henderson sat forward in his seat, his hands clasped loosely. “Look, Peterson, I know this is against most of what you’ve learned in the force, but you said you’re aware of my reputation, and I tell you I would never have had such a good closure record if it hadn’t been for these two.” He pointed at Lois and Clark. “Lane and Kent are trustworthy. Everyone in this room is, and more than that, they’re very good at their jobs ... the best.” Bill grinned at his old friends. “That’s something I wouldn’t have admitted when I was in the MPD, but it’s true ... and I think you know that, Jed, or you wouldn’t have come.”

“Thank you, Bill.” Lois had the grace to smile generously, confirming to Clark that her relationship with the former police chief had changed over the years he’d been gone. “Jed, I promise this conversation is off the record. I might be a hard-bitten reporter, but I know when situations are more important than getting the scoop. Yes, even me!” Lois reiterated at James’ snort. “Jed, you can speak freely here, and I guarantee it won’t be repeated in print ... not until we solve this case. We’d be very grateful for any help you can give us.”

There was a tense moment or two before Jed visibly eased up. “We got lucky with the guy’s identity. There was enough left of him to get a DNA sample and he’s on record. It turned out he’d been arrested for harassing a female a few years ago. Nothing like rape or anything. He was drunk at the time, so he pleaded guilty to drunken and disorderly conduct and sexual misconduct. The female in question actually dropped the charge, but his details were never removed from the sex-offenders’ register. He was one Robert Tanner, a down and out who frequented some of the many slum areas around Metropolis.”

“You got an address for him?” Henderson asked, his voice and manner reverting to laconic.

Jed shook his head. “No fixed abode, that we could find ... unless you count a couple of homeless shelters.”

“What about motive?” This time it was James who took up the questioning. “For blowing up the hospital, I mean.”

“We’re still looking into that,” Jed answered. “This investigation is ongoing.”

“Do the police believe he had an accomplice?” Henderson asked, drawing Jed’s attention back to himself.

“Hey, what is this? Good cop, bad cop?” Jed tried to chuckle, but failed miserably. “Because you don’t have it down right, you know. One of you is supposed to be sympathetic.” He turned his head away, his glance searching the moving shadows outside the window where the wind buffeted the trees, then he heaved an audible sigh. “My bosses believe he was working alone ...”

There was another long silence, during which Clark felt Lois’ eyes bore into him. He cleared his throat and then pressed on. “If he was such a bum, where did he get the concession stand from? Or his merchandise?” Clark clenched his hands to keep them still, not wanting to advertise his tension. “According to what I’ve managed to pick up from witnesses, he was selling food and wasn’t dressed like a bum. And where did he get the explosives from?” Finishing his run of questions, he paused to breathe deeply. “Jed, I’m not interested in what your bosses believe, but I’d like to know what you think.”

“A fanatic with a grievance can acquire whatever he needs ... one way or another,” Jed explained, struggling to keep his tone even.

“Have there been any reports of these things being stolen?” Clark followed up quickly. He was aware Jed was feeling intimidated, but couldn’t afford to ease off. This bomber was still out there ... he was certain of it.

“No,” Jed replied curtly. “As for the explosives, you can buy the ingredients cheaply in many stores. He could have stolen money, or even got himself a casual job. We’re checking that out, but this is a big city.”

Henderson stretched out his legs, allowing his body to settle in his chair, and when he spoke, his tone was moderated. “True, about the explosives, but would this guy have had the know-how to put the explosives together?”

“I think so,” Jed said, sounding on more solid ground. “He wasn’t always a bum. He taught engineering at New Troy Tech before the booze got to him. I think he’d have had the brains.”

Clark carefully placed his coffee mug on an end table and leaned forward. “Jed, if you know that much about him, then you’re bound to have discovered if he had some sort of motive to go on a bombing spree ... assuming that he did.”

“Bombing spree?” Jed tipped his head to the side. “We haven’t linked him with the letter bombs, though it’s possible he is the perp. We’re still searching into his background for a motive, but getting fired from his job and his wife running off with his best friend might have made him a little sore. Add in the drink, and that’s quite a cocktail for him going off the rails.”

“Going totally loco, more like,” Jimmy interjected with a grunt.

“True, though I wouldn’t quite use those terms. When did all this happen?” Clark persisted, still not convinced, though he had no firm reason to doubt what Jed was saying.

“About fifteen years ago. The guy has been going downhill slowly for years and has been on the skids for about ten of those years, as far as we can trace.”

“So what set him off after all this time?” Henderson spoke up again. “If I remember my profiling courses correctly, there’s usually some sort of trigger.”

“That we don’t know yet.” Jed gave Henderson a long stare. “Look, we don’t have all the answers yet, but my bosses are being pushed to wrap this thing up quickly and it seems Tanner might fit the bill. The mayor’s office doesn’t want a panic ...”

“But you’re not so sure?” Clark asked, intuitively. He smiled briefly at the young policeman. “I don’t mean to give you a hard time, Jed. Yet I doubt you’re completely happy with the direction the commissioner is going. I can also understand the mayor wanting results, but this is much too dangerous a case to get railroaded onto the wrong track. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes!” The one word burst from Jed, almost of its own accord. He looked around abashed, but then continued, as if once started, he couldn’t stem the tide. “I’m not saying the force has got it wrong, but apart from that one incident of groping a woman, Tanner’s never been in trouble. Not that that means anything, but, like you say, there are too many questions left unanswered,” he concluded quietly.

“Like, if he has no permanent address, where did he make the bombs? He’d had to have some sort of cover, and privacy ... and, if the concession stand belonged to someone else, which employer would hire a homeless man?” Henderson wondered speculatively, then broke the intensity of the moment by asking, “James, you got any more of that lethal liquid you pass off as coffee? I need a drink, and I’m sure Jed could use one.”

“Right. Coffees all round,” James said, standing and heading for the kitchen, where he’d prepared a large pot of coffee. He knew how much Lois loved her java when on a hot investigation, and this evening ought to have been a chance for her to be a

crime reporter again. Yet, surprisingly, after her first input, she’d kept silent.

The coffee break and the inconsequential chat that went with it had the effect Henderson, the experienced interrogator, had sought. When the group returned to brainstorming ideas about the case, Jed was no longer hostile, but had become part of the team.

Draining his cup and sending a silent thank you to Bill for his insight, Clark once more opened up the questioning. “Have there been any developments on what type of detonator was used, Jed?”

“We found traces of a cell phone ...”

“So the bomb could have been detonated remotely?” James interrupted eagerly.

“I guess, or Tanner could have used it. There’s just not enough of it left to pick up any traces, though the forensic team is still working on it ... checking for any DNA or even prints,” Jed replied, relaxing his height into his chair as best he could.

“Do down and outs use cell phones?” Lois said at last.

“Some do. They pick them up second- or third-hand at the shelters. The charity workers try to persuade them to carry one, just in case they get in trouble. You’d be surprised how many of them get beaten up,” Matt explained, blushing a little at butting into the adults’ conversation. “Not all of them want one, though. Most of them like their privacy, and they don’t trust the authorities.”

Jed craned his head to check over the teenager who had chosen to sit near the door, a little way back from the rest of the group. “He’s right. But how would a kid know so much about vagrants?”

Matt’s cheeks flushed a deeper shade of red and he threw an apologetic look toward his parents. “Actually, I’ve worked at a couple of the shelters. Mom and Dad encourage me to help others less fortunate than myself.”

Again Jed’s brows quirked in surprise as he directed a question at the Kents. “That’s commendable, but aren’t you afraid to let your son loose in such dangerous parts of the city?”

Lois chose to answer and, at least, she could stick vaguely to the truth. Matt’s rescues were still being monitored. “Sergeant, we’d never wittingly expose our children to danger, as I’m sure you know. Mostly, Clark or some other adult is with Matt when he’s helping out.”

“Sorry. I didn’t think,” Jed admitted sheepishly in the face of Lois’ indignation. He quickly changed the subject back to the business in hand. “So, Matt, have you heard any gossip about Bob Tanner and the bombings when you’ve been working at those shelters? We’ve tried to ask questions but you know what it’s like. These homeless people clam up whenever the police come around. We could try going undercover, but they seem to have second sight when it comes to cops ... not to mention, my bosses think it’s a waste of police time. They believe they’ve got their bomber.”

Clark groaned internally. He was hoping the police would be keeping an open mind, yet he wasn’t totally surprised. “Matt’s been busy with school exams, so hasn’t been down at the shelters, but if you give me the names of the places Tanner frequented, I could check them out. I do some charity work myself, so perhaps they’ll open up to me.”

“Be my guest, Kent. The shelters he used regularly are the St. Andrews Mission and The Rest and Be Thankful, near the old Steelworks. You might be wasting your time, but it’s worth a shot.”

Matt had been deep in thought, but he suddenly spoke up again. “There was someone used their cell phone when I touch ... when I saw Jor-El touch down ... and the bomb went off almost immediately.” He ducked his head, hoping to hide his agitation at his near mistake, but he went on regardless, believing he could be onto something important. “Remember, I told you about it, Dad

... Uncle Jimmy, when we got back home from helping out.”

“I’m sure there were a lot of people using their cells,” Jed remarked, but not unkindly.

“I know, that’s what Uncle Jimmy said! But there was something about this guy ... only I’m not sure what. He looked uptight. Then all hell broke loose and I forgot about him.” Matt looked somewhat crestfallen; however, his father wasn’t so ready to ignore his point this time.

“But it could be a clue,” Clark said thoughtfully. “It’s important we rule nothing out at this time. Can you remember what the guy looked like?” he asked, looking pointedly at Matt, reminding him that he’d have to hedge a little. He just hoped Matt remembered the ethos: stick as close to the truth as possible.

Furrowing his brows, Matt seemed to search the floor for inspiration. “I only saw him for a second ... before I was distracted by the explosion.”

“Concentrate, Matt. Cast your mind back,” Clark said softly, helping his son as much as was possible. Matt had inherited his power of recall, but hadn’t explored it fully — yet.

Matt looked up into his dad’s steady gaze. “The guy was kinda ordinary, I think. Medium height, but pretty thin. Narrow face, but I didn’t see his hair, ‘cause he was wearing a hood. Yeah, a dark jacket with a hood ...”

“Do you remember what color?” Clark prompted.

“I’m not sure ... Maybe black, or gray ... with another color, I think ...”

A picture of a man popped into Clark’s head ... a stranger he’d met by chance only this evening. Could it be the same guy? There was no reason why it should be ... and yet, his gut instinct was screaming out.

“What other color?” Clark prodded again.

“I don’t know. I can’t remember.” Matt’s voice was flustered and his eyes bleak.

“Hey, Kent, give the kid a break,” Jed suggested, clearly shocked by Clark’s tactics. “He only saw the guy for a second. I’d say Matt did pretty well remembering that much ... and it probably has no connection to our bomber.”

Clark’s face paled. He hadn’t meant to bully Matt, but he sensed this was important. But Jed was right — he had crossed the line. He was letting his interest in this case evolve into an obsession, and knowing his reasons didn’t absolve his coercion of his son.

“I’m sorry, son,” Clark said, his expression full of contrition, and not only for Jed’s benefit. “You’re doing your best and I had no right to sound so harsh,” he added aloud, then changed to telepathy. <I am sorry ... but I think you are onto something. Jed wouldn’t understand, but your description could fit the stranger who bumped into me in the park tonight; the guy I’m fairly sure was watching Mom, the girls and me get into the car.>

<Someone was watching you, Dad?> Matt asked.

Inside Clark’s head, Matt’s young voice cracked with emotion, and something akin to fear.

<Matt, we’ll go into this later at home.> Reverting to speech, Clark announced for public consumption, “You know, I think we’ve pretty much covered everything we need to for now. Matt and I will check out those shelters. Jim, perhaps you could call on your sources ... see if the name Bob Tanner means anything to them.”

“Sure thing, CK,” James answered quickly, a tiny, awed smile turning up the corner of his mouth. He was still getting used to this special link that Clark had with Matt and was pretty certain that he’d just witnessed its use.

Henderson, on the other hand, had no doubt that some unspoken exchange had taken place and was anxious to know just what it might be. “Lois, I came back here with James, and Sheila has the car, so do you think you could give me a lift home?” He looked pointedly at his sometime adversary, now turned friend.

Lois smiled knowingly in return. She too was eager to find out what had gone on between father and son. Judging by the way Clark had interrogated Matt, she was sure he was onto something, but she had no idea what. Other than the name of the alleged bomber, Jed hadn’t given them many leads. There was only one way to find out.

“Sure, Bill. OK, I guess that wraps up the meeting for now.” Lois gathered her things together and stood. “Jed, thanks for the information. You might not think it’s much, but it does give us some clues to follow ...”

“True, Jed,” Henderson added. “You’d be surprised how much Lane and Kent can find out from next to nothing. James here isn’t such a slouch either.”

“Thanks, Bill, but I learned from the best,” James said, grinning. “Lane and Kent, the hottest team in town.”

Lois joined in the laughter, but was secretly thankful to Henderson for remembering a time when she and Clark had been the pair everyone wanted to scoop ... and not just for Clark’s sake. She’d decided to take a backseat during the questioning, giving Clark the lead, but she’d felt her investigative juices flow, and couldn’t wait to get home to confer with Clark. And Bill clearly shared her curiosity.

Peterson stood to take his leave, but he appeared a little agitated. Everyone waited, and finally he spoke. “You all know it’s important to keep quiet about my involvement with you.” When everyone nodded in assent, he relaxed. “Please, don’t get in touch with me ... or no more than you would for a quote. No one at the precinct will let you speak with me, but I will get back to you.”

“Sure thing, Jed. We do understand,” Clark assured him. “We might have come on a bit heavy, but you have helped.”

Clark held out his hand to Jed, and was happy when the young policeman took it.

“I’ll be in touch,” Jed said, shaking Clark’s hand. “Oh, and I think you’ll be able to print Tanner’s name soon. I’m sure the commissioner will be issuing a statement any day now. I’ll try to warn you before it happens.” With those final words, he left the apartment, quickly followed by the others.

Lois turned at the door. “Hey, James. Flattering the boss will buy you a lot of slack, but I still need your story on the memorial service. You are duty reporter on the city desk tonight,” Lois reminded him. Checking her watch, she added, “There’s still time for you to make the online deadline.”

“Sure thing, Chief,” James said with a wink. “I won’t forget.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “Goodnight, James.”

The door closed.

Another winter squall beat needles of sleet down on Lois, Clark and Matt as they exited their Jeep. Their late arrival home prevented them from securing a parking space close to their townhouse, so they made a run for it, Clark’s arm holding tight to Lois’ elbow as she glanced down at her high heels not made for rainy surfaces — or charging down the street.

On the way to Henderson’s house, Clark had told Bill about the mysterious stranger who’d accosted him earlier in the park, and raised the possibility of him being the man Matt had seen at the crime scene. However, Clark had to admit it was a long shot. The explosion had diverted his son’s attention, and Clark couldn’t be sure this evening’s meeting wasn’t purely by chance.

Yet his instinct refused to lie quiet.

He ran a hand through his wet hair and tried one more time. “Matt, are you sure you can’t remember anything else about this guy?”

Clark watched Lois shaking out her wet jacket with a pang of sadness — he could no longer use his heat vision to dry her off the way he’d done so often in the past. Times had changed, and it was the little details that seemed to matter most.

“Dad, I’m sorry, but I’ve told you all I know. Honestly.” Matt’s voice interrupted Clark’s wallowing. “I only saw him for less than a second, and the next thing, I’m flying into an explosion, trying to find survivors.” He crossed to the nearest couch and sagged against the cushions. “I never thought remembering would be such a big issue ... and I never even saw this guy you met tonight.”

“I know,” Lois said with a sympathetic chuckle, as she made her way to the kitchen. “You were too busy looking at Melissa. You haven’t said much about her ... or the two of you. How long has this been going on?”

Matt’s eyes flashed as he sat up, but his face was turning bright red. “Nothing is going on! Not really. She’s just a ... girl.”

Lois paused in the doorway, casually crossing her arms. “A very pretty girl. You have good taste.”

Immediately, Matt let his guard drop. “You really think so, Mom?”

Holding back a laugh, Lois considered the matter for a second. “Oh, yes. Of course, I don’t know her, but I’m sure you wouldn’t like her if she wasn’t a good person. You should invite her over ...”

“Mo-om! It’s not like that.” The teenage suitor squirmed on the couch. “Melissa is a nice girl. She’s in my physics class, and we get along real well ... but I’m not sure if she likes me... you know ... that way.”

“Sure looked that way to me.” Lois let her grin break through. “Why don’t you ask her over for a study session, and she can stay for dinner.”

Clark had had enough of the inane chitchat, and he crossed the room to stand between his wife and son. “I understand Matt’s, uh, dating life is important, but so is finding out who this guy is. So forgive me if I’m being insensitive, but I think discovering the identity of the bomber takes precedent.”

Matt and Lois exchanged glances ... part guilt, part exasperation. This conversation was beginning to sound like a broken record.

Matt sighed. “Dad, I’m sorry I’ve let you down ... I wish I could help, but I just can’t.”

“Star!” Clark, exclaimed, his eyes bright.

“Star?” Matt’s eyebrows lifted in a fair imitation of his dad’s.

“An old friend of your mother’s.”

Recognition dawned on Matt’s face. “Oh, you mean that Star?”

Lois moved to Clark’s side, her hand rubbing up and down his back. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, we can’t ask Star. She’s not here.” She shrugged. “Remember she told us she was abandoned by a boyfriend who went off to worship some giant butterfly ... or was that a stuffed rabbit ... in the Amazon, or somewhere like that?”

Clark nodded, though he looked somewhat bemused. “Vaguely.”

“Well, it turned out he wasn’t a complete wacko. He finally got over his hippie period and joined some charity, working to save the rain forest; a bit like Mac and Marge, I guess.” She linked her arm through Clark’s and walked him to the opposite couch, gently pushing him to sit, and perching on the arm beside him. “To cut a long story short, almost two years ago, this guy came back to Metropolis for an ecological conference and he happened to bump into Star. It turned out he’d missed her a lot, but he’d assumed she would have found someone else by the time he came to his senses ... which she hadn’t, so he’d never got in touch before. Being Star, she saw this new meeting as a sign from heaven, and she ran off to the Amazon with him. We had a letter from Salvador when she arrived, but she was moving inland, and I have no idea where she is now.”

“Good for Star.” Clark sank back into the cushions, his smile awry. “I shouldn’t be surprised that everyone else got on with

their lives while I was gone. I’m happy for her,” he added, on a lighter note.

“Yeah, me too,” Matt agreed. “I liked Star, but what makes you think she could help, Dad? Those astro-readings of hers are a bit flaky ... and she talks to aliens.”

“Don’t mock, Matt.” Lois looked at her son judiciously. “Star came close to the truth ... sometimes ... after a few tries.” She winked. “Besides, your dad’s an alien and you’re half one.”

“But we’re for real!” Matt fell silent as he thought for a second or two. “Did she know about us?”

“Probably,” Lois replied after a moment’s consideration. “Not that she ever said anything, but I’m sure she had her suspicions ... and not just psychic ones.”

Matt ran his hands through his hair as he re-evaluated his opinion of his mother’s old friend. “If you think she could help, I guess I could go look for her.”

“Matt, the Amazon basin is huge, and since the logging has been curtailed, the jungle is growing back. It could take you days to cover the area, and you have enough to do with your super job, and school. Besides, Star might have moved on. It’s not the best use of your time.” Lois stood up. “Does anyone else want hot chocolate?”

“Yes, please, Mom.”

Clark sat silent, staring into space.

“Clark?” Lois reached over and gently shook his shoulder.

“What?” He turned toward her, but his gaze seemed like a million miles away.

“You want something to drink?”

He shook his head. “No. No, I’m fine.”

Lois nodded and continued on her way to the kitchen. She doubted that Clark was fine. Suddenly, she stopped. “Draw him!”

Clark still looked a little stunned. “Draw him?”

“Yes. As in art ...” She spread her hands, looking triumphant. “A sketch!”

“Sketch who?” Clark frowned at her. “The man from the park?”

“Yes, Clark. You’ve done it to identify criminals before. Remember Jefferson Cole? Perhaps seeing a picture of this mystery guy will jog Matt’s memory ... and even if it doesn’t, you can show it around when you visit those shelters. See if this stranger is a known associate of Tanner’s.”

Clark’s hands clenched nervously on his thighs. “I haven’t done that for a long time, honey. I’m not even sure I still can.” He spoke skeptically, but there was a hint of resolve in his eyes.

“Well, you won’t know till you try,” Lois said encouragingly. “There’s a notepad and pencils in the desk drawer. Why don’t I go make us all something to drink while you practice your skills.”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt to try,” Clark agreed, standing to retrieve the items. “Have you ever done anything like this, Matt?”

“Me? No. Never really thought about it. Art isn’t my favorite class at school. I’m more into science and biology ...”

Lois smiled, as she listened to the conversation between father and son, which was cut off by the closing of the kitchen door. It made her feel good to hear them comparing skills ... super or ordinary.

When she returned, Clark was sitting at the desk while Matt craned over his shoulder, his head cocked to one side as he studied the portrait his father was still in the process of drawing.

“I’m not sure about this,” Clark announced, adding some final touches. “I’m sure I was better at this when I used superspeed.”

Lois balanced the tray carefully as she made her way to the coffee table. “If you’ve finished it in the time it took me to make three glasses of chocolate milk, I doubt you’re that much of a slouch.”

Clark held the drawing at arm’s length, studying it critically. “But I’m not sure it’s a good likeness, and it will never win any

prizes, that's for sure. Maybe drawing fast improved my skill," he added, dubiously, but lost his deflated air as he looked more closely.

Crossing to the desk, Lois surveyed the finished portrait. There were actually two pictures on the page; one a close-up of a man's face, and the other a full-length figure. "They're pretty good, honey. I only caught a glimpse of the man in the park, but you've got the general impression, I think."

Her lips tightened as she studied the image of the very thin face and narrow chin, the pale eyes which seemed to pierce the viewer to the soul. No wonder Clark was uptight. "This guy looks scary," she finally said, suppressing a shiver. "He has strange eyes."

With a shrug of his shoulders, Clark admitted, "To tell the truth, I can't be sure that I'm not projecting my own feelings into the drawings. He could be just an ordinary guy ..."

"No, Clark. I trust your instincts. You've never suspected anyone without reason. In fact, you always tried to see the good in people." Lois rested her hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently. "And you were right about Luthor when everyone else thought he was the best thing since sliced bread!"

"Thanks, honey." Clark smiled up at his wife. "I would never have thought of doing a drawing if you hadn't reminded me ... and thanks for the compliment."

While his parents talked, Matt had remained silent, staring at the sketchpad on the desk. He closed his eyes and tried to recall the moment he had landed on the stage in front of the hospital, a split-second before the explosion had distracted him from scanning the audience, from watching the man on the edge of the crowd use his cell phone.

Only, now Matt remembered. The phone hadn't been at his ear, it had been concealed in his fist, and the hood of his jacket had been pulled low over his face. A rain-jacket very similar to the one his father had just drawn.

"Dad, I couldn't swear to it in a court, but I'm pretty certain that could be the man with the cell phone," Matt said, pointing at the figure on the pad. "I never saw his face too clearly because he had his hood pulled down low, but that chin looks kinda familiar."

"I'm not asking you to give evidence, Matt. I'm just happy to have your corroboration. I was beginning to think I was obsessing."

Lois slid both arms around her husband and, bending close to his ear, whispered playfully. "Obsessing, honey? You? Never!"

"Okay, so what do we do now?" Matt asked, crossing back to the couch, and picking up his glass, he took a large gulp of his drink. "Is there anyway we can find a name to go with the face?"

Both parents followed him and sat side by side on the other couch. "I guess we could ask Jim to do a comparison through the databases," Clark answered, forgetting he'd refused and taking a long drink. "But that's a long shot. I doubt this man has a criminal record."

"What about a driving license?" Lois suggested. "It's possible he has one of those."

"It's worth checking, I guess," Clark relaxed, and allowed his free arm to curl around Lois' shoulders. "But without a name and only a rough sketch, I doubt we'd have any success with the DMV."

"I know," she said with a sigh. "I was just throwing out ideas ..."

"The way we used to work," he replied, smiling, and felt comforted as his wife snuggled into his side. "You were right earlier, Lois. Our next move should be to visit those homeless shelters to ask about Tanner and show the drawings to the people there. Who knows, we might get lucky and someone will recognize this man."

"We should plan to do all of these things," Lois agreed,

sipping her own drink carefully; she did not possess an invulnerable tongue. "But not tonight. I think we need to get some rest. And, Matt, try not to go out again, unless it's something the emergency services can't handle on their own. I have a feeling that things are going to be pretty hectic over the next few days."

"Let's hope you're right, honey. We could do with a break in this investigation." Clark yawned; his bed was looking very welcome right now, and maybe he could persuade Lois to indulge in a little relaxation therapy before going to sleep. "You ready to go upstairs?"

"Sure am," she replied, slowly licking the last drop of chocolate from her lips, causing her husband's eyes to glint appreciatively. She allowed him to pull her to her feet before stretching languidly. "I'm beat. You know, I'll probably fall asleep the minute my head hits the pillow."

Lois walked in front of Clark, ducking her head to hide a grin. She didn't look back, but she was sure his anticipation had turned to disappointment. Poor Clark. He was just so transparent ... well, hopefully only to her.

But it appeared that his mind wasn't wholly on what was about to happen in their bedroom.

"Oh, and by the way, Matt," Clark said, standing over their son. "I didn't want to continue the argument at Uncle Jim's, but I do agree with your mother when it comes to you drinking beer. Even if it doesn't affect you, drinking alcohol as a minor is illegal — so no more."

"Dad! I don't," Matt protested loudly. "Honest! I've tried it ... but I didn't enjoy it much." He wrinkled his nose. "I only asked for a beer 'cause I was trying to look grown up. I didn't think. You believe me, don't you? Jor-El doesn't lie!"

His parents were ascending the stairs arm in arm when he saw them exchange glances, and he could swear he heard them chuckle, too. Now what had he said that was so funny?

"Mom ... Dad? You do believe me?"

"We do. Go to bed, son," Clark shouted.

Matt switched off the lights and trailed wearily up the stairs. Being a grown up sure wasn't easy.

Chapter Nine: Headway

St. Andrew's Homeless Shelter was located in an abandoned church in Metropolis' dockland. The church had been built in the late 1800s to minister to the immigrant Catholic families who had poured into the city to work in the many shipyards along the banks of Hobbs Bay. Sadly, during the last century, the shipyard bosses had moved their businesses overseas in search of bigger profits, and many families, too, had moved on, finding work elsewhere.

The less well-off, however, had had to stay behind in the teeming apartment blocks, which also had fallen into disrepair. They took whatever work was available. Metropolis was still a busy port and some found work as dockers, though with new machinery and container-ships, the industry employed less personnel.

The area was now the home of Metropolis' poor, and those who found the pace of modern living too hard to bear. People, who for one reason or another, had fallen through the social-welfare net and now lived in the rundown alleyways and doorways, under bridges and flyovers — anywhere that would provide them shelter from the inclement weather.

The Catholic diocese had chosen to reopen the doors of the old church as a homeless shelter a few years ago, accepting all, and never questioning the poor souls who found their way to its refuge.

Clark and Matt had chosen early evening to visit the shelter, knowing that this was the best time to reach as many people as possible. During the long, dark nights and piercing cold of winter,

the church became a busy hubbub of life, as homeless men and women came for warmth, a modicum of comfort and a wholesome meal.

Besides, during the day, Matt had school and Clark had other stories to pursue.

Father and son walked through the great doors and stood for a second or two, staring at the large interior. The grand pillars and vaulted ceiling still stretched up to the heavens, but the stained-glass windows, which had once shown prisms of light into this place of worship, were now boarded up against the chill from the air outside.

There was no longer the swelling sound of the church organ, nor the sanctified chanting of the priests. In their place was the sound of shuffling feet, chairs scraping against the wooden floor, and the hushed tones of sporadic small talk.

The homeless were not prone to lengthy conversations about their busy days at work, nor gossip about their private lives, which most had left behind.

Nevertheless, on this particular evening, there was an unusual buzz about the place. The official statement naming Tanner had not yet been made public by the police, but that didn't mean these people were ignorant of the man's death. Somehow, bad news spread like wildfire through this anonymous population, and Clark could only hope that some of its members would be prepared to answer his questions.

Ever courteous, Clark walked quietly down the side aisle of what had once been the sanctuary and now was divided into two rooms; half serving as a large dining room, the other as a dormitory. He headed toward the kitchen to inquire as to whom was in charge this evening — and, heedful of the transient population's suspicion toward the media, to seek permission to speak to those present.

Up ahead, a bespectacled, gray-haired priest stood behind a counter, very carefully ladling out soup to those waiting in line. He looked up as the two men approached.

"Clark Kent?" The priest squinted through his thick lenses, a smile slowly spreading across his face. "I was wondering how long it would be before you dropped in to see us." The man laid down his ladle and beckoned to an assistant to take over his serving duties. With as much speed as he could muster, he came through the narrow door, a white cane in one hand while his other hand stretched out toward Clark. "It's good to see you again. I thanked the good Lord when I heard about your miraculous return from the dead. How are you, my boy?"

For a few seconds, Clark was stunned by the effusive welcome, but very quickly he took the priest's hand, smiling in return. "Father Ninian, it's good to see you're still in Metropolis, but I'd no idea you were in charge of this shelter."

The older man finally let go of Clark's hand. "My superiors thought the parish in Queensland Park was too much work for an old man like me, especially since my eyesight is failing fast. They decided to give me some missionary work instead, even if it is in Metropolis." Father Ninian gestured around the room with his cane, his smile broadening until his cheeks creased like a well-read newspaper. "Mind you, I'm not complaining." He smiled at the woman who had taken over for him. "I have so many helpers that there's little for me to do — but I still enjoy the work."

Clark took in the crowded tables of people hunkered over steaming bowls of soup. "And it looks like you do a great job."

"Well, my flock here isn't quite so devout as I'd like, and they don't always like my prying, but on the whole they're a good bunch." Father Ninian finally noticed the young man standing behind Clark and, if it was possible, his smile grew bigger. "And, bless my soul, isn't that our young Matt?"

"Yes, Father," Matt answered, moving to stand next to his father.

"Of course, Matt Kent. Clark's your dad! Why didn't you

ever tell me?"

Matt blushed. "I'm sorry, but I didn't know you knew Dad ... and I've been so busy lately, with school and everything, I haven't been around here much."

"I should think so. Your schoolwork is more important than being a dishwasher here."

"You sound like my mom," Matt replied with a rueful grin.

"Ah, your mother is a grand woman. You listen to her and you'll turn out well." The priest nodded his head wisely. "I remember when your parents solved a nasty run of sexual attacks that took place around St. Agnes, my previous church. The police were stumped, so your mother offered herself as bait. Of course, your father and Superman were guarding her, but she was a very brave woman, and thank goodness they caught the man before he could do her too much harm." The old priest found an empty pew along the side wall with his cane and he lowered himself down cautiously. "Oh, yes, that surely was a night! I'd met Superman a couple of times before, but I never saw him quite so angry as he was then. When he saw your mother covered in bruises, I was sure he was going to tear the attacker limb from limb ... but your mother stopped Superman with just a few words. Mind you, Lois Lane was no helpless female." Father Ninian chuckled, though he sounded slightly awed. "You should have seen the villain! When she'd finished with him, I think he was more afraid of her than he was of Superman."

Matt tore his stunned gaze away from the old priest and fixed his wide eyes on his father. "You never told me that! And neither did Mom!"

"It was a long time ago, and to tell you the truth, it was one of these memories I'd forgotten about until now. I think you were about nine months old at the time, Matt," Clark replied, his brow creased in concentration. "Believe me, I wasn't exactly happy with your mother's plan, but you know your mother. When she gets an idea in her head, there's no stopping her. Still, after that, she didn't try anything as dangerous again." He flashed his son a smile. "She realized she had more important responsibilities."

Father Ninian folded his white cane and laid it on the seat. "I remember it like it was yesterday, but ask me what I had for lunch and I'm stumped. That's what happens when you grow old, you know," he said with a wry grimace. After a few moments, he spoke again. "Yet I can still see that dreadful night; how terrified your father was of losing your mother."

Clark blanched. Was this how it was for Lois now?

The thought hit Clark like a sledgehammer. After the kids were born, Lois had become less reckless in her journalistic pursuits, and now, for the sake of the family, he had to be the same. He could still do his job, still investigate, but stunts like throwing himself in front of bombs were definitely out of order, at least until his invulnerability kicked back in ... if it ever did.

"But it all ended well, Matt," Father Ninian declared proudly, smiling again. "The bad guy was caught and sent to prison, thanks to your parents." He turned to Clark. "Now what can I do for you today, because I doubt this is purely a social call?"

Clark shook himself out of his wondering. "No, Father. I'm afraid not. We're investigating another case, the Metropolis bomber, and we've been told that he might have frequented your shelter. If you don't mind, we'd like to ask your guests a few questions."

"Ah, you're talking about poor Bob Tanner," Father Ninian said. "He did come here, now and then, but I'm afraid I didn't get to know him very well. He was one of the quiet drinkers. Keep himself to himself, but I never dreamed he was capable of committing such a heinous crime. I think perhaps I failed Bob." His bony hand trembled on the cane by his side and his shoulders drooped, as if he carried a heavy burden.

"I doubt you failed with anyone, Father," Clark replied quietly. "And there's a chance he didn't commit the crime."

“You think not?” The priest’s myopic gaze brightened as it swung in Clark’s direction. “I’m not convinced myself, and if you can prove otherwise, I’d be very grateful. I believe Bob was a good man who’d lost his way. Go ahead and ask your questions, though I doubt you’ll get many of my congregation to talk. The police were here earlier and most of them clammed up or made themselves scarce. Still, I remember you were very good at getting people to open up.”

“Thank you, Father.” Clark stared at the ground, shoving his hands into his pockets in a self-conscious gesture and hoping he hadn’t lost his touch. “You can be sure,” he added, looking up, “I’ll treat them with respect.”

“Oh, I never doubted that for a moment, my son.” Father Ninian began to rise slowly and both Clark and Matt extended a hand to help him stand. “Like father, like son,” he said, a gentle smile on his face. “Now, I have to leave you. Duty calls. We hold an evening mass for those who want to partake, and I have to get ready. May God bless your investigations.”

Accompanied by the tapping of his cane, Father Ninian made his way to a small side chapel; the only part of the building that had retained its original purpose. Left alone with Matt, Clark’s shoulders tensed as he scanned the crowded room. No one looked in their direction. In fact, most of the diners were apparently engrossed in anything but the two men who had invaded their privacy. Questioning these people was not going to be easy.

“What do we do now, Dad?” Matt asked, sounding a little out of his league.

“I thought you’d worked with these people before,” Clark replied, raising his eyebrows. “Haven’t you met one or two of them?”

“Maybe ... but it’s mostly when I’m in the suit, and they treat me differently then.” Matt shifted from one foot to the other, looking even more uneasy than his father. “When I’m here as myself, I’m usually the dishwasher-in-chief.”

Matt’s awkwardness calmed Clark’s nerves. He laughed and leaned close to his son. “Hasn’t The Superman Foundation donated a dishwasher to the shelter yet?”

Matt shook his head. “No, only me, and I don’t use the powers ... well, hardly ever, and only when no one is watching.” His voice was an even whisper, but he had visibly relaxed at his father’s demeanor.

“Maybe we could do something about that.” Clark winked at Matt and started walking between the tables, searching the faces nearest to him, looking for someone who looked ready to talk. “OK, Matt, stay close to me and follow my lead.”

Since his return, Clark had noticed his son was nervous around strangers when he wasn’t in the suit. It wasn’t too surprising since he’d been the same way as a teen, and he hadn’t had the added responsibility of being a superhero. Matt was doing brilliantly as Jor-El, but he was still barely more than a boy.

Clark stopped for a moment and placed his hand on Matt’s shoulder. “I hope you know how proud I am of you?”

<You mean Jor-El,> Matt thought back, ducking his head.

<No! You’re wrong.> Clark shook his head emphatically. <Superpowers don’t make a superhero. Believe me, I’ve met quite a few people who used them the wrong way. You’re the person behind the suit, and that’s who I admire.>

<I guess.> Matt sounded a little doubtful. <I’m not sure how much I can help you here though, Dad. You’re the investigative reporter ...>

<Then let me do the questioning. If you feel like going out on your own, then jump right in. Just be yourself, and you’ll do fine.>

However, an hour later, Clark and Matt decided that the only pertinent information they’d gathered was that Bob Tanner was a quiet, decent man, even when drunk, and that most of the St.

Andrew’s residents didn’t believe he was capable of such a terrible crime.

Clark’s sketch had also drawn a blank. No one recognized the guy, but the chance of that had always been slim. In the hope that someone might eventually be able to ID him, Clark pinned a copy of the sketch on the message board, then they said their goodbyes to Father Ninian, who promised to keep them informed of any breakthroughs.

On the way back to the Jeep, they heard the wail of sirens.

“Fire?” Clark asked, looking in the direction of the distant sound. His hearing hadn’t improved quite enough for him to make out the details of the accompanying police report.

“Yeah. A big one too ...” Matt cocked his head to one side. “It’s the Old Town Theater. The place will be packed for the Christmas show. I have to go.”

“Sure you do, and you’re taking me with you ...”

“Dad ...” Matt objected, but his father cut him short.

“Son, I’m coming with you. I might not be up to speed, but if that theater’s as full as we think, then you’ll need all the help you can get.” Clark stared Matt down. “Don’t worry. I’ll be careful.”

“What about the other shelter?”

“It can wait until we sort this out. People are in danger and I might be able to help.”

For a second, Matt held his father’s stare, then nodded. “OK, let’s get moving.”

Matt spun into the suit and, grabbing Clark’s arm, zipped into the sky. The journey to their destination was just long enough for Matt to realize that carrying his father was perceptibly easier. Surely Dad was doing his own flying ... or almost, but they didn’t have time to test the theory. They had people to rescue.

Clark stared up at the building in front of him as flames shot high into the amber sky. On all sides, firemen trained their hoses on the burning edifice while paramedics set up makeshift triage units to assess the injured.

Fortunately, many audience members had already made their way outside unassisted. The Old Town Theater might have been built in the late 1800s to accommodate Vaudeville, but it had been recently renovated, and though the owners had retained the décor of the original building, it fulfilled all mandated safety rules of the current century.

Still, people remained trapped in the upper balconies, so Jor-El had gone to their rescue. He’d been a little uncertain about leaving his father, but Clark had assured him he wouldn’t do anything risky, and with the emergency services on the scene, Clark doubted there would be much for him to do other than report on the fire.

But as he watched the flames leap even higher, Clark couldn’t help but wonder why the fire had spread so quickly through the theater. Had this been the work of city’s bomber? Clark dismissed the thought from his mind as quickly as it formed. It couldn’t be. The M.O. was completely different, and besides, Clark’s own instincts were telling him the fire wasn’t the work of the man from the sketch.

Was it possible that this was an insurance job? But even that seemed unlikely. According to The Daily Planet reviews, the Christmas show was a sell-out, and he had a hard time believing the management would risk torching the structure with customers inside. So, could it have been due to shoddy construction work?

Clark ran his hand through his hair in frustration. What the heck was he doing, standing here contemplating who was at fault, while a full-scale emergency was playing out right before his eyes?

He wasn’t used to being a bystander, yet he couldn’t help feeling useless. Matt was doing what he had been born to do, and doing it well. Earlier this evening, Clark had told his son how proud he was of him, and he was ... he really was. But it was

hard to stand around and do nothing.

“Excuse me, sir.” Clark heard a voice at his elbow and turned to see one of the fire chiefs. “You’re standing too close to the building. It could be dangerous, and my men need room to work.”

The fireman looked too young to be in charge, or perhaps Clark was growing too old. Yet, he wasn’t about to give up without a fight.

He flashed his press pass. “Clark Kent, Daily Planet.” His voice was more irritable than intended as he added, unnecessarily, “I’m with the press.”

“I’m sorry, but that doesn’t change things. Please, move back behind the barriers.” The fireman stood his ground. “We have a job to do, Mr. Kent. I know you do, too, and once we have this fire under control, I’ll be happy to answer any questions you have.” He made a gesture, and when Clark finally stepped back, he returned to supervising his crew.

A blanket of desolation enveloped Clark as he walked into the shadows. Why had he insisted he come? There was nothing he could do ...

“Help!”

Clark’s head snapped up.

“Help us, we’re trapped!”

A quick look around confirmed no one else had heard the cry for help. He peered into the smoke-filled alleyway that ran down the side of the theater.

The voices became a refrain. “Help us! Please, anyone!”

Well, Clark couldn’t just stand there. He cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled after the fire chief. “Hey! There are people down here!”

But Clark’s voice was drowned out by the roar of the fire as it attempted to consume the building, and the sounds of the frantic emergency crews.

The shouts continued and Clark recognized they held a note of hysteria. He moved closer to the emergency workers and called louder. “Chief! Can anyone hear me? There are people in danger, and we need a team down here ... fast!”

Still, none of the firemen paid attention; they were just too overwhelmed to notice another cry amid the cacophony. Clark decided to try a different approach.

<Matt!> He opened up the telepathic link with some urgency. <Come in, Matt. Are you listening?>

There was the echo of a pulse beating hard inside Clark’s head, which gave Clark a clue to his son’s state of mind.

<Dad! What is it? I’m kinda busy up here. The fire teams haven’t reached this level yet, and there’s a lot of people waiting to get out.>

<Can you cope, Matt?>

<I think so. There’s a fire escape at the end of the hall, but some people got hurt in the crush, and I need to get them out. They’re starting to panic.> Clark heard Matt’s breath catch in his throat and there was an edge to his son’s voice when it came again. <Hey, sir! Stay back ... will you? There are women and kids here and if everyone takes their time, we’ll all get out safely.> There was a delay for a few seconds, in which Clark’s worry increased, for his son and for the people down the alley who appeared to be forgotten. <Sorry, Dad, I didn’t mean you, but some people are crazy ... Dad, I have to go. There will be a stampede here if I leave, and I’m not sure the stairs can cope with a riot. Was there something you wanted?> The last was asked almost as an afterthought.

<No! I’m fine. You just concentrate on what you have to do.> Clark headed back toward the alley, picking up speed as he moved. <Good luck, Matt.>

In that second, Clark made his decision. Everyone had jobs to do — and this was his. He wouldn’t back away and leave those people to die. Without wasting another second, he plunged into

the smoke, letting it hide his shift to superspeed.

But there was no one to notice. All eyes were trained on the front of the theater, where the flames licked greedily at the massive billboard. The star’s names, just hours earlier illuminated in lights, fizzled and burst with a loud pop, causing a shower of multi-colored sparks.

Clark slowed as he reached the end of the alley. There were no windows in this side wall, nothing visible to give him any indication of what was going on inside other than the heat radiating from the wall. If left alone, pretty soon the bricks would begin to buckle and collapse. He needed to free those trapped inside and get back to warn the firemen.

The ground at the back of the theater sloped away and there were steep steps twisting downward — a basement, perhaps?

Clark took the steps at a run, his feet hardly touching the concrete, and was soon standing before an ancient door. He could just make out the faint words ‘fire exit’ painted on the wood. From the look of things, this escape hadn’t been used in a long time. Confirming his suspicions was the pile of bricks, torn bags of cement and rusty tools preventing the door from budging.

But the door rattled as it was hit from inside, and Clark heard the voices once again, but this time they were close enough to be distinct.

“David, it’s no use. It’s stuck ...”

“What the hell?” The reply came through shallow pants, as the speaker fought for breath, but his anger was clear. “It’s a fire-exit!”

Clark felt his jaw drop as he saw a man kicking the door ineffectively. His X-ray vision was back?

In the dim light of the narrow passageway, backlit by an eerie red glow, Clark could just make out a man with two women huddled close behind him.

“David! Stop!” One of the women shook her head in despair. “Laura’s right. There’s no way out.”

“But we followed the signs ...”

“So the signs were wrong. We have to go back. Find another way.”

David looked horrified. “We’ll be killed if we go back into the fire ...”

“Don’t go,” Clark blurted out, shocking the three people inside.

They froze.

“Is someone there?” David finally called. “Can you help us?”

Clark had been studying the pile of rubble. The cement had leaked from the bags and, over time, the rain had turned it into concrete, plugging the door tight. But it shouldn’t be impossible for him ... He had once been Superman.

“I think so. Someone’s used this place as a dump, and the door is blocked with bricks and concrete, but I think it’s possible for me to shift it.” There was no point in letting these people know they were actually sealed inside.

“If you’re not sure, you should go get some help,” the younger of the two women sobbed. “Surely there are firemen who can get us out. We heard the sirens.”

“Believe me,” Clark replied, “I tried to get their attention, but for now, it’s just me.”

“Then try harder, you idiot!” David shouted angrily, though Clark was sure that fear goaded the man. “We need help! Fast!”

Clark had been watching the interior of the theater as best he could. At the end of the narrow corridor in which the little group stood, tongues of fire were licking at the roof. He guessed it wouldn’t be long before the passageway itself was alight. Already smoke was thickening the air and he could hear the trio coughing violently.

“There’s no time for that. Look, trust me, I’ve already cleared some of the stuff away.” Clark had been desperately tearing at the concrete with his bare hands, and amazingly, he was making

headway. The seal was cracking.

“Please, hurry,” Laura screamed, her voice cracking on a cough. “The fire is coming.”

For a nanosecond, Clark stared through the door, and what he saw made him double his efforts. Without thinking, he threw the wheelbarrow and spades aside, giving him better access to the door. His hands were working so fast now, his eyes could barely follow them. It was a race between him and the fire. He prayed that he hadn’t gambled these people’s lives against his need to prove himself.

Yet the exit was free. He squeezed his fingers into the crack between the edge of the door and the frame and heaved with all the strength he had. With a sucking noise, a gap opened up. Clark yanked and three people fell through the door, almost on top of each other.

“Quickly,” Clark instructed, picking them up off the ground, while flaming debris drifted like bright-red feathers in the heated air around them. “Up those stairs, and get as far back from the building as possible. This wall could collapse at any time.”

The leading woman stumbled, threatening to knock them all back down the staircase. Clark swept her up into his arms and climbed as fast as he could without actually flying. He still doubted he was capable of flight, not when he was carrying someone else.

“This way,” he cried, reaching the top of the steps and leading his little group into the parking lot at the rear of the theater until he believed they were safe.

Carefully, he laid the woman down, and through the tears and smoky streaks on her face, he noticed she was a young woman ... a pretty young woman, who was smiling at her rescuer.

“Thank you,” she whispered hoarsely. “I’m Laura.” She grabbed hold of his arm for support. “I thought I was going to die.”

“Yeah, me too,” David barked, his hands fisting at his sides. “I was sure we were all goners when I couldn’t get that damned door open. Hell, it was supposed to be a fire exit! If you hadn’t heard us ... we would have died. I don’t know who you are, but thanks ...” It looked that he might say more, but was rendered speechless by the realization of their narrow escape.

Clark was doubled over, his hands resting on his thighs. Now that the rush of the adrenalin had passed, his breaths were coming in shallow gasps. Still, he straightened up and extended his hand. “Clark Kent. I’m a reporter.”

“Oh my God! Your hands!” Laura gasped from her position on the ground.

There was a wailing of new sirens as Clark looked down. His hands were cut and bleeding, his nails torn. He might have been able to tap into his super strength, but, clearly, his invulnerability still hadn’t kicked back in. Perhaps that was a good thing, though. An ordinary reporter should have injuries to show for his actions in freeing these people.

“I’m OK,” he answered the three people around him, who were looking concerned. “My hands will heal, and it’s a small price to pay for getting you out.” He forced a confident smile on his face and pointed to the fire engines weaving their way between the cars in the lot, followed by a couple of ambulances. “At last, help has arrived. I thought they’d forgotten the back of the building. We should go get you checked out by the paramedics.”

“I think you’re the one who needs medical help, Mr. Kent,” Laura said compassionately, but a fit of coughing interrupted her.

“And you have probably swallowed some smoke, which can damage your lungs,” Clark replied, bending to pick her up once more, but she forestalled him and stood on her own. “We should get over to the medics to get you treated.”

“And let them know what happened,” David added, sliding his arm under Laura’s. “We’re members of the cast and we got

separated from the others in the smoke. We thought we were headed for an emergency exit, but I guess we were wrong ...”

“We went down too many floors, David!” The older woman jumped in. “I told you!”

Clark cut in quickly. “Look, it doesn’t matter now what you did — argue over it later. If you think there are still people trapped inside, we need to tell someone, and fast!”

While Clark was speaking, he was training his X-ray vision on the interior of the theater. Thank goodness it was still working, and thank goodness the backstage area seemed empty. He hoped that meant the rest of the cast had escaped by a different route.

“Come on, there’s no point in us waiting here.” Actually, Clark wanted to turn his little band of survivors over to the paramedics so he could get back to the building to ensure there were no more casualties.

As the little group started walking toward the emergency teams, they were spotted and, very quickly, were surrounded by firemen and medics, all asking questions.

“Where did you come from?” the man in charge asked.

David quickly recounted the tale of their rescue, with Laura adding her concerns for Clark’s health, and Clark found himself led to the back of one of the ambulances, his protests ignored.

“Look, I’m fine. It’s just a few scrapes,” he objected as the medic started to treat his injured hands. “I’m sure someone else needs your attention.”

“Everyone will be treated — including you.” The man had clearly heard what David and Laura had to say, and added, “You might be a hero, but you’re not invulnerable like Jor-El.”

Biting his tongue, Clark tried again to break free. “There might still be people left inside ...”

“We know that, and everything is being done to search for them,” the medic said patiently. “If it makes you feel better, it seems Jor-El has got all the people out the front of the building and he’s checking for other survivors. The fire department thinks they’ve got the fire under control, too. They’re inside the building, so there’s nothing else you can do. If you ask me, you’ve done enough already.”

Listening to the medic, Clark felt his shoulders loosen. If Matt was on the job, then he could relax. His burst of superpowers was over and he was feeling exhaustion seeping into his body as well as his brain. Had he really rescued those people? These last minutes seemed unreal ... And then David was back, clapping him on the back.

“Clark ... can I call you Clark?” But David rushed on without waiting for an answer. “I just wanted to let you know that they’re taking us to the hospital, but they think we’re all going to be fine ... thanks to you. Laura wanted me to give you this,” David said with an embarrassed grin as he hugged Clark. “Actually, she asked me to give you a kiss, but I told her I wouldn’t go quite that far.”

David’s enthusiasm was rousing Clark from his stupor, but it still seemed as if the guy was talking to him from a long way off.

“I have to go too, but we just wanted you to know how grateful we are to you for saving our lives.”

“I’m sure I didn’t ...” Clark protested.

“Are you kidding?” David asked with feeling. “I know what you did ... we all do, and we’ll be grateful forever.”

Another medic appeared at David’s back and he was shepherded away, but not before shouting over his shoulder. “I hope your hands are OK, and come see us in the hospital if you have the time. Oh, and you’re a reporter ... we’ll save an exclusive interview for you.”

The irrepressible young man’s laugh echoed back through the clamor of the fire teams as they finally got the fire under control, and Clark came to sufficiently to wonder if getting an exclusive would avert Lois’ inevitable anger.

Just when he’d promised her that he would be careful, he’d

gone and risked both his life and his secret ... again.

Chapter Ten: Christmas ... A Time of Goodwill?

Lois walked across the newsroom floor to her husband's desk, her high-heels clacking on the tile floor, attracting some considerable notice. The Planet staff seemed to hold its collective breath as the staffers waited to see if this would turn into the latest round in the ongoing saga of Lane and Kent. It was nothing new; some even had the temerity to suggest that the life of their boss and her star-reporter husband was interesting enough to warrant a column or two in the Sunday news magazine.

This time, though, it seemed that those who thrived on havoc and disruption would be disappointed.

Coming to stop by Clark's chair, Lois spoke deliberately, with the intent to reach the far corners of the newsroom. "Congratulations, Clark. Excellent story on last night's fire ... It's not every time we have a reporter on the spot ... or our very own hero making the news. And the interviews with some of the survivors were a great touch. No other paper can beat us."

She smiled broadly as she glanced quickly around. A few of her staff looked disappointed, but most were beaming. Clearly, the majority were happy to see normal service resumed between Lane and Kent ... even if they were no longer functioning as a writing team.

"What's wrong, people? Don't you have work to do?" she called out, but her eyes were twinkling. "You've seen me praising reporters before."

There was a scurry as the staff returned to what they had been doing.

Clark, however, was staring at her with raised eyebrows, trying to work out if his editor was being facetious. "What? You're not mad at me for last night?"

While he and Matt had been tending to the fire, Lois had been dealing with her own small crisis at home. Sara had returned from her gymnastic class in tears. She hadn't been chosen to compete in The New Troy high-school meet.

Their daughter had reached the age when her superpowers were emerging but she was still having difficulty controlling them, and like her father and brother before her, she firmly believed that she shouldn't use her powers to gain advantage over her teammates or competitors. Also, when her dad had returned to Metropolis, Sara had, very understandably, wanted to spend time with him, and her sport had suffered from a lack of attention.

For the first time, Sara had been left out, and she was crushed that she wouldn't be able to compete in front of her dad.

Lois knew Sara would bounce back, and that she'd be able to show off her skills to Clark some other time, but still, she sympathized with her quiet, sensible daughter. So often, in the past, Sara had shown common sense far beyond her years, but she was still a child, and was bitterly disappointed by what she considered her failure.

When Clark and Matt had gotten home at a fairly late hour, Lois had just seen her daughter off to sleep. Her fatigue, coupled with her worry for Sara, had resulted in her listening to Clark's explanation of the fire and his involvement in the rescue with surprising detachment. Clark understood why, and assumed the storm would come later when she was thinking more clearly.

Yet, this morning she was applauding both his actions and his writing.

Lois shook her head and laughed. "Clark, don't be such a lunkhead!"

With those few words and a final pat on his shoulder, she strode back to her office and closed the door, leaving Clark stunned. He sneaked a glance around him at his colleagues, but it appeared most were looking in another direction or busy at their computers. His brow creased as he stared after his wife. Would there ever be a time when Lois Lane ceased to amaze him?

Since last night, he'd been waiting for her to light into him. In fact, he'd been relieved that Sara's problem had granted him a stay of execution, because he hadn't felt up to another round with Lois, but now she appeared almost blasé about his rescue. Was it that she no longer cared?

Or maybe it was because Christmas was coming up? The season of goodwill to all men — and Kryptonians? Nah! Lois had mellowed, but she still didn't do Christmas that well.

Looking around him one more time, he rose and strolled in the direction of the editor's office. He knocked on the wooden frame, but didn't wait for a reply before sticking his head around the door.

"Can I talk to you for a minute, Lois?"

She replaced her pen and glasses on her desk and waved him in. "Sure, honey, but I only have a minute. I was about to sign the overtime claims; payroll hates to be kept waiting."

"Sorry," Clark said, already backing out the door. "I can come back later."

"No, don't. I'm always busy, and I think we need to talk. This conversation has been simmering since last night, and it could have been settled, if you hadn't run out on me this morning ..."

Clark closed the door. "Oh, that," he said, trying to sound casual. "I had to get down to the hospital really early to interview some of the survivors. They were only admitted overnight for observation. If I'd missed them, I would have had to track them down at home, and I wouldn't have made deadline."

"Clark, come and sit down, and stop hovering by the door."

At Lois' statement, Clark's eyes widened and he quickly looked down at his feet, prompting a snort from his wife.

"I meant metaphorically speaking," Lois sighed and rested her elbows on her desk. "Clark, what is wrong with you this morning? You're acting like a cat on a hot tin roof. And don't pretend that the only reason you ran out of the house this morning was to get the story."

Clark studied his injured hands for a quick moment, then shrugged. "OK, it wasn't." He looked back up at his wife. "I thought, given the fact you'd had time to think about what I'd done last night, you might not be too happy with me, and I didn't want to have another argument in front of the kids." He finally sat down. "Sara is upset enough as it is, so I decided it would be better to talk here."

Lois gave Clark a puzzled look. "But why wouldn't I be happy that you rescued these people?"

He lifted his hands into the air, displaying the dressings. "I got hurt again, and I promised you I'd be more careful. But I couldn't ..."

"Ignore a call for help?" Lois interrupted.

Clark nodded sadly. "Exactly! I'm sorry, Lois ..." he trailed off as he saw his wife's head sink into her hands.

The tension in the air was almost too painful for Clark to bear. He stared at the ceiling while trying to get his breathing under control. "Maybe I should go ..."

At that, Lois' head snapped back up and he was surprised by the wealth of love and determination on his wife's face. "Don't you dare leave," Lois instructed him. "Clark, I didn't say that you should never help out." She stood up and came around the desk, leaning against it. "At first, I admit, I got scared, and I overreacted. I wanted to put you inside a glass cage and keep you safe, forever. But that wasn't my right. Then I remembered how I fell in love with you when you told me you were here to help ..." A tiny laugh escaped. "Well, that and a few other things." For a few seconds, she was silent, her gaze locked on her husband's face. "And I love you now for the same reasons. What you did last night ... it was amazing."

Clark shoved his hands into his pockets. "I didn't do anything special."

Lois crossed the space between them. "Perhaps not ... super

... but it was very special. Three people are still alive because of you, and I'll bet they think you're pretty special."

His lips curled in a lop-sided smile. "I suppose, but they are biased."

She stood on tiptoe and whispered in his ear. "Especially Laura ... or so I hear."

Clark leaned back to look her straight in the eye, but an embarrassed flush stained his cheeks. "Lois, she's young enough to be my daughter ... well, almost. Who told you that?"

Lois schooled her features. "James was at the hospital this morning on a follow-up story to the explosion. You know, how post-traumatic stress might be affecting the staff, and he happened to talk to your ... friends." She almost giggled; her husband was adorable when he blushed. "James said the pretty actress, in particular, was very taken by you."

"I saved her life, so she's probably just very grateful," he suggested, dismissing Laura from his thoughts. "But, honey, I'm a married man. You do know that I'd never ..."

Suddenly, Clark stopped talking as Lois' mouth closed on his, and, momentarily, they communicated by means more fundamental. At last, Lois let him go, though she leaned against him for support. There was nothing like a tiny shot of jealousy to spice up a relationship ... though she knew she had nothing to worry about. Clark had the purest heart she'd ever known.

His eyes were still shut, but he found his voice and ground out a throaty, "Wow!"

This time, Lois allowed a satisfied smile to escape. "You were saying?"

Now Clark's eyes opened wide. "Saying what?"

Clearly, she'd robbed him of the power of coherent thought, and she made a gesture, encouraging him to go continue. "You were telling me that you'd never ..."

"That I'd never look at another woman. Why would I when I have my hands full with a little tornado like you?" He reached out and stopped her from retreating back to her desk. "Who can also be a little minx when she wants to be."

"But you like it," she prompted, totally forgetting her urgent workload.

"Of course I do. I fell in love with Mad Dog Lane and I've never regretted it, not even for a second." Encouraged by his wife's actions, Clark decided to throw out the rules on conduct at work. He bent his head to wife's, claiming her lips again ... longingly ... lovingly.

The muted sounds of the busy newsroom outside were forgotten for a short, magical moment. When Lois surfaced for air, her gaze was hazy, but slowly it focused on her beloved husband's face.

"And I fell in love with a very super man, and I have never regretted it, not even for a second. Clark, I might have lost my way for a little while, but I never want you to stop being all that you are ... and if that means I have to put up with some stress, then that's what I'll do."

Clark's gaze strayed over every inch of his wife, and when he spoke, his voice was filled with awe. "Lois, you are the amazing one. You make me ashamed ..."

Her hand pressed against his lips. "No more apologies or excuses. We've been through those too many times. From now on, we don't look back, only forward."

Clark nodded in agreement. "But what do you want me to do, Lois?" He took her hand and led her to the well-worn plaid couch, where he pulled her down beside him. "Last night at the fire, I didn't have a choice. I heard their screams and I was the only one around to help ... so I did what I could. No one even seems to have caught on that there was anything unusual about the rescue."

Lois visibly swallowed before she asked. "Was there?"

Holding tightly to his wife's hands, Clark took a deep breath.

"I think so. I think I used super strength to clear away the rubbish that was blocking the emergency exit."

"You only think?"

"In the heat of the moment, it was hard for me to judge."

Tiny worry lines appeared between Lois' eyebrows. "But that can't be proved ... can it? No one saw you?"

"You don't have to worry. There was no one about except me. And even if there was, it was so dark and smoky, I doubt visibility was good enough for anyone to see anything clearly." Clark halted and regarded his wife appraisingly.

"Oh ... I knew it! Something else happened, didn't it?"

"Well, yes," he admitted slowly, drawing out the suspense. "Still, you might not think it's a bad thing ..."

"Clark!" Lois demanded, her wrinkles deepening.

"OK, honey." He took a calming breath. This was massive.

"Before I even opened the door, I knew there was a man and two women inside. I saw them. Suddenly, the door disappeared and I could see everything. David and his friends, the narrow passageway and the smoke ... even the glow of flames from around the corner."

Lois brows arched in surprise, smoothing away the lines, but she managed to tamp her exultation down to a muted squeal. "Your X-ray vision came back?"

"Yes, for a bit ... but could you be more careful here, honey?" Clark asked, indicating their linked hands, where Lois was holding on for dear life. "My invulnerability certainly isn't back yet, and that hurts."

"Sorry! I'm sorry." She smiled contritely and eased up on her grip. "Aren't your hands healed yet?"

"I haven't checked under the bandages this morning, but they still feel a bit tender." Clark grinned at Lois' crestfallen expression. "Please, don't worry. If Bernie's right, I'm sure they'll be better soon. But it is good news that more of my powers are beginning to come back ... don't you think?" Clark added hesitantly, still unsure of Lois' reaction.

Lois' gaze dropped to somewhere below her husband's chin. "I guess ..." There was a pause before she said in a rush, "Yes. Yes, of course I think it's a good thing. If you do ..."

"Honey, don't be scared that I'm about to run off to be Superman again." Clark stared at Lois' bent head, admiring the silky curtain of her hair, yet resisting the urge to touch her ... for now. "Even if my invulnerability did come back, there's the problem of my missing finger. I doubt my powers will ever cure that one."

Her thumb gently stroked the back of his bandaged hand, as she continued on a lighter note. "I'm sure we could get around that one. We're Lane and Kent. No problem is too great for us to solve."

Finally, Clark gave into his need to touch her. Gently putting his finger beneath her chin, he raised her face to his. "Honey, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it ..."

Lois smiled, but deep in her eyes, Clark could see the ghost of fear. The years they had spent apart had wounded them both so deeply, and Clark wondered if their scars could ever be truly healed.

"If we ever do ..." He kissed her tenderly, then tilted his head to the side to watch her. "Helping out as a 'normal' person occasionally will do me for now."

Lois studied her husband just as carefully. "Are you sure, Clark? I don't want to cage you."

"I don't feel like I'm in a cage!" Yet there was a tiny catch in his voice, one which he quickly disguised. "When ... when I had no memory, I was trapped in a world I didn't know. Honey, you came and set me free. You saved me."

"No, that was Matt."

"No! Matt found me. You were the only one who could have persuaded me to face the unknown and get my life back," Clark

said without a shadow of doubt. Once more, he touched his lips, softly, against her cheek. “You have always loaned me your courage.”

Lois still looked uncertain as her fingers played nervously with the lapels of his jacket. “But you haven’t really got your life back ... not completely. My God, you used to fly!” she finished in desperation. “Don’t you miss that?”

With a doleful shake of his head, Clark considered his wife’s question for a few seconds, before replying resolutely, “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t ... at least, a little. But when weighed against what I have got, the lack of flying barely tips the scales.”

Clark pulled her into his arms and kissed her hard, hoping his actions would speak louder than words. When, at last, the kiss ended, he cupped her cheek with his hand. “Lois, I’ve told you this before, and I’ll keep telling you until you believe me. I have my wife and kids back; I have my family and friends, and a job I’m really beginning to appreciate again ... and, if I don’t say so myself, one I’m pretty good at ...”

The telephone on Lois’ desk began to ring and a disembodied voice crackled across the line.

“Ms Lane, this is George from payroll. Sorry to bother you, but we really need these overtime figures as soon as possible. Are they ready for us?”

Husband and wife both laughed, but it was Clark who spoke. “And speaking of jobs, I think we better get back to them.” He stood and, after a final hug, he moved toward the door. “Oh, and, Chief, I’m going back out tonight to visit the other homeless shelter. I need to get a fix on the bomber.”

The phone was still buzzing impatiently and Lois clicked the privacy key. “Clark, I know how important this investigation is, but I’d rather you didn’t tonight. Sara is so upset. I’ve talked to her, but I think she’d feel better if you had a word with her. You understand about the ‘power’ thing.” She mouthed the word power silently.

Clark smiled again. “I’ve already arranged to pick her up from school. I thought we might go somewhere we could be alone ... if you don’t mind me using the Jeep?”

“No, of course not. I’ll get a ride home from someone here, or I can use a staff car.” Lois fingered the phone. “Good luck with talking to Sara, and be careful. She’s still pretty fragile.”

“I know, and I’ll tread very carefully. See you later, honey.”

As the door swung shut, Lois depressed the button. “OK, George, calm down. I’ll have the figures to you by lunchtime.” She grimaced as she picked up her glasses and put them on. Though she’d learned to take the rough with the smooth, administration was the part of this job she least enjoyed.

Life for Lane and Kent was hectic, but they would always have time for each other, and their family.

Thankfully, Lois wasn’t aware of Clark’s thoughts as he walked back to his desk.

His lips compressed as he admitted to himself that he’d just lied to his wife. A little white lie, but a lie nonetheless. He did miss flying, but he also believed he’d be very mean-spirited not to value the gift he had been granted. A gift which was worth all his superpowers ... in any lifetime.

He had been given a second chance to love Lois Lane.

Clark parked the Jeep on the far side of the parking lot, looking around at the empty, sand-blown scene. If Sara had wanted privacy, she’d certainly picked the right place. At this time of year, dusk came early and there were only a couple other cars in the lot. At the end of the pier, he spotted two brave anglers, but, mostly, the buildings were closed and shuttered for winter, the wooden cafe in front of them tired and lonely under the heavy sky.

“You know, I was kinda hoping to grab a pizza or a burger. Are you sure this is what you want to do?” he asked his daughter,

pulling her collar up and wrapping her scarf around her neck before they left the shelter of the vehicle.

“Dad, stop!” Sara batted his hands away, her voice a bit more petulant than usual as she headed toward the boardwalk. “I don’t feel the cold as much as I used to. And besides, you said I could choose where we were going.” She glanced over her shoulder and shouted, “Come on!”

Clark thumbed the remote to lock the Jeep, wincing a little at the high-pitched beep. He quickened his step to follow his daughter, taking another appraising look at the lowering sky. Hopefully, the gusting wind would hold back the rain long enough that they would stay dry during their walk.

He shivered and did up the remaining buttons on his coat. His daughter might not feel the cold so much these days, but clearly, he did.

“Sara, wait! Of course it’s your choice.” He caught up with his daughter, tentatively putting his arm around her shoulder, and relaxing when she didn’t pull away. “I remember this used to be one of your favorite places. You always liked to be close to the ocean.” A small smile crossed his face. “But it was usually a little nicer out.”

“I like it in all weather,” his daughter informed him, staring out over the swelling water, where the waves crested like the stiff peaks of white frosting. “Did Mom put you up to this?” she asked flatly.

For a few seconds, Clark was tempted to tell another tiny fib, but Sara’s placid nature aside, she was her mother’s daughter, and she probably could tell when she was being lied to.

“Yes, she did, but today at work, and you know I suggested picking you up from school first thing this morning.” Clark hugged his daughter to his side. “Sara, I might just be learning how to be a father again, but I do know when you’re hurting, especially when I’m part of the reason you’re upset.”

Sara’s voice was forlorn. “This isn’t your fault, Dad.”

Clark bent his head toward his daughter, but could only see the top of her hat. “Isn’t it?” he asked, his gaze gentle but somehow sorrowful. “You inherited these powers from me.”

His daughter shot him a look. “But you’re not a klutz! I’m clumsy and I’m scared.” Sara poked herself in the chest with a touch of desperation. “I’m the one who can’t control them.”

Pulling her closer, Clark kept his voice even. “But you will. Sweetheart ...”

“So, this is where I get the ‘you’ll learn to control the powers’ speech?”

Clark laughed. “I’m that obvious, huh?”

“You and Mom! She told me all this last night, but I thought you might have something to say, too.” Sara’s gaze swung back to the turbulent ocean. “What if I never learn ...”

“You will,” Clark repeated, halting their progress and turning his daughter to face him. “I know this might sound like an old cliché, but it’s true. It happened to me, and I’m sure Matt had some challenges, too ...”

The chilly wind hurled a blast of sand up from the beach, interrupting Clark’s words, and as the gust swirled around father and daughter, they huddled closer, sheltering from the needle-sharp sand.

“Sara, are you sure you wouldn’t like to continue this conversation somewhere a little ... warmer?”

Surprisingly, she broke away from her father, taking off her hat and shaking her long, glossy hair into the wind, savoring the storm. “No, Dad. I want to stay. Let’s walk ... please.”

She took Clark’s hand and started pulling him along the boardwalk. He couldn’t help but concede, while thinking she reminded him of a wild silkie from a Celtic legend, so unlike his customarily gentle daughter.

Yet, she looked wonderful, too. Perhaps one day in the future, when she’d learned how to control the powers she was afraid of

right now, she would fly to the rescue ... fierce and full of fire ... a reincarnation of Ultrawoman ... though Clark suspected Vicky might have already laid claim to that title.

But for now, Clark had a job to do: Calming his daughter's fears.

"Sara, you do know it's not your fault you didn't get chosen to compete in this meet? And I'm not disappointed or upset. There will be lots of other occasions when I can see you compete ..."

"Not the way I'm performing right now. I doubt I'll ever be chosen again." Her bitter laugh was swept away on the wind. "And before you tell me about you or Matt, I can't remember him giving up sports ... and you played football in college. I've seen the trophies!"

"Yes, in college, after I'd learned to control my strength. One time, when I played in high school, I dislocated Pete Ross' shoulder. It was an accident, but I was so scared of hurting anyone else again, I stopped playing for a year," Clark reminisced quietly, while he released Sara's hand to link his arm through hers and draw her closer. "As for Matt — I missed most of the years when his powers were developing, so I can't really comment, but I do know that he only plays soccer and basketball because he wants to fit in. He's not a serious competitor." He shook his head, squeezing her arm gently. "Not like you."

Sara sighed, starting to pick up the pace. "You mean the way I used to be."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, sweetheart." He smiled gently, his eyes filled with love as he fell into step beside her. "You know, you're so much like your mother ..."

"Not me!" She shot him an incredulous look. "You mean Matt ... or Vicky. Everyone tells me I take after you ... and I don't really mind that."

Clark's eyes twinkled. "I'm glad you don't mind ... but there's more of your mom in you than you think." He smiled at his oldest daughter. "You both push yourself to be the best, but sometimes, just trying to be the best is more than enough."

Glancing around him at the stormy landscape, Clark wondered if he even had the right to resurrect tales of past heartaches, but there was some relevance, and Sara had probably heard this story anyway. "I don't want to discredit your grandfather, but when your mom was a kid he told her that ninety-eight points on a test left two points for improvement ..."

"Granddad did?" Sara asked, her brows shooting up in surprise, a characteristic reminiscent of her dad's.

Oh, great, Clark thought. She hadn't heard the story, and he couldn't help but feel a sudden pang of guilt. He made a silent apology to his father-in-law. "Yeah, but please don't judge him too harshly. When he realized he'd missed out on the best years of his daughters' lives because of his selfishness, he tried to make amends. Over the years, he became a pretty decent dad. Your mom forgave him," he added, trying to coax a smile out of his daughter. "And you have to admit he's a great grandfather."

"I guess so ... and I did know he and Mom didn't get along too well once upon a time. That must have been terrible for her."

"It was," he agreed, remembering how driven Lois had been in the early days. "And his attitude hurt your mom for longer than she would admit." Clark stopped again to look his daughter directly in the eye. "But I'm not Sam, Sara. Heck, if any of you kids got anywhere close to ninety-eight on a test, I'd be over the moon. I'm proud of all of you ..."

"But, Dad, I didn't try!" There was a catch in Sara's voice as she interrupted her father, and she refused to meet his concerned gaze. "I didn't even concentrate. I was dropped because I hadn't put in the work ..."

"I know."

"You do?" Sara ducked her head even further and her voice was small. "Oh, Daddy, I just wanted you to see me and be proud

of what I could do ..."

Clark felt like crying for his daughter, but Sara needed his encouragement, not his sympathy. "But I am proud ... very proud. You missed out on your classes because of me. When I was sick, you spent time with me instead of going to the gym. Sweetheart, I think that makes you a very special person — to sacrifice something you love for someone else."

"No! It wasn't a sacrifice. I wanted to be with you. We all did." Finally, Sara looked into her father's eyes. "We love you, Dad, and I'm not sorry for spending time with you ... but I'm Superman's daughter. I thought I'd be able to do that and still be good at sports! Matt could, and I'll bet you could too, before they stole your powers."

"Maybe, but after years of experience." Clark ran his finger gently down his daughter's cheek. "Sara, you've chosen a sport which requires lots of skill and poise ... and you're out there on your own. That's harder than anything Matt or I ever tried. And I know that in addition to trying to handle the powers, you're also trying very hard not to use them to your advantage. That's a tall order, and you have to give yourself a chance to adjust. Please don't do anything rash and give up on your dreams."

An embarrassed flush colored Sara's cheeks, already tinged pink by the wind. "I hadn't really thought about giving up completely, Dad."

"Good!" Clark hugged Sara to his side. "To tell the truth, I never thought you would. Lane women never give up — it's a family trait."

"I thought that was a Kent family trait?" Sara's voice seemed less somber. "I'm sure Grandma Martha never gave up on anything ..."

"No, she didn't!" Clark chuckled fondly, thinking of his mother. "Even now, she's still a force to be reckoned with." The sun was sinking on the far horizon, yet the odd streak of gold still reflected on the black clouds over the city, and he felt his spirits rise. He walked on toward the sand dunes in the distance, beginning, like his daughter, to feel exhilarated by the turbulent weather. "I think the women on both sides of our family are stronger than the males."

"Dad, you shouldn't do yourself down either." Sara gave her father another glance through lowered eyelashes. "I know how much you've come through ... and none of it was your fault. I've been thinking that maybe you and I could help each other."

Clark leaned back to get a clearer view of his daughter. "You think I need help?" His eyebrows knitted together in a grimace, but he quickly added, "No, don't answer that ... I can do with all the support I can get. Like you, I'm not handling the fluctuating powers very well. I mean, I've been here before ... it's why your mother thought I could give you advice, but to be honest, I'm struggling myself."

"Dad, that's stupid!" Sara said with a derisive shake of her head. "My powers are coming and going randomly, but it seems to me that you're able to tap into your strength when you need it most ..."

Suddenly, Clark froze, and not due to the chilly weather. "Sara ..." The certainty on his daughter's face reached him as a flicker of knowledge flared deep in his soul. "You think that in an emergency I can channel the superpowers?"

"Yes, Dad. Isn't that what has been happening? It's due to adrenaline ... or something." Sara patted her father's hand and together they strolled onward, she leaning into his side, giving and receiving support. "I've read that it can happen to ordinary people when they're desperate ... like a mother trying to save her child from a burning car ... so why shouldn't it happen to you? But you've got more strength to tap into than most people. You've got to admit that it makes sense."

This time, Clark's laugh rang out into the wind loudly and sincerely. "You know, it's a true saying ... from the mouth of

babes ...”

Sara jabbed her father in the ribs. “Hey, I’m fourteen years old ... almost fifteen. I am not a baby!”

With another laugh, Clark rubbed his side where Sara’s elbow had connected. “OK, I agree, but could you please warn me when you’re about to hit me, so we can coordinate our use of the powers.” He winked at her. “Oh, and try to remember that my invulnerability is one of the things that isn’t back to super yet.”

Sara’s face fell. “I’m sorry. See, that’s what I’m worried about. I don’t know my own strength!”

Clark swung his daughter around again, tilting her chin up with his gloved hand. “Sara, I was only teasing. That was a normal dig, and you didn’t hurt me. I promise.” He bent forward and placed a light kiss on her cheek, eliciting a smile.

From out of the darkening sky, Clark felt the first telltale raindrops hit his face, and he pulled his collar up. “So we’re agreed we’re going to support each other every way we can, but now do you think we could get back to the car and find a nice, warm restaurant. I don’t know about you, but my seesawing powers make me hungry, and there isn’t enough sun around to recharge our solar batteries. Would you allow me to take you out to dinner, my dear?” he asked, bowing with a flourish.

Sara’s lighthearted laugh trilled out as she pulled her hat back over her windswept curls. “I’d be delighted, sir!” she replied coquettishly, giving Clark a glimpse of what he had to face in the years to come. She’d knock dead any young male with a pulse ... and that was without the use of her superpowers.

Lois’ and Clark’s lives as parents promised to be pretty interesting in the future.

Yet, he felt very comfortable with this particular role. Being a father was one of the best jobs in the world — right up there with being a husband to Lois Lane.

Next morning, in Hyperion Vistas Retirement Home, a few blocks from Lois and Clark’s brownstone, an old woman was being helped from her bed into a reclining chair by the large bow-window of her room. It was 9:30 on the dot, and the woman had already partaken of her breakfast in bed ... her only concession to her age of 93 years.

Her aide arranged the woman’s cashmere shawl around her shoulders before spreading a blanket across her lap and tucking it around her emaciated frame. The nurse then turned her attention to brushing out the lady’s thinning locks, being especially careful not to bruise the paper-like skin which showed through her white hair.

Ina Bowen-Timmons was the nursing home’s richest resident — and its most demanding. Her body might be failing, but her will was as strong as a steel blade, and her tongue as sharp.

Woe become any of the staff who inadvertently fell short of Miss Bowen-Timmons’ very high standards, a circumstance that seemed to occur fairly frequently. The old dame would extract her pound of flesh before having them moved onto other duties. Not that that seemed to disappoint many of the workers in the home. In fact, they usually felt greatly relieved, unless, of course, she saw to it that they were fired ... and she could do that too, being the founder and the largest share owner in the company which ran the nursing home.

In fact, the large mansion had once been her home. The Bowen family had owned a textile mill in Metropolis and played a minor role in the city’s high society for a number of generations, but Ina was the last of her line ... or so she let everyone believe, and the mill had left the family’s ownership almost a century ago.

Her father, Arthur Timmons, had been a captain in the British Royal Navy until he met his American wife during World War I. At the end of the war, he had resigned his commission, under duress, and emigrated to the US to work in the family business in

Metropolis.

Soon after Arthur had joined the firm, his father-in-law had died unexpectedly, leaving him in charge. For some time, he’d tried very hard to step into the patriarch’s shoes, but he was in over his head. Believing himself to be a better sea captain than one of industry, he’d sold the company for a very large sum of money, which he’d promptly deposited in the Bank of England. Once his family was provided for, he’d gone back to sea with a great sense of relief.

Arthur’s lack of business acumen and his implicit trust in his native country’s banking system had proved to be a great stroke of luck. By the end of the 1920s, the bottom had fallen out of Wall Street and the Great Depression had begun.

Yet, while Arthur pursued his life as a captain of a merchant vessel plying the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Ina grew up in a house full of women; her puritanical grandmother, her lovely, but frail mother and, in time, her baby sister.

As a young child, Ina had looked forward to the infrequent visits of her handsome, happy-go-lucky father but, in time, she came to resent him stealing her mother’s attention, and she soon realized that after his visits, her mother would often be left expecting another child. There were many pregnancies, but only one other resulted in the birth of a live baby. Eventually, her mother’s state of health failed, and she died while attempting to carry her seventh child to term.

Her mother’s death soured Ina completely. She blamed her father in particular, and men in general. She refused to talk to him when he returned, though he had attempted to get back into her good graces over a number of visits.

Finally, he gave up and didn’t return to the family home. Five years later, he went down with his ship during a monsoon in the Indian Ocean. Ina even blamed him for that, though he’d left his daughters in the care of his mother-in-law, and financially well-off.

Ina’s devout grandmother became her role model. She found sustenance in her duty to the church, a habit she continued to the present day. But not for Ina, the gentle faith of Jesus — she believed in duty, penitence and sacrifice.

And, as her sister grew, she recognized their mother’s weaknesses and their father’s carefree character in the child. Ina was extremely disappointed, and resolved to reform her sister’s flighty ways.

It wasn’t Ina’s fault that she’d failed.

“Are you warm enough, Miss Bowen-Timmons?” the young aide asked solicitously as she pulled back the heavy drapes, revealing gardens covered lightly with a layer of snow. “That wind is blowing straight from the Arctic and it wouldn’t surprise me if we get more snow.” The girl shivered and rubbed her hands up and down her arms, continuing to chat, unaware that her charge was looking at her with daggers drawn. “It feels cold in here too.”

She hurried over to the thermostat and was shocked to see the temperature level set so low. “Would you look at that. They haven’t turned this up for winter.” She stretched out her hand to rectify the fault, but was halted by the hoarse, yet commanding voice of the old woman.

“Don’t touch that!” The female’s prattle had eventually penetrated Ina’s aloof manner. “Do you think this home is made of money?”

The young woman looked slightly alarmed, but she persisted. “But you’re in danger of catching hypothermia in this cold room.”

Ina was not persuaded. “The cost of heating this home is already extortionate. We can’t just go turning up thermostats whenever we like. If there’s an unexpected cold spell, the residents can wear a few extra clothes.” Her claw-like hand pointed toward a closet in the corner of the room. “Fetch me

another wrap ... the plaid one. It's the warmest."

While the aide followed instructions, the door to the room opened and the nursing supervisor came in carrying the mail. Normally, delivering mail wasn't the supervisor's job, but she made an exception for the home's most important resident.

"Good morning, Miss Bowen-Timmons. It's a fine morning, but a little chilly. Are you warm enough?"

"I'm fine, thank you." Though Ina was polite, she treated the boss with only a little less condescension than she had the aide. "The girl there is fetching me another shawl."

The supervisor glanced in the direction of the closet to see the rather nervous looking young woman emerge. "Ah, I see Liz is attending to you this morning," she said, turning back to the old lady. "She's our newest recruit and comes highly recommended. I'm sure she'll look after you very well."

"That remains to be seen!" Ina declared belligerently, her watery eyes studying the new recruit. "Don't dither, girl. Bring me the shawl."

But Liz couldn't help but hesitate. "I wasn't sure if this was the right one," she said, holding the item out for inspection, and trying hard not to fidget like a preschooler.

"I said plaid! Don't you recognize plaid?" Ina hissed, her head weaving forward in the manner of a snake readying to strike. "It's the tartan one on the top shelf."

The supervisor walked a little further into the room. "Miss Bowen-Timmons, I hope you'll give Liz a chance. This is only her second week here, and so far she's been doing very well."

"Where's Nancy? You know I like to stick to the people I know." Ina changed tactics and cowered into her chair, her hands trembling and her voice sounding weak and thready. "I'm an old woman. I don't cope well with new things."

"Nancy called in sick," the supervisor explained, striving for patience. She'd been here before with Ina. There was nothing weak about Ina's brain, but she occasionally used her age and frailty to manipulate a situation. "Nancy has come down with that flu virus which has been going around ..."

Ina gave up her pretense to tut in disapproval. "We didn't take to our beds with something as trivial as the flu when I was young."

The supervisor tried to keep calm — in Ina's younger days people often died from the flu. "That's not exactly true, Miss Bowen-Timmons," she said reasonably. "But, regardless, we have two more staff who are sick and it looks like one of our other ladies might be ill. I do hope we're not in for an epidemic, but most of our residents have been immunized. However, we're going to be short-staffed for a few days, so please try to be polite to Liz, who has kindly offered to take over Nancy's duties. I'm sure you will get along."

The disgusted look on Ina's face led the supervisor to believe that this was a forlorn hope, but she had other duties to attend to; other residents who weren't as difficult as Miss Bowen-Timmons.

Still, she continued in a pleasant tone, "I've brought your mail, and you even have a package today." The old lady occasionally got mail from her solicitor or her church, but seldom any packages, and she didn't recognize the printing. "Perhaps a Christmas present ..."

"Why would anyone want to send me a gift?" Ina barked.

It was a rhetorical question, but Liz ran in where angels feared to tread. "Because it's Christmas soon, and people give gifts at Christmas."

Ina shook her head and a dribble of saliva ran down her chin. "I never did hold with the custom. Christmas is far too commercialized these days. People getting themselves in debt to have the latest gimmick of a gift. Christmas is a time to celebrate the birth of our savior," she ended piously, closing her eyes in the hope that the two women would leave her to her own thoughts.

The supervisor chose to make her escape. "I'll just leave this

here for you," she said, laying the parcel on the small table by Ina's side. "Perhaps you can open it later ..."

She wanted to add 'when you're in a better mood', but she didn't quite dare. On the whole, she enjoyed her job, and she needed the money. Besides, in her opinion, hell would freeze over before Ina's mood would get any better.

"Will we see you for lunch, Miss Bowen-Timmons?" she inquired on her way out the door.

"I believe I have a headache starting, so I'll eat in my room," the lady in the chair replied without turning around.

It was the reply the supervisor had expected, but before she left, she decided to give Liz an excuse to leave. "Are you coming, Liz?"

But clearly, Liz wasn't so faint-hearted. "I believe Miss Bowen-Timmons' closet could do with tidying out, so if you've nothing else for me to do, I'd like to stay."

The supervisor returned Liz's smile. "Not right at this moment, but if you could come back to the floor before coffee at eleven, I think we can spare you to look after our favorite lady." The woman almost choked on these last words as she closed the door with a firm click. She pitied poor Liz. It was obvious she was new and didn't know what she was letting herself in for, or she wouldn't have willingly suggested remaining in the lion's den.

The phone on Clark's desk rang and he picked it up absentmindedly, while he continued to concentrate on his latest column for the Sunday magazine. Lois had asked him to do a report on Jilin and its community, and he'd happily agreed.

"Clark Kent speaking," he said politely.

"Clark, is that you?" the caller asked.

Suddenly, Clark's attention switched to the call as he recognized the voice. "Father Ninian?" He leaned back in his chair. "How are you?"

"I'm doing fine, Clark. This cold weather makes my old bones ache, but I'm as well as can be expected," Father Ninian replied with his usual cheerfulness. "But how are you? I read in the paper about your latest heroics and your injuries. You are a brave man, Clark."

"Thank you, Father, but those injuries are superficial and they're healing quickly." Actually his wounds had closed up completely, leaving the new flesh fairly tender, the remaining bandages were only a disguise. He knew it was necessary, but he couldn't help but blush at the fabrication. "I did what anyone else would have ... nothing spectacular."

"I'm not so sure," the priest said, his voice becoming weary. "It seems to me that there are too many people prepared to pass by on the other side of the road these days. But I didn't call you to give you a sermon." His tone brightened again. "I have information for you ... or I have someone here who has."

"About the bombing?" Clark sat up straighter, hoping for a substantial lead at last.

"Not exactly ... but certainly someone who knows a little about the person in your drawing." Father Ninian lowered his tone dramatically before continuing, sounding like a contact out of a spy movie. "Mind you, I don't know how reliable the information could be. I'm sure Patrick thinks he's telling the truth, but he's been on the streets for nigh on thirty years ... and been drinking for longer, I'm sure. He has been known to see pink elephants before today."

"Is he there with you, Father?" Clark lost a little of his animation at Father Ninian's words, but he forced himself to remain positive. "Would he talk to me?"

"Yes, I have him here, and I think you should come over as soon as you can, because I don't know how long I can keep him here. He hasn't had a drink since last night, when he talked to me about the sketch ... except for a little glass of communion wine I

gave him to persuade him to stay. I'm sure the good Lord will forgive me for my sins, but Patrick was in sore need of the hair of the dog that bit him. If he didn't get it here, I'm certain he'd go looking elsewhere, and without tying him down, I wasn't sure how else to stop him." The old man took a large gasp of air, after rushing through his story.

Clark couldn't hold back a smile. "You are a saint, Father. Try to stop him from leaving and I'll be there as soon as possible." It was at times like these that he missed flying.

"I'll do my best," the priest chuckled. "There's still some wine left in the bottle ... but best get here before it's finished, or before Patrick becomes totally inebriated. I doubt I'll ever reach sainthood ... not when I'm giving away holy wine."

"Thanks, Father. I'll be there soon."

Clark replaced the phone on its cradle and, looking around, he spied Jim heading for Lois' office.

"Hey, Jim, can you tell Lois that I might have a lead on one of my stories, but I've got to run ... oh, and I need to borrow the Jeep." He pulled his coat on as he backed toward the elevators, checking he had a set of car keys in his pocket.

"Sure thing, CK," Jim answered, juggling a number of files in his arms. "Do you know how long you'll be?"

Clark called over his shoulder. "I'm not sure, but tell Lois I'll finish the Jilin article on time, even if I have to work late." He pressed the button to call the elevator. "Tell her I'll call if I'm not going to make it back by lunch time."

The elevator arrived and he hurried inside, heading down to the car lot and not to the roof as he once would have done if he was in a hurry. Not being able to fly to emergencies or interviews was pretty inconvenient.

All things considered — he decided he really did miss the flying!

Back at the nursing home, Liz had finished tidying Miss Timmons' closet. The old lady had some good stuff, but it was mostly old-fashioned, and very plain ... yet you couldn't hide quality. Clearly the old lady was still rich.

Liz had heard all about Miss Bowen-Timmons. Most of the staff had a story or two to tell about the old woman, and none of them complimentary, but Liz was kind-hearted and she preferred to give the lady the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps she was just lonely. Liz had been told that apart from her minister and solicitor, no one bothered to visit.

As Liz came back into the room, she saw Miss Timmons' eyes were shut, but she didn't think the lady was sleeping. There was something watchful about the figure in the chair ... yet something forlorn too.

"There now, Miss Timmons, your clothes are all stored away neat and tidy again, and I've put the winter clothes to the front ..."

"How dare you shorten my name!" The lady protested indignantly, straightening her spine as best she could. "It's Miss Bowen-Timmons!"

Liz gulped. She'd been shortening the name in her head because it was such a mouthful, but clearly the lady was not amused.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. I didn't mean to insult you. I've never known anyone with two second names before. You must be a real important person," Liz said soothingly.

"I do have a certain status in this city," Miss Bowen-Timmons answered, her voice mellowing just the smallest bit, though she knew well that her family's influence had waned long ago.

Liz wasn't about to give up on her attempt to befriend the lady. She'd worked with old people for a number of years and learned how to get around them. It seemed that Nancy had found a way to work her way into Ina's good books, so she didn't see

why she couldn't do the same ... and if it made her position more secure, then so much the better. Her husband had lost his job due to downsizing and the family needed her salary.

"I'm sure you do," Liz agreed, but Ina had closed her eyes again, dismissing her. Only Liz still wasn't ready to leave, not without leaving a good impression of herself with the old lady. She searched around her for a reason to stay, and her glance fell on the package on the side-table. "Look, Miss Bowen-Timmons, you haven't opened your mail. It really could be a gift."

"I have no one who would send me gifts," Ina answered, yet a pitiful note had crept into her voice, and this time Liz didn't believe it was engineering.

Liz moved closer, but decided not to sit in the opposite chair. "Don't you have family?" she asked, sounding interested ... and she was. This old lady was somehow pathetic.

There was a long pause as a tear squeezed itself free of Ina's eye and trickled down her cheek. "No ... not anymore. I had a sister once, but she died a long time ago."

"I'm sorry," Liz said candidly. She'd been an only child, and though she still had both her parents, she would have enjoyed a wider family circle. "And you don't have any children of your own?"

"Don't be stupid, girl," Ina snapped back. "I'm a Miss. I have never been married. Of course I don't have children!"

Liz let the old lady's spite wash over her, hoping, once more, that the bad temper sprang from loneliness. "And there's no one else ... no nephews or nieces?"

"Hhmm ... I had a nephew once," the old lady admitted, her head nodding, but whether in agreement or an involuntary twitch, Liz couldn't be sure. "My sister's son. I gave him a home when his no-good father ran away."

Ina looked across at the aide, giving her an appraising glare. The foolish girl had opened the floodgates of her memory ... so, now Liz could hear the whole sordid tale.

"Sit down, girl." She waved her hand over to a high-backed chair and waited until Liz was seated before she continued, though her gaze wandered back to the garden. "It doesn't seem like a life time ago that I used to take my baby sister to play in those grounds. Those were the good times ... before we were abandoned."

There was a long silence, and Liz thought that Ina might have really fallen asleep, but finally, she went on ... her words quiet and edged with bitterness.

"In the end though, my sister grew up to be as foolish as my mother. Both of them believed in the false promises of a Lothario. Only that man was worse than my father — he was off the minute he realized I had control of the purse strings. Didn't hang around long enough to know if he had a son or a daughter." Ina's mouth tightened into a very thin line, her cracked lips almost disappearing. "He left me to care for them ... and I did. I tried my utmost to make both of them into god-fearing people, but it was no good. My sister died on me, and the boy, Thomas ... well, the least said about him the better." The old woman's bony hands gripped her blanket. "I fed and clothed him, sent him to a good school; took him to church every Sunday, and saw that he read the bible every day. I prayed over him ... but nothing worked. He was a wastrel like his father ..."

Feeling a certain sympathy for young Thomas, Liz was almost afraid to ask. "What happened to him?"

"You mean the boy?" Ina turned back to the young woman, but she didn't wait for an answer. "He was never a good scholar, but I managed to get him into a reputable college. But was he grateful? No! He ran away. I've had a letter or two from him over the years, but it's mostly when he's needing money for some scheme or another."

"And did you reply?"

"No. Of course not. I did my best for him and he threw my

efforts back in my face. Why should I help him when he felt he needed me?" The whine was back in the old lady's voice. "He never considered that I might need him!"

The old lady was lonely and wanted to renew her ties with her nephew. Perhaps Liz could lend a hand.

"Miss Bowen-Timmons, perhaps the package is from Thomas. He must know you're still living here, if this has been your family home ... forever. Maybe he's sending you a Christmas gift to make amends for leaving you."

"Oh yes, he used to live here, so I imagine he knows ... but I doubt he'd send me anything ..." Another tear slipped unheeded down the wrinkled face.

"But you won't know until you look. Would you like me to open it for you?" Liz asked gently.

Again there was another silence, broken only by Ina's rasping breath as she stared at the brown-wrapped package.

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to look," she replied eventually. "And if he did want to come see me ... I suppose it wouldn't hurt to give him permission. The good Lord teaches us to forgive."

"Of course he does, Miss Bowen-Timmons, and especially at Christmas." Liz lifted the package and looked for the edge of the wrapping, her hands working nimbly. "Christmas is a time for good will. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could spend this Christmas with your nephew ..."

Chapter Eleven: In the Bleak Midwinter

Clark was shown into a small room off the chancel, which appeared to do double duty as a storage room and office. He moved past some shelves filled with boxes into the main part of the room to find Father Ninian pouring a drink into a glass. Clark grinned — more sacramental wine, he surmised, while hoping that his contact was still fairly sober.

"And that's the last I'm giving you until you've talked to my friend, Mr Kent. I want you somewhat coherent when he gets here," Father Ninian said, echoing Clark's concerns.

"Good morning, Father," Clark said, walking eagerly into the center of the room.

The old priest's hand jerked as he swung toward the voice, completely oblivious of the havoc he had caused, until he heard an outraged squawk from his companion.

The man in the armchair moved quickly to steady the bottle in the priest's hand. "Would you look at what you're doin', Father. That's too precious stuff to be throwin' away."

The father glanced back to the table where a red stain was spreading across the wood. His friend, however, was busily wiping up the spilled wine — only Patrick was using his fingers, then greedily licking off every last drop.

The priest's eyes narrowed behind his glasses. "Patrick, Patrick, what are you doing?" He nudged the man's hands aside, using his handkerchief to mop up the mess in a more appropriate manner.

Patrick threw him a disappointed look, but he ducked his weather-beaten face as he dried his hands on the front of his coat. "Well, it is communion wine," he mumbled. "Hasn't it been blessed ... or something?"

"You mean, you'd rather it went down your throat?" Father Ninian sounded resigned, but the quirk of his lips showed he was more amused than reproachful. "And no, not yet ... or you'd be going without."

"But I've only had three ... and you couldn't have found a smaller glass if you'd tried, Father," the homeless man lifted the glass and stared at it with mournful eyes. "You're a hard man, Father," he added, before downing the last of the contents.

Father Ninian shook his head in despair and turned back to Clark, beckoning him forward. "Clark, my boy, come in and sit yourself down. I'd like you to meet Patrick."

Clark offered his hand to the man in the chair, but Patrick

simply stared at him as if he were some alien being ... which he actually was, but Patrick didn't know that. This wasn't exactly the best of starts, but Clark had interviewed hostile witnesses before, so he hid his apprehension and pulled up a wooden chair, leaving the remaining armchair for Father Ninian.

The priest seemed grateful for Clark's thoughtfulness and sat down, the worn leather cushions sighing as they took the old man's weight. "Patrick has something to tell you, Clark. Don't you, Patrick? That's if you haven't forgotten already."

A sly gleam lit up Patrick's bleary eyes as he glanced first at Clark then the father. "Do I?" He thought for a moment, looking puzzled. "My memory isn't so good these days, Father Ninian. It tends to come and go. I'm getting old, like you, Father. Though it's a funny thing, but a little libation seems to oil the wheels ..."

The priest grunted. "It's too much libation that's got you here in the first place ..."

"Father Ninian, please don't," Clark cut in quickly, holding up his hand. He was beginning to doubt that this Patrick could tell him anything relevant, and certainly nothing which could be considered solid evidence by the police, but he had to try.

"Patrick, if you have something to tell me, I'd be very grateful. The man you thought you recognized is very dangerous. He's killed before, and I think he's going to kill again, unless you can help me stop him."

Patrick shifted his indistinct stare to Clark, his adam's apple bobbing up and down nervously. "Hey, I'm an old man. I can't do nothin' like that!"

Clark leaned forward, resting his arms lightly on his thighs in what he hoped was a non-threatening manner. "I don't expect you to do anything physical, Patrick. Just tell me what you told Father Ninian." He stayed silent for a second or two, giving the man time to calm down, before he asked in a sympathetic voice. "Bob was a friend of yours, wasn't he?"

"Kinda! We was both loners, ya know ... didn't like company much, but Bob had been around almost as long as me," Patrick sighed, staring at his dirty fingernails. "I'm gonna miss him."

Father Ninian leaned over and patted Patrick's sleeve. "Me too, Patrick. Me too."

Clark saw a faint chink in Patrick's armor, and though he hated manipulating people, it was for the greater good. "The police and the media are blaming Bob for the bombings. They believe Tanner is the killer ..."

"That ain't true!"

For the first time Patrick looked animated, and Clark pressed home his advantage. "I agree. I don't believe he did it either, Patrick."

Again Patrick stared at Clark, weighing up the truth of the newspaper man's statement. "Them people who think Bob could kill anyone don't know nothin' about him," he finally said with a touch of bitterness.

"But you did. You'd been on the streets together for a long time. I'd say you probably knew him better than anyone." Clark let Patrick think for a moment before continuing gently, "Wouldn't you like to help me get justice for poor Bob? I'm sorry I can't bring him back, but I can make sure he won't be remembered as a murderer."

Patrick glanced over at the priest as if seeking reassurance.

"Come on, Patrick." The priest nodded his head, smiling encouragingly, "Clark is a good man, but he needs your help." And as Patrick's eyes fell on the bottle on the table, he added, "I'll even give you another drink, after you've told Clark everything." Father Ninian glanced heavenwards, seeking forgiveness for his unethical coercion.

The guarded expression finally left Patrick's face to be replaced with one of fear as he asked Clark, "You think the guy I saw with Bob was the bomber?"

"It's possible."

Patrick shrank into the chair. “Then I ain’t tellin’ you nothing! He could come after me next.”

“No!” Clark stated, immediately sitting up straight. “That will not happen. I always protect my sources. I promise you — your name will never show up in print.”

But at those words, Patrick had a slight change of heart. “I never said nothin’ about never.” He too squared his shoulders. “And if I helped you put this bad guy away ... I’d be a hero.”

A tiny grin turned up the corner of Clark’s lips, which he quickly hid. “Yes, you would. I think the people of Metropolis would be very grateful to you for putting the villain away.” Clark’s face became serious once more. “And you’d have cleared Bob’s name.”

“I’d like that,” Patrick said, smiling at last, though his faded eyes filled with tears at the memory of his fellow outcast. After a moment he went on, his voice sounding stronger. “What do you want to know?”

Clark tried not to look too eager, but he slid his chair nearer to Patrick, taking out his notebook and pen; the man would probably bolt at the sight of an audio-recorder. “If you could just tell me who the guy in the drawing is ...”

“Oh, I don’t know him.” Patrick shook his head back and forth.

Clark gripped the pen, the pressure threatening to break it in two. Was this going to be another dead end?

“I know his name though ...”

“Bob told you?” Clark interrupted, eager for information.

“Nah! I told you. Bob was a loner. He kept himself to himself ... like me.” Patrick tried to make himself more comfortable in his chair, but he couldn’t help from throwing a longing look at Father Ninian and the bottle of wine.

“Patrick, I said after you talk,” the priest repeated. “And if you could speed up a little, I’m sure we’d all be very happy ... you included.” Father Ninian stared pointedly at the bottle and the empty glass.

“OK, Father, I get the message. You’re gonna make me work for my reward,” Patrick snorted and, turning back to the reporter again, he went on resignedly. “I heard Bob call this guy Tom ...”

Clark’s instincts went on high alert. “You overheard a conversation between Bob and this man?”

“Sorta ... not the whole thing, you understand ... oh, and it ain’t Tom ...”

“Do you know anything I can use?” Clark asked, letting his irritation show. This old drunk could be playing Father Ninian and him on a string in the hope of caging a free drink or two. Wanting to strangle a witness wasn’t exactly good interviewing techniques, but now he understood exactly where Lois had been coming from all those years ago.

But Patrick seemed oblivious to Clark’s frustration. “It was Thomas. I remember, ‘cause the dude got really upset when Bob called him Tom ...”

Clark exchanged another glance with the priest. Perhaps Patrick was telling the truth. He kept his voice even as he asked, “And can you remember when this conversation happened?”

“Course I do!” Patrick answered indignantly. “My memory might not be so good when I’m drunk ... but there ain’t much chance of that now, is there?” He shot the priest another wounded look, before continuing, “It was the day I found my new coat.” His fingers stroked the thick material reverently. “It’s a little big, but it’s good wool and it’ll keep me warm this winter.”

Clark surveyed Patrick’s coat with its worn collar and cuffs. The garment had certainly seen better days and was a few sizes too big. Patrick had cinched it around his waist with a length of rope, yet it had been made of good quality wool and was very likely an improvement on the man’s usual attire. Clark made a mental note to talk to the Superman Foundation about providing some warm clothing for the homeless people under Father

Ninian’s care.

But he quickly returned to the reason for his visit. “That’s a really nice coat, Patrick, but can you remember when you got it?”

“The day before the bomb went off,” Patrick announced, and folding his arms across his chest, he sat back in his chair, satisfied that he’d gotten both men’s undivided attention.

Father Ninian broke the pointed silence. “Are you sure, Patrick? This could be really important ... so you have to be sure.”

“Father, I’m a drunk not an idiot!” Patrick grouched, though his words didn’t seem to reassure his listeners.

“Maybe you should tell us what happened in your own words, Patrick,” Clark suggested, trying very hard to stay objective. This was the closest he’d got to a solid lead, even though his first witness might not be too reliable.

Patrick narrowed his eyes at Clark. “And you won’t butt in no more? ‘Cause it just confuses me. I’m an old man,” he repeated in a whining voice.

“No, I promise. I won’t interrupt.” Clark turned his hands, palms upward, in a gesture of surrender. “Just take your time and try to tell me everything you can remember.”

“Right! Remember, no interruptin’.” The old man nodded and gripped hold of the arms of his chair. His hands were beginning to shake and he would have dearly liked another shot of Father Ninian’s wine, but he knew better than to ask. He swallowed hard and began. “I’d gone over to Chapel Hill that day. It’s a long walk, but my old coat had burst at the seams and was lettin’ the rain in. I’d heard the recycle center there had some good stuff, so I figured it’d be worth the effort. It must have been my lucky day, ‘cause I met old Josie Kidd on the way over, and some snobby bird had given her a five dollar bill. Turned out it was Josie’s birthday, so we shared a beer and a dog!” he said, a look of satisfaction crossing his face as he remembered the taste of his meal with Josie.

Patrick was totally unaware of the reporter’s shoulders tightening impatiently. It saddened Clark to think that a celebration meal for this old couple was a beer and a dog, but he’d come here on the trail of a bomber and so far he’d discovered nothing. He had promised the old man a hearing, and he had every intention of listening to the story, even realizing it was likely to be a rambling one. He just didn’t remember getting this frustrated in the past. Somehow he had to find his balance again, otherwise he’d never be able to do his job. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to relax as he offered Patrick some encouragement.

“Was that when you saw Bob, Patrick?”

But, clearly, the homeless man had other things on his mind. “Father, I ain’t talked this much since ... well, I don’t remember when, but it’s thirsty work, ya know. I don’t suppose ...” His voice tailed away, but his eyes slid hopefully to the wine bottle.

Without speaking, Father Ninian poured a little wine into the glass. Patrick snatched it up and drank, smacking his lips as he savored the taste, though Clark doubted the wine ever touched the man’s taste-buds.

“Thank you, Father. You’re a good man.” Patrick closed his eyes for a few moments, and Clark was just about to prompt him again when his eyes blinked open and he continued, “Now, where was I?”

“With Josie enjoying a hot dog,” Father Ninian said with a benign smile.

“Ah, yes.” Patrick grinned too. “OK, by the time I got to the recycle center it was crawlin’ with folk and I was sure all the good stuff would be gone, but I figured, if I walked this far, I’d search anyway, and I was right, ‘cause I found my coat!”

Patrick fell silent again, and Clark was wondering anew if the man had anything significant to tell him, but, he’d come this far ...

“Just shows ya, Father,” Patrick mused, staring at the crucifix on the far wall. “God helps them that helps themselves.”

Once more Father Ninian was tempted to laugh. His flock tended to find God when it most suited them. However, the priest could see that Clark was getting edgy, so he decided to try to get Patrick back on track.

“Patrick, did you see Bob that day?”

Patrick threw a disapproving look at the priest then pointed at the reporter. “He said to tell my story my way. I’m just getting to that! By the time I got my new coat on and found a piece of rope to tie around my waist, it was getting dark, so I started hurryin’ back. Ya have to get to St Andrews before six, ‘cause they start linin’ up before then and ya won’t get in. Did ya know that?” He directed his question to Clark, who shook his head.

“No, I didn’t know that. I guess it’s a good shelter?” Clark asked, trying to make small talk and ignore his impatience.

“The best! Even though Father Ninian here is a bit stingy with his ... hospitality.” The old man chuckled at his own joke. “But ya want me to get to the bit about Bob ... so, I was just a few blocks from here when I saw Bob on the other side of the road, just in front of Casey’s Bar. He was with another guy. At first I thought he was another homeless guy on his way to the center, but he was dressed better ... not much, mind ya, but he was wearing one of these rain-jacket things. Anyways, I crossed the road to ask them if they was headin’ to St Andrews, but just when I gets close, I sees this guy pullin’ Bob down the alley. Poor Bob looked scared, so I tiptoed closer so I could listen, see if Bob needed my help ...”

“Hah!” Father Ninian gasped, but added quickly, “Sorry!”

“Ya think I ain’t gonna help a friend, Father? We homeless bums gotta stick together,” Patrick said proudly, a defiant grimace on his face.

“No, of course not. I apologize for doubting you, Patrick,” the priest said contritely.

Clark felt a tingle of excitement begin in his gut, this was the closest he’d ever gotten to the bomber. “What happened next, Patrick?”

“I couldn’t peek around the corner, in case the guy saw me. I mean, he sounded angry that he’d caught Bob goin’ into Casey’s. He told him he didn’t want him takin’ no drink, seein’ how he had an important job to do in the mornin’. I’d never heard Bob say he was workin’ for this dude, but we keeps ourselves to ourselves, so I wouldn’t ... would I?”

“No, I’m sure you wouldn’t,” Clark replied, since Patrick seemed to think this was important.

“I heard Bob promise Tom he wouldn’t take no drink, and that’s when this guy gets right uptight and says ‘It’s Thomas’ ... all stuck-up like. Then he says, just to make sure Bob should spend the night at his place, and then they comes out of the alley all pally-like and walk off down the street. I never seen Bob again ... but I wouldn’t, ‘cause next day he died, so they say ...” Patrick crossed himself as his gaze strayed back to the crucifix.

“He did, Patrick. They’ve matched up the DNA with Bob’s records,” Clark said gently. These people might not have much left in life, but it was clear they shared a certain loyalty. “Patrick, did they see you?” he asked, anxiously, as he realized that the old hobo might be in danger.

“Nah! I heard them coming and ducked into Casey’s doorway.” Patrick grinned at his cleverness.

His words, however, gave Clark cause for doubt. He moved closer to the edge of his chair, his hand beginning to pull at the stump of his finger. “And you still got a good view from the doorway?”

“Oh yes! Casey’s Bar has a neon sign right above the door, and they walked right past me. No one never takes no notice of old drunks lying in the doorway of Casey’s.” Patrick cackled. “Mind ya, ya think Bob would have, but he was too busy to

notice, his buddy having his arm wrapped around him real tight.” The old man heaved a sigh as he thought back to that night. “I seen the guy in your drawing real good, though. He made me shiver. That long thin face of his ... and those eyes. They were scary eyes ... Could have been the light from Casey’s sign, but they looked like madman’s eyes to me.”

The old man shuddered and shrank into his chair at the end of his story, too upset for the present to request his promised reward.

Clark used the silence to finish off his notes, but finally he had to ask. “Patrick, there’s no doubt in your mind that this was the same man I drew, or that his name was Thomas?”

Patrick stared at Clark with an aggrieved expression. “I told you! You don’t believe me ‘cause I’m a hobo. No one ever trusts us. But if you weren’t gonna believe me, why did you bother comin’ all this way?”

Clark had the grace to blush. “I’m sorry, Patrick. That was unkind of me. I do believe you.” Strangely, Clark didn’t doubt the old man at all. “I just wanted to make sure I got your information down right. You’ve helped me a lot and I’d like to do something for you ...” Clark started to pull out his wallet, but Patrick interrupted him.

“You keep your money. I helped for Bob’s sake ... and to show that homeless people aren’t totally useless,” he snapped, and for a few seconds, the man who Patrick used to be seemed to inhabit his frail body. Then, just as quickly, he deflated again, his gaze returning to the bottle on the table. “Father, do I get that drink now?”

“Patrick, after all your work, you can have the whole bottle. God forgive me.” The father crossed himself before pouring out another glass of wine. He left the bottle by Patrick’s hand and stood up stiffly, gesturing Clark to proceed him to the door. “I know I shouldn’t encourage him,” he whispered, leaning close to Clark’s ear, “But I don’t believe you can teach an old dog new tricks.”

Clark took some dollars from his wallet, stuffing them into Father Ninian’s hand as he too replied in a whisper. “Can you make sure that Patrick gets a new coat. One that fits and will really keep him warm ...”

“I will.” The priest took the money, smiling sadly. “And I’ll pray he doesn’t pawn it to buy some more booze.”

Again Clark’s brows rose in question. He’d never thought of that, and he really should have. When he was wandering around in China, he might not have sold a new coat for alcohol, but certainly for food. “Father, please do what you think would be best for Patrick with that money. I’d really like to thank him in some way. This is the first real information I’ve managed to find about our bomber. I’m very grateful.”

But Patrick hadn’t finished. “Hey, newspaper man,” he called, almost choking on his wine.

Clark leaned back into the room, believing Patrick might have overheard his conversation with the priest. “Yes, Patrick. Is there anything else I can do to help you?”

“Nah, but maybe I can help you some more. That guy — I might have seen him before. He was servin’ in some greasy all-night cafe over in Bakerline, I think, but I can’t remember for sure. It was a whiles ago ...”

Patrick’s attention began to wander as he sipped his wine, and Clark realized he’d gotten all the facts the old man had to give ... but now he was certain he was on the right track. Patrick had just confirmed that the guy with Bob could be the same one who’d sent the tape that smelled of greasy food.

He backed out, talking quietly to Father Ninian again. “Look after, Patrick. I’m going to talk to the Superman Foundation about donating some funds to your shelter. I think I still have some influence with them.” Clark crossed his fingers behind his back as he dissimulated to the priest. “From someone who knows what it’s like to be homeless, you’re doing a brilliant job, Father,

but I think the Foundation could help make things easier.”

Father Ninian took Clark’s hand. “Thank you for your belief in me and my shelter. I know, as a priest, I’m supposed to be above worldly goods, but I’m not such an old fool as to look a gift horse in the mouth. Believe me, any donations for St Andrews are much appreciated,” he said, shaking the younger man’s hand. “Goodbye and may God be with you. You’re a very compassionate man, Clark Kent, as was your friend Superman, and I count all our blessings that you made it back home.”

Suddenly, tears sparkled, trapped in the wrinkled skin beneath the priest’s eyes, and he dislodged his glasses as he wiped them away. Straightening his spectacles he said gruffly, “Ignore me! I’m a sentimental old softie. Off you go and bring that man to justice before he has a chance to hurt anymore people.”

Clark walked quickly through the large dining room where just a few stragglers were finishing off their breakfasts and the staff were already setting the tables for lunch. He left St Andrews with a spring in his step, feeling elated that the trail for the bomber was finally starting to shape up. There was still a lot of investigating to do, but he’d brought down other villains from such obscure beginnings and was confident that this time would be no different.

He was also still wondering if Father Ninian had winked and squeezed his hand at the Superman reference. Could the priest possibly suspect? There didn’t seem to be much that got past Father Ninian, and he had known Lois, Clark and Superman for a long time.

It seemed the family secret might not be quite such a big secret after all.

Clark sat back in his chair and surveyed the two people on the other side of the table, digging his hands in his pockets to keep them still.

“Well, that’s where I am. I know it isn’t much, but at least I have a partial name and an actual district to search.”

Jim imitated Clark’s actions, balancing his chair on its back legs. “Not much is right!” He placed his hands behind his head and stared back at his old friend, trying to keep the pitying look from showing up in his expression. Clark was trying so hard. “CK, you can’t really call that a solid lead ...”

“I don’t know, Jim. It’s better than anything we’ve had before,” Lois said, supporting her husband, and yet she was not quite able to disguise her skepticism either.

Clark had returned from the St Andrews shelter, appearing very animated and asking her and Jim to meet with him in the conference room. He’d hinted he had solid information on the bomber, but if this was all he had, he was definitely reaching.

“Come on, guys. We’ve worked cases with less ... at least, you and I did, Lois.” He leaned forward, placing his hands firmly on the table. “Think about it. I have a first name and we now know that Tanner had an accomplice ...”

“The guy Tanner was seen with could just have been a friend,” Jim interrupted, his tone still doubtful but not derisive.

“The night before the bombing ... and asking him to stay the night?” Lois said, beginning to feel a tiny buzz sizzle along her veins. “That’s too coincidental. I agree with Clark on the accomplice issue.”

“Lois, I’ll stake my life Bob wasn’t a partner ... more like a patsy.” Clark pushed back from the table and stood up, starting to pace. “Everyone who knew Tanner says he was a quiet guy ...”

“Yeah, CK. A loner,” Jim added, the front legs of his chair also falling to the ground with a bang. “And you know what they say — loners are often the worst.”

“But they also say that Bob was a good guy ... a kind guy.” Clark stopped pacing and turned to James. “Someone who would share any good fortune he found along the way.”

“I hear you, CK. But you’ve been talking to down and out ...”

“Jim, Bob had been on the streets for years. Why did he suddenly go rogue? It just doesn’t make sense. And I’ve been talking to more than just homeless people.” Clark stuck his hands in his pockets again; he was attempting to cure himself of the nervous need to play with his ‘ghost’ finger ... and he was feeling under stress right now. He needed Jim and Lois to believe in him. “The volunteers at the centers agree. Tanner didn’t fit the profile, and if Patrick was right, Tanner was almost kidnapped on that last night.”

“Can you believe this Patrick?” Lois asked. For the first time since he’d returned, Lois could see the passion for the chase shine from Clark’s eyes, and she shared his excitement. No matter how tenuous the lead, she was prepared to trust his instincts.

Clark shrugged. “He’s a drunk, and Father Ninian did bribe him with another drink ... after he talked.” Clark fell silent for a nanosecond, considering, then he took a deep breath. “But yes. I’m sure he was telling the truth. And, Lois, the ‘mystery’ guy spooked him, he mentioned the thin face and the eyes ... just like you did when you saw the sketch.”

“I remember. He wasn’t ever going to win any prizes for Mister Universe with that narrow face ... but those pale eyes of his were scary.” Lois moved her own chair back, preparing to leave the conference room. “OK, Clark, what’s your next move? I’m sorry I’m going to have to cut this meeting short. I’m busy ...”

“Honey, your always busy,” Clark said sympathetically. “Jim, I was hoping you’d run the sketch through another data-base check, now you have a partial name ...”

James wasn’t convinced Clark was onto anything, but he was prepared to work with him ... even if it was only to humor him. “Sure thing, CK. I have a story to finish, then I’ll get right on it.”

“Thanks, Jim. I know you’re not a researcher anymore, but their isn’t anyone I’d trust more with a computer search ...” His voice tailed off as he watched Jim walk out the door. Slowly, he turned back to his wife. “Are you humoring me too, or was that minute note of enthusiasm in your voice for real?”

“You noticed, huh?” she said, smiling gently at her husband as she walked toward him. “Actually, it was for real ... and I have no concrete reason why. I mean, logically, Jim’s right, and your lead is as thin as a spider’s web ... but, relatively, spider’s webs are pretty strong.” Lois was standing very close to Clark, but she didn’t touch him. “For the first time, I feel what you feel.”

It was Clark who raised his hands to rest lightly on Lois’ shoulders. “You don’t think that could be due to our special connection?”

Lois shook her head, her hair wisping about her face. “No. This is different. This is business, and I haven’t felt like this in years, but then I’ve been a desk jockey for a long time. Maybe too long.”

Clark eyebrows rose as he looked incredulously at his wife. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

She stepped back, giving his chest a final pat. “I don’t know what I think I’m saying. Give me time to think about it ...”

“Honey, it’s a big step ... and a backward one.”

She silenced him by planting a kiss on his lips. “Don’t! I have my current job to do right now ... and you’re correct, this is a big step ... a huge step, and it’s one I’m not sure I want ... or that the family deserve ...”

Lois kissed him fleetingly then almost ran from the room, leaving Clark nervously playing with his hands again. He’d thought he’d give anything to have Lane and Kent back together, except that would put Lois back in the firing line and without him having reliable superpowers to protect her.

Perhaps they were both getting too old to face the danger ... and there was no denying they had a responsibility to stay alive

for their kids.

But that was for the future, and at this moment he had his own job to do. He opened the conference room door and went after his wife. “Lois, wait!”

She halted for a second, calling over her shoulder as she hurried back to her office. “Not now, Clark. I really am busy.” Only, he wouldn’t be put off and she heard him follow her. “Clark please, I know we need to talk, but not now ...”

The door clicked shut. “Lois, I totally agree. We do need to talk about this, but right now I have a bomber to catch ... right after I finish that Jilin piece,” he added, knowing Lois expected him to do all the work she’d assigned. Which was only fair, he shouldn’t be given special privileges just because he was her husband.

“Oh, I think that can wait,” Lois said, swinging around at the edge of her desk. “The bomber is the big story, and I want my best investigative reporter on it.” She gave the smallest of smiles, cocking her head a little to the side, thinking, before she inquired. “Are you planning on passing this information to Peterson?”

Clark acknowledged Lois’ compliment with a smile, then his lips pursed and he shrugged, answering her question with one of his own. “What information? You’ve seen how Jim reacted, and he’s a friend.” His expression grew somber, as he realized just how insubstantial his lead appeared to others. “I doubt Peterson would be any more convinced, and I couldn’t blame him. His bosses certainly wouldn’t listen. I need more proof before I go to the police.”

Lois nodded sagely. “You’re right. It’s too soon to bring Jed on board.” She stared long and hard at Clark, sensing his determination. “But you have a plan?”

Clark grinned at her reading of him. “I thought perhaps I could talk Matt into checking out the cafes in Bakerline tonight. Now we’ve narrowed down our search, we could get lucky.”

“Sounds good ... but, maybe tonight isn’t such a good idea.” Lois could barely hide a grin, and it was clear she’d put the touchy subject of their future and work aside for the present.

“Oh, something happening tonight that I should know about?” Clark asked, his eyes twinkling.

“Not what you’re thinking, though if you play your cards right ...” Lois chuckled and winked. “No. Actually, Sara mentioned to Vicky that one of your favorite Christmas movies is *It’s a Wonderful Life*, and it happens to be playing at the new retro-film theater a couple of blocks from here. The girls got tickets ... kinda an early surprise Christmas gift. We’re all going; the kids — providing nothing calls Matt away — even your parents and mine.”

“No kidding?” A grin flashed across Clark’s face, his teeth gleaming white against his skin; little by little he’d lost his unhealthy pallor. “That’s great. I haven’t seen that movie in ... well ... you know.” Suddenly he was serious again, reaching out and touching Lois’ cheek. “I couldn’t have wished for kinder daughters. I know I’ve told you this before, but you did a great job with them ... and Matt.”

Lois pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “They are good kids, most of the time, but I didn’t do it all by myself. I think it has something to do with their genes ... mostly yours.” She gave him a lopsided smile before moving behind her desk, a sure sign that the family conversation was over. Narrowing her eyes at the copy on her desk, underlined heavily in red, she asked distractedly, “So, you’ll put off your search until tomorrow?”

“What time do we have to be there?”

Lois halted picking up her pen and opened her top drawer instead, quickly checking the tickets. “The show starts at 6.35 and we’re meeting the kids, your parents and mine at the theater.”

Clark was still beaming. “That’s terrific. Matt and I can go see the movie with you guys and check out Bakerline later. If you think that’s OK?” he added, unsure if there were any plans for

after the movie.

“No, I think that would be good, though the girls might be a bit disappointed not to pick up a pizza on the way home. Are you sure this can’t wait till tomorrow?”

“Lois, this man has exploded four bombs in almost as many weeks ... and he’s getting more ambitious every time.” Clark’s head dipped for a few seconds, but when he looked up, there wasn’t a shadow of doubt in his eyes. “I don’t believe we have any time to waste.”

Lois brow wrinkled and her lips tightened, but when she replied, she sounded just as positive. “Unfortunately, I totally agree. Don’t worry about the girls being disappointed. I’ll talk to them ...” Her chin firmed and she swallowed hard. “They’d want you to do your job. I want you to do your job. Go nail this criminal, Clark. Put him away before he does anymore harm.”

Chapter Twelve: It Came Upon a Midnight Clear

Ina turned over in her bed, enjoying the comfort of a new mattress. While this bed might be smaller than her usual king size, it molded and supported her body in a way the Bowen’s family bed never did.

Bah!

She was growing soft in her old age. Why on earth had she allowed that Liz person to talk her into leaving her own room? A room which she’d claimed as her own since her grandmother’s death, and, no matter her change of fortune or the change of status for the Bowen’s mansion, she had been adamant that it remain hers.

Yet she’d let herself be persuaded to move until such time as the thermostat was repaired. The aide had discovered, when she’d tried once more to turn up the heat — the girl was very persistent — that the damn thing was broken. So here she was in smaller, though, she had to admit, more agreeable accommodation.

And she’d even agreed to open the package, and had experienced the smallest frisson of surprise when she’d discovered it was a greeting card and a box of chocolates from Thomas.

Of course, the boy hadn’t remembered that she’d only indulge in a such a luxury on special occasions, or that she ate only Belgium chocolates ... the rich, dark sort. In the end, she’d given the chocolates to Liz, who had finally agreed to take the box to share with the rest of the staff, it not being a big enough box to go around all the residents.

Ina supposed the size of the gift might be an indication that Thomas was down on his luck and couldn’t afford the expensive kind ... which was perfectly believable, since her nephew had never succeeded in any undertaking.

She heaved a sigh of resignation as she rolled onto her back to stare at the ceiling. Just like his father, he was a good-for-nothing, and it was too much to expect that he’d changed ... leopards did not change their spots. He had probably got in touch with her after all these years because he needed a hand out and expected her to have mellowed with age.

Well, his expectations were way off the mark ... or were they? Underneath her mistrust and indignation there was a tiny part, a very lonely part of her which dreamed she could renew her ties with her only remaining kin.

Perhaps she was getting maudlin in her dotage? She turned her head stiffly, screwing up her eyes to peer at the card which sat alone on the bedside cabinet. The bright moonlight shown through a gap in the drapes and crept across the floor to illuminate the Christmas message.

At least, he’d chosen a suitable card ... nothing with Father Christmas in his garish red suit, or silly sentimental animals which were supposed to pull at the heart strings. No, it was a religious card: a card celebrating the birth of our Savior ... as was correct.

Could it be that Thomas had finally found his salvation? She could die content if that were the case. Ina closed her eyes as her mouth twisted in an unaccustomed smile. Tomorrow, when Liz came in, she might instruct her to answer Thomas' message. Was there a return address on the package? She hadn't asked.

With an unusual warmth in the room and inside her heart, Ina drifted off to sleep.

Outside, on the edge of the silver-coated lawn, Thomas hid in the shadow of a gnarled oak tree. His attention was drawn to the stark branches above him, bowed down with a fresh covering of snow. He remembered he'd tried to climb this tree as a child, but had fallen and broken his arm.

His mother had been very sympathetic, though his aunt had told him not to burble like a baby; that he'd only gotten his just desserts for disobeying her instructions. There were only a few sections of the grounds where he'd been permitted to go and this tree was out of bounds. It had been planted, as had all the other trees that lined the wall, by one of their predecessors, the one who'd built the house, and was therefore more important than himself to Aunt Ina. In her estimation, he ranked way below her dead relatives and precious possessions.

Now was payback time.

Thomas stared across the lawn at the granite facade of the house, at the grand portico of the doorway, flanked on both sides by tall, curtained windows. He could still imagine the gloomy rooms behind those drapes — the place of all his childhood nightmares.

Finally, his gaze focused on the large bow-window on the second floor, the old witch's lair. The house might now be an old people's home, but he'd bet his life that Ina wouldn't give up her treasured domain for any reason. No, she was there, lying in luxury, while he, the last Bowen-Timmons was living rough.

But he'd ditched the stuck-up cow's hyphenated name the minute he'd escaped her clutches. He'd wanted to use his father's name, but he'd never known it. It didn't appear on his birth certificate. When he was a kid, he'd broken into Ina's study and found the certificate, and in the space where the father's name should be, it read 'father unknown.' That had hurt. He'd asked his mother about his dad but she'd been too scared to disobey her sister and tell him the name ... then she'd died.

The witch had thwarted him at every stage of his life.

Not for much longer, though!

His gut tightened in frustration as he frowned. The package must have arrived by now. This was the second night he'd infiltrated the grounds to witness the results of his revenge, and yet ... nothing. The house stood quiet and undamaged.

After all these years his aunt was still messing up his plans. Even if the old crone couldn't open her mail, one of the nursing staff would have assisted her.

Maybe it was a mistake to put the explosives in with the chocolates, but he'd always known about his aunt's addiction to candies, a habit she'd indulged in secret, and he'd banked on her not being able to resist the sweets.

The box of chocolates had cost him more than he could afford, and his supply of explosives and detonating equipment was dwindling alarmingly. Since he'd felt it safer to leave his job, he had no means of replenishing his supplies, and he still had one more target to destroy before he was finished ... one more before he could go to join Mary.

It never occurred to Thomas that his wife might not approve of the road he'd taken.

He was tired of waiting. It was typical of his evil aunt to ruin his plans, but as it was well past midnight, the old bat was probably fast asleep and not going to be eating anything till morning. Besides, he was running out of time as well as money. He had a gut feeling Kent was closing in on him, and he should

just go ahead and prepare for his finale.

It was ironic how things turned out. Though he hadn't planned it, the one man in Metropolis who seemed to have uncovered his vengeful trail was going to be involved, albeit indirectly, in the final showdown.

Thomas started to make his way stealthily toward his hidden exit. There was a certain amount of security around the gates of the old house, but he knew every inch of this estate. He'd disobeyed his aunt on many occasions as a child and had used these gardens as a haven from her tyranny.

He was disappointed that he wouldn't be around to see Ina get hers ... but he was fairly confident that she would eventually succumb to the lure of chocolate, and then ...

Boom!

The noise shattered the night and, turning back so quickly that he almost stumbled, Thomas looked up at the house, expecting to see a large hole where the bedroom window should be, but the front of the building remained intact. Instead, a plume of dark smoke billowed from the far side of the house.

Damn!

He ground his teeth together, while his nails dug so deeply into the bark of the tree he'd used to steady himself that he yelped in pain. The old hag had escaped his trap.

But he had to leave. There was no time to indulge in self-recrimination. The MPD and the emergency services would be arriving soon and he had to escape. He still had work to do.

While Thomas had been skulking in the bushes at Hyperion Vistas, Clark and Matt had been searching Bakerline's cafes, hoping to find someone who could give them further information on the man in the sketch. It was close to midnight as they vacated another dive without success, and they'd already visited a number of other establishments. Was this going to be another night when they struck out?

"Matt, this is getting us nowhere," Clark said, sighing and pulling a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his hands. The cloying smell of dirty cooking oil and congealed grease pervaded his clothes, hair and skin, and he would have liked to go home and shower, but he had to keep looking. Matt, on the other hand, should be in bed. "Son, your semester finals start tomorrow, you should go home. Your mother will kill me if you're red-eyed and tired in the morning."

Matt grinned. "Is the smell getting to you, Dad?"

"I'd almost forgotten what it was like to have an extra-sensitive sense of smell." Clark's nose wrinkled in disgust as he returned the grin and winked. "Right at the moment, I'm beginning to wish my powers weren't coming back."

"These places are gross! It makes you wonder how they managed to pass the hygiene regulations, but, Dad, it's just around midnight, and you know I don't need as much sleep as most people. Lets check these next few blocks, at least." Matt finished quickly as he tried to stifle a yawn.

"I can work alone, Matt," Clark stated with an edge of frustration, although his gentle expression belied his tone. "Go home and sleep."

"No way, Dad! I can't just go to sleep!" Matt stared at his father for a few seconds, before hunching his shoulders and walking off down the street. Clark quickly caught up as Matt continued to vent. "I was at Metro General, remember, and I've seen what this monster can do." The young man glanced over at his father, but the edge had left his voice. "We have to stop him, Dad, and that has nothing to do with doubting you can do this job alone."

"You think you'll sleep better at night once this guy is behind bars? 'Cause I have to warn you it doesn't always work that way ... but it does help." Clark suspected his son wouldn't accept a hug, so he patted Matt's shoulder instead. "If you're still having

bad dreams, you can talk to me or your mother.”

Matt touched his father’s hand briefly. “I know. I won’t pretend I haven’t had any dreams, but I will sleep easier when this bomber is behind bars ... and, Dad, just having you around makes everything easier. You have no idea how much ...” The young hero ducked his head as his voice faded. It appeared he’d inherited his father’s ability for getting tongue-tied.

“But I do. I feel the same way,” Clark interrupted, forcing the words past the lump which had formed in his throat. “To be here, watching you wearing the suit ... being able to help in anyway I can, means everything to me.”

Matt’s head snapped up. “And it still doesn’t upset you?”

Clark opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again and thought hard. His son deserved honesty. “A little, I guess ... more since the powers have started to return. Part of me does wish I could be up there with you ...” He gazed up at the night sky with a hint of longing, before looking back at Matt, his smile both encouraging and bittersweet. “But there was a time I never expected to have this much, so mostly I’m content to pass the mantle over to you ... and offer support and advice.”

In the fitful light of the worn out street lamps, a glance of compassion and complete empathy passed between father and son. They would work together to make a difference, and in this particular instance that meant catching a bomber who was threatening the city they’d made their home.

“And now it’s my turn to help you,” Matt said with a grin. “Come on, Dad, let’s go find the next greasy dive. We have to get lucky sometime,” he added with the optimism of youth.

Two blocks further on, it seemed Matt’s positive attitude was about to pay off. Across the street they spotted a little cafe with a busted neon sign above the door and a front window which was partially boarded-up. But what drew their attention was the particular smell of dirty cooking oil which permeated the air, though they were still some yards away. The odor wafting from the doorway was very similar to that on the tape and, as they crossed the road, a plaintive meowing reached them.

“Dad, did you hear that?” Matt asked, walking faster, excitement beginning to bubble in his veins. “The sounds and the smell both match the tape.”

Clark matched his son’s pace, but he was a little less eager. “It could be, but I’m not an expert on cat calls ... are you?”

“I guess not ... but, you gotta admit, this is the best fit we’ve come up with yet.” Matt took the lead and approached the entrance, only to halt in front of the door, his head cocked to one side, listening. “There are two cats!”

A glance back at his father told him that he too had recognized the differing tones.

“I think so,” Clark agreed, gesturing with his head to a narrow opening at the end of the building. “The noise seems to be coming from down that alleyway toward the back of this building. But we shouldn’t get carried away here. The cats meowing and the smells could be just a coincidence.”

Matt winked and grinned boyishly, looking very dissimilar to the solemn superhero who patrolled the skies above Metropolis. “I’ve got a good feeling about this one, Dad. Come on, we won’t know for sure until we check it out.”

Reaching the door, Matt pushed it wide and vanished inside, leaving Clark to follow behind, his head shaking a little from side to side. Had he ever been so ... buoyant?

But his answer came without thinking; he’d always been an optimist. Even when he had nothing, when his life had been a barren and lonely place, he’d dreamed of a better one. Somewhere deep within himself, he’d known that it was just out of his reach, waiting for him to return, and it had been that knowledge which had kept him going.

“Dad, are you coming?” Matt shouted back to his father,

breaking into Clark’s profound thoughts.

With a quick prayer that his children’s trust would never be tested in quite the way that his had, he strode inside ... and gagged.

If the smell had seemed bad on the street, in here it was overpowering. Clark took a quick look around the dingy interior. The non-smoking bylaws were clearly being ignored, causing a thick haze to hang suspended over the room. Yet, as his eyesight adjusted, he was surprised to see quite a few people seated at the tables, some were regarding them with a mixture of suspicion and barely veiled hostility. This was a poor neighborhood in which merely existing was a trial, and he and Matt must have looked oddly out of place, though they’d dressed in their oldest clothes.

His confidence faded as he realized there was little chance of any of these strangers giving out information. These people closed ranks against outsiders, and here there was no Father Ninian to bridge the gap. After a moment of threatening silence, the customers ducked their heads and returned to the business of consuming their meals, the sporadic buzz of lowered conversations beginning once more.

Clark was sure Matt and he were the topic of those conversations, but watching the clientele, he couldn’t help but wonder how they could stomach the disgusting food, but his son clearly had inherited his cast-iron stomach, because Matt was ordering them both a burger and fries with a coke to wash the food down. Clark decided he’d need a gallon of liquid to wash this unpalatable meal down, and hoped that his invulnerability had kicked in enough to save him from contracting salmonella.

To date, this had to be the worst eating place they’d visited in their search, but he couldn’t fault Matt’s strategy; pretending to be customers was the best way to get the information they were looking for.

If the customers refused to talk to them, they might have more success with the guy behind the bar, and with that in mind, Clark sat on a stool in front of the counter. Matt joined him and both waited in silence until they were served.

Minutes later two dirty plates, containing something which barely resembled food, were slapped down in front of them, while the waiter stood at the other side of the counter with a sullen expression on his face, daring them to complain.

Clark wasn’t about to give him the satisfaction. Picking up a fork, he speared one of the limp fries and stuck it in his mouth, swallowing with just the merest grimace. “Thanks,” he forced the words out. “My son and I have been on a late job and we were getting hungry. We weren’t sure we’d find anywhere to eat around here. You open all night?” he added, casually, while continuing to eat. By his side, Matt appeared to be collaborating his statement by wolfing down the unpalatable burger.

“Yeah!” the waiter answered.

Glancing around again, Clark continued chatting. “You seem to do pretty good business for so late at night.”

There was another pause before the pimply youth behind the bar replied. “Yeah!”

Obviously the waiter come cook was a man of few words, but Clark persisted. “I thought an old buddy of mine worked here.” He chewed some of the ground meat ... though he actually doubted this burger had come from any palatable part of a cow, before continuing in his friendliest of voices. “His name was Thomas. Maybe you know him?”

“Nope!” Johnny-one-note spoke again.

Clark took a deep breath to calm his frustration, trying to project a relaxed curiosity. “Perhaps he works here too.”

With a certain amount of arrogance, the waiter looked to both sides of the counter space before checking out the kitchen. “Don’t see nobody else here.” He chewed on his nails and deliberately spat the contents he’d work free in the general direction of the two Kents. “Do ya?”

Clark made a mental note not to eat anymore of the food, while beside him, he could feel Matt tense. He quickly placed a restraining hand on his son's arm. It was just a guess, but an informed one, that many of the customers at their backs would love to start a fight.

"I thought that maybe you alternated nights," Clark suggested reasonably as he rooted in his pocket until he found the sketch and his wallet.

"Well, ya thought wrong." The pimply youth wiped his hands on a tea towel, which had seen better days, before resuming the conversation in a bullying tone. "Look around. Ya think this dive could employ two night workers ... and I'm the wrong person to ask. I only started work this week due to the other guy doin' a runner. Ya want more information, come back and talk to the boss. Now, ya said ya all were hungry, so eat up and go." He gestured expansively around him. "See, we don't take kindly to people comin' in here and stickin' their noses in where it isn't wanted. I'll just take this and keep the change." With that, he snatched the twenty dollar bill that Clark had pulled out and walked toward the dirty kitchen in the back.

Squeezing Matt's arm to warn him to stay put, Clark stood and made for the tables which were occupied, yet immediately Clark moved, the waiter halted, frowning menacingly at Clark.

"Ya hard of hearin' or something? I told ya to leave," the young man snarled. "Your kind aren't wanted around here," he continued, deciding the two strangers needed further persuasion.

Despite the guy's acne and his lack of size, he had a mean and streetwise air about him, but Clark had come for information, and he wasn't about to leave without it. He didn't want to fight, yet he was pretty certain that Matt and he could hold their own if trouble started. There would be no chance of using superpowers, since his son was in his civilian role, and his own powers were intermittent, to say the least. Nevertheless, he'd spent the last few years of his life working on the land in China, often doing backbreaking work, and though he had lost some of his own muscle tone, he was healthier now and doubted he was a pushover.

Yet Clark had always hated physical violence, so he locked stares with the waiter, refusing to flinch. Somewhere at the back of his consciousness he heard his son gasp, but he ignored it as he spoke.

"We didn't come in here to make trouble," Clark said, his voice polite but edged with steel. "I asked you a question and you couldn't or wouldn't give me an answer. I'll assume the former, but some of your customers might be regulars and might be able to answer my questions. I'd like to give them a chance to earn a few dollars."

For a few seconds there was a standoff, before the guy behind the counter dropped his gaze to the floor. The dollar word had caught the interest of a couple of people in the cafe, and one or two took a quick look as Clark continued to distribute copies of his sketch.

Recognizing defeat, the sullen youngster backed off, feeling he'd been lucky to avoid a confrontation with the stranger. On first glance, he'd thought there was nothing intimidating about the older dude who'd invaded his space, but he'd caught a glimpse of raw power in the man's eyes and hadn't felt up to the challenge.

Anyway, it was a free country, and it wasn't his problem if the stranger wanted to waste his money on the bums who frequented this place. Mumbling under his breath, the waiter retired to the end of the counter to read his comic. Now, if he'd been Iron Man, he could have given these two newcomers a fight they'd never forget!

Meanwhile, Clark waited in silence to see if anyone was prepared to talk, which seemed very unlikely as every moment passed. Most people hardly gave the drawing a second glance,

and those who did, quickly returned to minding their own business.

He took another twenty dollar bill from his wallet and held the two notes aloft. "I have forty dollars for anyone who can give me any details on this man," he said, projecting his voice into every corner of the room.

In fact, there would probably be a bigger reward for any information leading to an arrest, but Clark wasn't about to reveal that fact. There was every possibility that the prospect of a windfall would send these deprived citizen's imagination into overdrive, and Clark didn't need any false leads.

Yet it appeared forty dollars wasn't enough incentive, or maybe no one had anything to tell him ... or they just weren't willing to talk. He felt, Matt's hand on his shoulder, and his son's voice echoed kindly in his head.

<It's no use, Dad. People like them don't open up to people like us.>

With his shoulders sagging, Clark walked toward the exit. <I know, Matt. I just thought we might have gotten a break at last.>

Back on the street, Matt let out a long breath. <Wow, Dad. For a minute, you looked like Superman in there, even without the suit. That spotty guy never stood a chance ... >

<It didn't change anything though. Did it? I wasn't Superman. I was just some guy throwing his weight around.>

Clark started down the street, feeling more discouraged than he had in a very long time. They'd practically exhausted their search of Bakerline, yet they were as much in the dark as ever. The wind had risen with an icy bite, whirling dust and garbage against his body, but he barely noticed.

<Dad, I could go back as Jor-El.> Matt suggested uncertainly. He was just a teenager, but he appreciated how important breaking this case was to his father. <They might talk to a superhero in a suit.>

His father paused, but he didn't look back, and Matt could sense the chagrin which was tearing him apart.

"You think?" Clark asked, returning to normal speech, his voice sounding tired, mirroring his emotions. "You could be right. People used to open up to Superman when they wouldn't to anyone else." There was a stagnant silence before Clark finally continued, ignoring the echoes of envy that crept, unwanted, into his mind. "It might be a bit of a coincidence though, Jor-El showing up so quickly ... but what the heck, that information is important." His breath hissed out audibly as he watched an old newspaper get caught in the updraft and fly off into the sky. How he wished he could do the same. Finally he said, repeating the words that were beginning to sound like a refrain. "Go on, Matt. What are you waiting for? You really don't need me ..."

"That's not true, Dad ..."

But Matt's protest was cut off by the sound of shuffling feet approaching quickly, and someone panting heavily. "Hey, guys." A figure emerged from the gloom, though it was difficult to tell whether it was a man or woman, it was so wrapped up against the cold. "You meant what you said back inside? 'Bout money for info on the guy in this picture?" The person lifted a gloved hand and thrust the crumpled drawing at the two men.

Once more, father and son exchanged glances, but it was Clark who answered.

"Yes, we did, Ma'am," he said, finally recognizing he was addressing a woman, and a woman who had been sitting at the very back of the cafe. "If you can give us any information, or even a name, we'd be grateful."

"How about fifty dollars worth of grateful?" the woman asked, her voice hoarse and muffled by the scarf she'd twisted around her neck.

Matt was about to rush in, but Clark raised his hand to quiet his son. "That would depend on the information." As he peered at the huddled figure he could see the woman was middle-aged and

shivering. “Why don’t we go back inside where it’s warmer ...”

“No way! People who talk to the authorities in this neighborhood don’t last too long ...” The woman threw a nervous glance over her shoulder. “Can we start walking?” She suited her actions to her words as she led the way down an alley.

“We aren’t the police, Ms ...” Clark inquired, keeping pace with the woman as Matt kept watch on the street.

“You don’t need my name, and I know you’re not MPD. I don’t talk to cops ... no way.” She halted once she was sure they were out of sight. “Lets just keep this short and sweet. The guy you drew is called Thomas Timmons ... and he worked nights here until a week ago ... maybe a bit more. If you want more, talk to the owner or his daughter. They works days.”

Clark tried to keep the excitement from his voice. “Can you be more specific about when he left?”

“Nah. I was spendin’ a few days out of town for the good of my health, due to our boys in blue ... if you catch my drift. He was gone when I got back.” The woman set her hands on her hips and squared up to Clark. “Now you give me my money and I can get out of here.”

Though she only came up to his chest, she was ready to spit fire, reminding him of his wife ... if she were in disguise, of course. He felt like laughing. He felt like lifting this strange female up and swinging her around, though he doubted she’d appreciate such a gesture. Instead, he got out his wallet again. “Fifty dollars, you said?”

The woman nodded and even smiled as Clark counted out sixty of his dollars. He felt she deserved every cent, and was happy to hand them over.

“And you never spoke to me ... you never even saw me,” she said, as she grabbed the money and stuffed it inside her coat. “Remember!” She jabbed Clark in the chest with a grimy finger, which poked through a hole in her glove, before running back to the head of the alley. She sent Matt a disdainful look as she passed him at speed, then disappeared into the shadows.

At a much slower pace, Clark joined his son. He was smiling in relief, his bad thoughts of a few moments earlier buried away for another time, when he could pull them out and explore them ... perhaps Lois could help him get them into perspective.

For now, his persistence as a reporter had paid off. Now, he had a full name ... and a chance to find out who the bomber was, where he was, and why he was taking such deathly revenge on this city ... and stop him.

Chapter Thirteen: What’s In a Name?

Clark got out of the car at the foot of the drive, since it was clear the police were stopping any non-essential traffic from entering the gates. He strode closer and checked out the busy scene at the front of the building where police cars, fire trucks and ambulances vied for space.

Soon after talking to the woman in Bakerline, he and Matt had heard the blast on the other side of the city. Jor-El had left immediately, and Clark would have preferred to accompany him, but again there was the problem of coincidence — he’d been the first reporter on the scene at the theater fire, having hitched a ride with his son. He couldn’t let that happen again.

Instead, he’d asked Matt to drop him on the roof of The Planet where he could hurry down to the newsroom to write up his notes from the source, before legitimately learning through the wire about the explosion. From there, he could take one of The Planet’s cars to Hyperion Vistas, and hopefully, he wouldn’t be scooped by too many other reporters.

Close to an hour had elapsed since the explosion, and though the moon shone clear in the deep sapphire sky, scattered with thousands of tiny diamonds, the darkness made visibility difficult, even for Clark’s improving super sight. The mansion was lit up like a Christmas tree, but these were not celebratory

lights, they belonged to the emergency services. Under their glow, Clark could make out a number of uniformed personnel working outside the building, and he was certain there were just as many inside.

Now the big question was how to get closer?

The ringing of his cell phone sounded loud in his ears, startling him from his thoughts. He pulled it from his pocket, smiling as he recognized the caller.

“Hi, Lois,” he said quietly. “I just got here.” He’d already alerted Lois about his plans from the newsroom; in fact, he’d needed to persuade her to stay home with the girls since the incident was close to Hyperion Avenue.

“How bad is it?” Lois asked, her concern vying with her need to report the news.

Clark studied the scene before replying, in full reporter mode. “The building seems to be mainly intact, though there is some damage to one side, and I’m pretty sure there’s been a fire which the emergency services have already extinguished. If this is another bombing, it’s nowhere near the size of the hospital one.”

“Thank god for small mercies,” Lois added, then lowered her voice. “Is Jor-El still at the scene?”

“I can’t see him, but I’m sensing that he’s not too upset, so hopefully, that means the number of casualties is low. He knows what he’s doing, honey.” There was a moment of silence as Clark trained his vision on the house again. “The paramedics are bringing out some people now, but from here, none of them looks to have serious injuries. Lois, I have to go. I have a job to do.”

“I know. Can you get in there, Clark?” Lois asked, now sounding totally professional.

“I have no idea. They’ve got this place ringed pretty tightly. I guess I’ll just have to try my powers of persuasion.”

Lois was tempted to offer her assistance. Watching Clark at work had got her investigative juices flowing again, yet she was a little afraid that he would assume she didn’t trust him to work alone. Instead, she gave a tiny laugh. “Find a policewoman and flash your mega-watt smile. I seem to remember that used to work quite well for you.”

There was a pause, before Clark joined in with a small chuckle. “Yeah, I guess it did sometimes, but I was a whole lot younger then. I’m not sure it would be so effective now.”

“You underestimate yourself, honey.” She lowered her voice. “You still have the power to make my legs go weak.”

This time, Clark’s laugh was more enthusiastic. “Maybe, but you’re biased.” There was the sound of traffic on the road behind him and he turned to see more media vans pulling up. “Lois, the press pack is arriving. I’d better go try those powers of persuasion right now, if I want to keep ahead of the game. See you later, sweetheart.”

Snapping his cell phone closed, he turned his attention to the gate. He was certain the officers had been given instructions to keep the press out, and though he did have a ‘source’ inside, Matt was there to help, and he wasn’t a journalist. Clark had to rely on his own devices to get past the first line of security, and he might as well start with the honest and obvious one. With that in mind, he walked up to the line of police cars pulled up across the driveway.

“Hi, Kent, Daily Planet.” He hurried through the introduction he was now becoming comfortable with as he flashed his press card. “Any chance of getting closer to the house?”

The cop turned, and Clark found himself staring into the eyes of a very young and very pretty policewoman. Had Lois added clairvoyance to her skills? At that thought, he couldn’t resist a smile crinkling the corner of his lips.

The policewoman gave him the quick once over, after checking out his card. She must have decided he was on the level, as she gave him a small smile in return, but that didn’t mean she was about to break her orders.

"I'm sorry, sir, but that's a crime scene up there and we have instructions that no one, not even the media, is to be allowed through. You'll have to make your report from here."

Clark glanced up at the house and said in his friendliest voice. "Then it is a crime scene? The house didn't just explode accidentally ... like a gas leak or something?"

The policewoman blushed, ducking her head at her mistake, but she recovered quickly and said with only the slightest stammer, "I ... Again, I'm sorry, but I'm not at liberty to give out any information. I'm sure someone will speak to the media soon. Now, I have my job to do, so if you'll excuse me."

"I understand completely," Clark interrupted quickly. He felt a little sorry for the cop, who looked like she was very new to the job, but he also had his work to do, and it wasn't just reporting on a story. Bending his head the tiniest bit to look over his glasses, he narrowed his special vision on the damaged area of the house where he saw a familiar figure. "Is Sergeant Peterson on the case?" he asked almost casually.

The woman halted in her tracks and replied. "I believe he is. Do you know him?"

"He and I have been helping each other with the case of the bomber, and I think I might have some new information for him." Clark turned back to the policewoman and regarded her seriously. "I know it's not in your remit, but I've been trying to discover who is targeting Metropolis. It's really important that I speak to Sergeant Peterson. Do you think you could contact him for me? Tell him Clark Kent would like to talk to him urgently ... and not just for my story. Catching this bad guy is what's important."

The policewoman narrowed her eyes as she checked him over more closely; seconds passed before she spoke again. "Wait a minute. You're Clark Kent ... of Lane and Kent?"

"That's me," Clark acknowledged, his voice rising hesitantly. "Wasn't this woman too young to remember him from the past?"

"I remember you ... and Lois Lane. The Hottest Team in Town. I was working on my college newspaper when you and Superman disappeared. That was a bad time, and I tell you, I missed you more than the Big Blue. Not that Superman wasn't a sad loss to the world ... he was ... but when I think about all those crimes you and Lois Lane solved." The young woman shook her head in awe, before rushing on almost without taking a breath. "Your record was impressive, and she was my role model when I was growing up. You know, I almost went into investigative journalism, but my father was a cop, so I chose the MPD instead. It's kinda like the family business. I think you might have known him ..."

Clark's gaze slid to the officer's badge and everything fell into place. "Officer Zymak. You're Sergeant Zymak's daughter?"

Now she was nodding her head and smiling broadly. "I am. Isn't it a small world!"

A friendly smile crossed Clark's face as he thought back. "We worked with your dad on a couple of cases back in the nineties. How is he doing these days?" Clark asked, though his smile faded. Perhaps that wasn't the best of questions. Being missing for four years, and not yet being up to speed on all the people he'd once known, put him at a disadvantage.

"He's good, but he took early retirement when the department downsized a couple of years back. He and Mom are living in Florida these days and they've both taken up golf." Zymak Junior laughed at that. "Never saw my dad as a keen golfer, but my mom says it's a good way to keep fit. If you're ever down there, you should look them up."

"Maybe," Clark agreed, nodding. He and Lois hadn't had a vacation in years, and perhaps it was something that he and the whole family needed ... after he'd solved this case. "Officer Zymak, I don't want to get you in trouble, but I'd really appreciate you getting in touch with Peterson."

Zymak took a quick look around her, then leaned closer,

lowering her voice. "The name's Tracey, Mr Kent. Are you really working with Sergeant Peterson?"

"I am. Off the record, of course."

Another tiny grin flashed over the policewoman's face. "Kinda like the way you used to do with Dad. OK, for old time's sake and because my father trusted you, I'll contact Peterson, but it's up to him whether he talks to you or not."

"Understood," Clark replied and watched her closely as she turned to walk a little distance away, talking quietly on her radio.

Within minutes she was back, leading Clark closer to the large ironwork gates. "Peterson will meet you up at the house, but I have to remind you that it's a crime scene ..."

Clark cut in, quickly, eager to get inside. "No problem. I'll be careful."

Again Zymak laughed. "I know you will. I reminded Peterson you were checking out crime scenes while he was still in junior high."

Clark's brows rose at her audacity, before enlightenment struck. "You don't know Sergeant Peterson, by any chance?"

The policewoman's smile spread across her face and her eyes twinkled as she answered. "You could say that ... but that's something else that's off the record, Mr Kent."

"Completely off the record." Clark bobbed a tiny bow, grinning in return. "For a newspaper man I can be the soul of discretion."

"Thank you. Now you better hurry, Jed's waiting." She pointed with her radio to the front of the house, before waving him through the gate.

Clark needed no further encouragement, and he silently offered thanks to the erstwhile Sergeant Zymak as he strode up the drive at a very fast pace to where he could see the tall detective appear in the doorway, highlighted by the beam of a spotlight.

Although the large reception area of the nursing home was bursting at the seams with emergency personnel and their equipment, fortunately, it seemed undamaged, but as Clark followed Jed Peterson down a corridor and up the back staircase, there was increasing evidence of blast burns. They stopped at the head of a passageway that was littered with broken furniture and glass, while its walls and ceilings were coated with grime and smoke. An obnoxious smell hung in the air.

"What happened here?" Clark asked, sidestepping an upturned cabinet, which once had held a plant pot. He had to restrain his instinctive need to tidy up the mess.

Jed glanced down the corridor and back the way they had come, before replying in a hushed voice. "There was an explosion in the staff room at the end of this corridor."

"A bomb?" Clark lowered his glasses ever so slightly and tried his x-ray vision. The shell of a blackened room with a gaping hole where the window should be came into focus, peopled by two men and one woman dressed in white coveralls — probably part of the forensic team.

Jed studied the reporter. He'd been told by his bosses to keep a lid on this incident for the present, but somehow he knew Kent wouldn't buy the normal 'that's still under investigation' line ... besides he trusted this particular reporter.

However, he dropped his voice to a murmur. "I think that's the one thing we can be sure of."

"A letter bomb?"

"That's a possibility, but at the minute we can't say for sure," Jed replied, pulling Clark aside as another white-clad figure appeared like an apparition in the gloom, and walked past them into the room. "But according to the nursing supervisor, who happens to live in an apartment over the garages, the mail was opened as usual this morning. She told me that the staff seldom have their mail delivered here, and certainly none this morning,

so it's doubtful the bomb got into the staff room through the mail. Doesn't rule out our bomber though."

Clark gave up examining the scene through the wall and swung around to face the sergeant. "So, you agree that Tanner wasn't the bomber?"

If it were possible, Jed spoke more quietly. "I never totally bought into Tanner as the criminal either — my bosses did! I was always open to any of your suggestions." The sergeant beckoned Clark, clandestinely, back from the corridor into a recess next to the stairs. He cleared his throat. "Tracey said you had information for me?"

"I do, and we'll get to that in a minute, but are there any witnesses to what happened here?" Clark asked with as much assertion as he could muster. He was aware Peterson was going out on a limb by talking to him, but this situation was becoming evermore critical. Clark had no idea why, but he felt there wasn't time to tiptoe around worrying about the police chief's sensibilities.

"There was a member of staff in that room, though I doubt she'll be telling us anything soon." Jed pulled a packet of Kleenex from his pocket and blew his nose. "Excuse me, but I think I'm developing an allergy to explosive dust," he explained, stuffing the tissues back in his coat, before heaving an angry sigh. "The woman's unconscious and her condition is critical. I'll be checking in with the hospital soon, but I doubt she'll be fit to tell us what happened for quite some time ... if ever."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Clark said sympathetically. "But are there other staff members here who might know something?"

"Yeah. Three night staff, including the victim. They take their breaks at different times, and Kath Price was first to go, though they'd all left their belongings in the room earlier without any incident. I asked them if they'd noticed anything different, or out of place, but neither could remember a thing." Jed began walking back down the stairs. "Mind you, they were both in shock, which isn't surprising. We'll question them again later, but they're waiting in the front lounge for the moment. If you want to talk to them, I can instruct my team to turn a blind eye."

"Thanks, Jed. I appreciate you going the extra mile for me," Clark said, trailing a little way behind the sergeant while he tried to scan the rest of the home in his own unique way, but when his sight reached the bedrooms on the floor above, he felt like an intruder, particularly as many of the old folk left in their rooms were in varying stages of worry and shock. Quickly shutting his x-ray vision down, he turned back to Jed. "Has the building been secured, and what's going to happen to the people who live here?"

They had reached the reception area again, and Jed gazed up the staircase. "Jor-El looked over the building and the bomb-squad checked out the main area of the house with their sniffer dogs. I think they're still working in the basement and the attics."

Clark barely stopped himself from blurting out that he could hear them. He had to relearn to be more careful. Instead he nodded, saying, "Good ... and the residents?"

"The supervisor is overseeing the evacuation of the residents. The paramedics and some of the men I can spare are trying to help her, but she asked if she can contact some of her day staff and the residents' families. She feels it will be less traumatic for the people under her care. God knows where these poor old folks are going to go, though."

"Do they all have to move out?" Clark asked, gazing at the right wing of the mansion, which looked intact. "I mean, if there isn't anymore danger, surely some parts of the house are still structurally sound."

Following Clark's eyes, Jed nodded in agreement. "I'm not an architect, but the house looks like it was built to withstand an earth quake. Maybe when Jor-El gets back from the hospital, he can look for cracks and the obvious stuff, but it will still need to

be checked over by a structural engineer; it's procedure."

"Jor-El's not here?" Clark's brows shot up. Since he'd been allowed past the police barrier, he'd been purposely trying not to track or contact his son. Matt was perfectly capable of dealing with these emergencies alone, and if not, he would get in touch with Clark.

"He was. In fact, he arrived before anyone else, and thankfully put the fire out before it had a chance to take hold." The sergeant looked around the hallway and up to the gallery above. "If it weren't for him, our casualty count would be a lot higher than it is." Jed pointed off to his left. "Some of the residents closest to the explosion have minor injuries, though who's to say what the shock might do to the elderly. But for the moment, we only have one critical victim."

"The night aide?"

"I'm afraid so. Jor-El found her. He cleared the wreckage away, but realized he couldn't move her safely, so he brought in the paramedics and once they'd stabilized her, he flew them all to the ER." Jed told his story in a rush, shaking his head in awe. "You should have seen it, Kent. Once they'd loaded her into the ambulance he lifted the whole thing off the ground and flew away. Granted, he couldn't fly as fast as I've seen in the past, but it was amazing."

"Have you heard how she is?" Clark asked with a mixture of pride in his son and the stirrings of a longing that he couldn't do more himself.

"Not yet." Peterson's cell phone chimed and he answered it quickly, backing away from Clark, his hand extended in something like an apology.

Clark didn't mean to listen in, but he hadn't quite got his hearing under complete control ... and the caller was talking loudly for emphasis.

Peterson's inspector was making sure that Jed was not talking to any member of the press. Clark took a quick look around him, wondering who had blown the whistle on Jed. None of the uniformed officers appeared to be paying them any attention, and Clark was sure Tracey Zymak wouldn't have reported his presence at the scene. Of course, there was a huge police presence at Hyperion Vistas: the bomb squad and a revived anti-terrorist unit. Or it could have been another of his fellow reporters jealous of his special privileges. But whoever was to blame, Jed was reassuring his boss that he was doing everything by the book.

When the call was over, Jed came back, his pale face flushed. "Kent, I'm sorry, I have a job to do. If it was up to me ... but it isn't. You've gotta leave ..."

Jed was already turning away, back toward the room where the bomb had exploded.

"Jed, wait," Clark called, hurrying after the detective, who stopped at the foot of the back stairway.

"Kent, I can't talk to you." Jed put his hand on the banister, his white rubber glove stark against the smoky rail, and explained awkwardly. "It's more than my job is worth."

"But you have to listen ..."

"No! No buts. My boss is breathing down my neck ..." Jed took a deep breath. "If you have information, Kent, find a uniform cop and give it to them." He looked Clark directly in the eye as he spoke, trying to convey a private message. "They'll pass it along if they think it's relevant. Now I really gotta go. I'm sure you'll get a chance to talk to the witnesses later."

Then he was gone, taking the stairs two at a time with his long stride, bordering on superspeed. Peterson had clearly gotten torn to shreds by his superior.

Clark was left alone in the eerie, echoing corridor, but at least he knew exactly who to give his message to. He began walking toward the exit to find Officer Zymak. He'd reached the doorway when a distraught young woman burst through the door, almost

knocking him down ... and that was getting to be a difficult feat, though he had been distracted.

The woman stumbled, and Clark caught her, setting her back on her feet. "Are you all right?" he asked, noticing there were stress lines between her eyebrows and tears in her eyes.

"Yes ... yes, I'm fine." The stranger halted, scanning every detail of the crowded lobby. "They said there was a bomb."

Clark nodded, but still kept hold of the woman, who looked like she might faint at any moment. "I'm afraid there was ..."

"Like the one at the hospital?" she interrupted breathlessly.

"No. Thankfully, not so large as the explosion at Metro General. It went off in the staff room." Clark said gently, but clearly, searching for a quiet spot in the busy reception room. He led the woman between the equipment to a large sofa by the window. "I'm not completely sure, but I think the rest of the home received only minor damage ... and mainly around the center of the explosion."

Clark's new acquaintance sank into the sofa. "Was anyone hurt?"

Again Clark nodded, sitting beside the anxious woman who clung to his arm. "I believe one of the night staff was hurt, but I don't know the details, except that they've taken her to the hospital. Would you know her?"

"I'm not sure. I'm new here and I work days. I haven't met all the night aides yet."

"Why don't you take a minute to get your breath back and then go talk to your supervisor. I was told she was somewhere around here, trying to evacuate some of the residents whose rooms have been affected by the blast."

The woman was nodding her head, though she still looked very shaky, but Clark had somewhere to go. He had to find Zymak ... fast.

"I'm sorry, I have something important to do. I really need to leave," he said, speaking distinctly as it seemed the young aide was still stunned. "Will you be OK on your own?"

"Yes ..."

But clearly the woman was in a world of her own, and Clark held back from leaving, deciding he had a few minutes to spare.

"I'm Clark Kent," he said gently. "Can you tell me your name?"

"Liz ... I'm Liz, and I work here ... and it's all my fault!" she moaned, her voice almost cracking on a sob.

Clark was momentarily shocked. She couldn't mean the bomb! "I'm sure it's not. You couldn't know there was going to be a bomb."

Slowly, she turned her head to him. "No. Of course I didn't know about the bomb ... but I got her to change her room ... and she could be hurt."

Suddenly, she stood up and looked as if she were about to run down the corridor to the bombed area beyond, but Clark held her back, knowing Peterson and his team wouldn't be happy to have a member of the staff blundering about the crime scene.

"Who could be hurt?" Clark asked as the aide looked at the hand that was restraining her. "I've been told there is only one serious casualty ..."

"Miss Bowen-Timmons," she answered, freeing herself from Clark's hand and backing away. "Miss Bowen-Timmons swapped rooms because the heating in her own room wasn't working ... and it was cold. She didn't want to leave her room ... but it was too cold, so I persuaded her to leave ... and she was moved to a room on the floor above ... the staff room."

Clark stood frozen for some seconds, while the aide seemed to be on the verge of tears again. When he continued, it was almost distractedly, "I think some of the old people in that wing were taken to the hospital, but I was told they weren't badly injured." At last, Clark shook himself into complete awareness. "Excuse me, but did you say Miss Bowen-Timmons?" he asked,

emphasizing the second part of the name.

"Yes. She's a very important person around here. I think she owns this place, or something," Liz explained, her voice rising worriedly. "And I sent her to a place where she's gone and gotten hurt. She'll hate me ..." Her voice died away as she stared at nowhere in particular.

Clark did feel sorry for poor Liz, but she'd just given him the connection he'd been looking for. "Liz, did Miss Bowen-Timmons have a relative ... like a cousin, or maybe a nephew?"

Liz's eyes almost jumped from her head. "How did you know that?" She took a couple of steps back toward Clark. "Do you know him too? He's her nephew, and his name's Thomas. They'd been estranged, but he sent her a card and a gift for Christmas. Wasn't that nice of him? He must want to get back together with his aunt before she dies ... because she is very old ... and now she's been bombed, and old people do die from shock ..."

Liz was almost whining, but Clark cut in quickly. "Her nephew is Thomas Timmons?"

"You do know him! Can you get in touch with him, tell him about his aunt?"

"I'd guess he already knows," Clark replied with a grimace, taking hold of Liz's hand again. "Liz, do you know what was in the package Thomas sent?"

"A greetings card and a box of chocolates," Liz almost whispered.

"What happened to the chocolates, Liz?" Clark tried to keep his voice even, but it was hard to control his urgency.

There was a silence that lasted only a few seconds, but to Clark it seemed like an eternity until Liz went on.

"They weren't the kind she liked, but I suppose he'd forgotten that, after all, he ran away years ago," Liz said in a daze, her thoughts heading for a particular conclusion she didn't want to reach. "There weren't enough candies in the box to go around the whole home, so she gave them to me ... but I'm on a diet." Liz patted her stomach with her free hand. "You eat too many sweet things at Christmas ..."

Clark wanted to rush her, but knew he should let her take her own time.

"So, before I left last night I put them in the staffroom ..." Liz's eyes widened even further, and if Clark hadn't been holding her up, she would have collapsed on the floor. "Oh, you don't think? No! It couldn't be. It was my fault."

"No!" Clark cut in quickly, almost lifting Liz back to the sofa and sitting her down. "It was not your fault. You didn't know ... and we can't say for definite ..."

"Liz, there you are." Another female voice sounded from the top of the stairs, and Clark looked up to see a formidable woman descending. "Thank you for coming at my call, and I'm so relieved you're here. Miss Bowen-Timmons was caught up in the explosion, but according to the medics who checked her over, she's suffering only minor bruises from when her bed collapsed, but they believe she has no broken bones," the newcomer said as she reached the bottom of the stairs. "I'd say she was back to her usual self by the way she's complaining, but she insists on her doctor visiting her, and I agree it's better to be more safe than sorry ... but I don't want to leave her alone right now, so be a dear and go sit with her, Liz. She seems to accept you more than the rest of the staff."

Liz looked at Clark anxiously, not quite sure what to do. "Mr Kent?"

"Don't worry, Liz. Do as your boss says." Clark took a guess and was relieved to see the woman nod her head. "I have a friend in the police force who's upstairs. I'll tell him exactly what you've told me."

"You're not a policeman?" Liz inquired, still sounding bewildered.

"No, I'm Clark Kent of The Daily Planet, but I've been

investigating this case and Thomas Timmons. Believe me, Liz, you've just given me the chance to stop this madman," Clark said, deciding he could leave Liz in the care of her boss. "Go sit with your old lady, and I'll let the police know where to find you. They'll want to talk to you soon, and can you repeat everything you've told me about the package from Thomas?"

Liz nodded. She wasn't sure why, but she had trusted this stranger from the moment he'd prevented her from falling. "It's the truth."

"I don't doubt that for a minute," Clark assured Liz, then turned back to the older woman. "Are there any policemen on the floor above?"

The supervisor looked puzzled but she answered freely, instinctively recognizing Clark Kent's aura of authority, "Yes, there are policemen stationed all over the home."

"Then tell them to put a guard on Liz and Miss Bowen-Timmons. I can't tell you why, but it is very important."

"Don't worry. I'll make sure they are safe." The supervisor had no idea what was going on, but she'd picked up on the seriousness of the situation immediately.

"Good!" Clark replied, giving both women a fleeting, yet somehow somber smile.

The two women watched as Clark left the building at speed. It was imperative he find Zymak and she talk to Peterson on his behalf. Jed ought to be convinced of the connection now, even though his bosses might need some persuading.

Soon after Officer Zymak had relayed Clark's message and convinced the sergeant of its urgency, Peterson arrived. Without saying a word, he marched past Clark and the policewoman, leading them further off the drive into the privacy of the trees.

Finally he turned, regarding Clark guardedly. "Sorry about the cloak and dagger stuff, but I suspect my new partner told the inspector I was talking to you earlier. He sees sucking up to the bosses as his fast track to the top." For a brief second the detective seemed weighed down by too many problems and he spoke to Clark somewhat curtly. "I've been told you think you have found our bomber?"

Clark shifted his weight from foot to foot. Perhaps getting Jed on board might not be so easy as he'd believed. "I haven't found him exactly ..."

"Then why am I here?" Jed interrupted, before swinging on Zymak, his voice hard edged with frustration. "Tracey, you told me ..."

"I do have a name!" Clark cut in with some force, directing Peterson's attention back on himself. When the sergeant fell silent, he continued. "His name is Thomas Timmons, and if you check with the nursing supervisor and an aide called Liz, you'll discover that Miss Bowen-Timmons lives in the home, she might even own the place, but today she got a package from her nephew Thomas. He sent her chocolates, but she didn't open them." Clark watched Jed's face closely to see how he was reacting and saw a flicker of interest spark in his eyes. "Instead, she gave them to Liz who put them in the staff room. Liz didn't open them either, but I'm guessing that our casualty did. You can ask her when she regains consciousness."

Jed cleared his throat, but said hoarsely. "I'm afraid that's not going to be possible. I got word from the hospital. The victim didn't make it."

Silence engulfed the private conversation of the three individuals for a time, the only movement clouds of their breathing rising in the cold air.

"I am sorry," Clark murmured, his eyes closing as he felt heartache for this woman and her family at this time of year, when life should be happy. And Matt! Matt would be hurting. He had to find his son and comfort him ... but not yet.

"Yeah," Jed said starkly. "This Timmons has a lot to answer

for."

At Jed's words, Clark's eyes flashed open. "You believe me about Timmons?"

The sergeant inclined his head in a partial nod, but didn't look at Clark. "Let's just say I'm prepared to go along with you at this point." There was another pause while he blew on his hands and rubbed them together for warmth. "It's cold out tonight; probably below freezing ... but I guess we're lucky to be alive to feel it. Too many people have died." Jed turned back to Clark. "This isn't for publication, but I believe you because one of the forensic team found traces of something that could once have been chocolate on the detonator. They can't be sure — not until they run tests, but it's a possibility."

Clark nodded in silence, ignoring the temptation to warm up the two cops with his heat vision. Totally oblivious of Clark's impulse or his ability to carry it out, the sergeant continued, "So you seriously think we can link the bomb with this Timmons guy?"

"I'm sure Liz and Miss Bowen-Timmons will confirm that the package came from him, and ..."

"But you knew about him before you got here?" Jed's question came at Clark with the speed of a bullet.

"Yes, I did." Clark took a deep breath, trying to get his thoughts in order, which wasn't quite so easy, because in the deepest recesses of his heart he could feel Matt's distress. He had to wind this up as quickly as he could and find his son. "This is what I was trying to tell you earlier. This morning ... or make that yesterday, I got a tip from a source who saw Timmons with Bob Tanner, the night before the hospital explosion. My source said he overheard Timmons telling Tanner he wanted him to have a clear head for some job they had on the next day ..."

"Blowing up Metropolis General?" Tracey joined in the conversation.

"I believe so," Clark answered her.

"That's purely circumstantial," Jed said, slightly dismissively. "And do I want to know who this source is?"

Clark sighed. Peterson had every right to be skeptical. With as fragmented information as he had, he'd be exactly the same way. "True, but the coincidences mount up ... and, no, right at this minute, I have to protect my source."

"Sure that's all it is, Kent, and not that your source isn't exactly reliable?" Jed asked bluntly.

Stifling another sigh, Clark continued. "Please, just go with me on this. I know I don't have any firm evidence, but you're a good policeman, Jed. Hear me out?"

There was another pause, but shorter this time, before Jed acquiesced. "OK, tell me what you've got."

Clark straightened his shoulders before continuing. It was imperative that he get this right. "My source gave me a partial name and the fact that he had spotted this guy working in an all-night cafe in Bakerline." He glanced at his listeners to see how they were reacting; Tracey was hanging on his every word, but Peterson was poker-faced. "I went there tonight and eventually found the cafe. One of the customers recognized the man I was looking for as being Thomas Timmons, who'd worked at the cafe until a week ago."

"What happened a week ago?" Jed demanded, his voice monotone.

"The guy didn't show up for work. He didn't tell anyone he was leaving, and he hasn't been in since. I asked for an address, but my contact couldn't tell me where he lived, though it was suggested I come back during the day and talk to the boss."

Jed eyed Clark cynically. "Right ... and I'm guessing this source doesn't have a name either?"

"No." The ground at his feet was suddenly very interesting to Clark, but after a second, he gritted his teeth and locked gazes with the detective. "The contact would rather remain anonymous.

You know there are some areas in Bakerline where talking to the police can get you into serious trouble.”

“But you think the owner of the cafe will talk?” Jed came back quickly.

Clark swallowed, he’d been wondering about that himself. “I don’t know, but that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t give it a try.” Clark dug his hands into his pockets to keep them still, not wanting to betray his anxiety. “Remember the cassette recording of the bomber? Jor-El said it smelled greasy, and when you had forensics check it out, you found faint traces of cooking oil; that could tie in with someone who works in a cafe.”

“Or someone who does a lot of home cooking ... granted not very healthy cooking, but ...”

“But Tanner never cooked at home or elsewhere. He didn’t have a home, and I doubt you ever managed to tie Tanner to that tape,” Clark stated, standing firm.

“Yeah, well, it’s difficult to compare voice patterns when the suspect is blown to pieces,” Jed said, and jumped when Zymak put her hand on his arm.

“Jed, that’s not fair. Tanner is already dead,” the policewoman said reasonably. “You can’t blame him for this crime, so it’s possible that he had an accomplice, at least.”

“Or he was tricked,” Clark insisted. “There are people who will vouch for Tanner not being able to hurt a fly, and I happen to believe them. Jed, I know I only have a string of coincidences, but my gut tells me that there is no smoke without fire, and I think you agree with me.” He drew his hands from his pockets and held them out to the detective. “You have to admit it’s worth checking into.”

Peterson stayed silent as he took his turn to study the ground.

“Peterson, I’m not asking you to do the investigating, but if I can find a connection between Timmons and the rest of the targets, will you consider him a suspect, and try to persuade your bosses to put an APB out on him?”

For the first time during their conversation, Peterson relented. “Kent, I’m not saying you’re wrong ... just that I need more proof before I can act, but if you find that connection, I’ll do everything possible to bring this man in.”

Clark nodded. It wasn’t as much co-operation as he’d hoped for, but it was something. He turned to go, but paused for a second as he dug a copy of his sketch from inside his coat and held it out to Peterson. “Jed, do me a favor, don’t ask me how I got this, but show it to the old lady, Miss Bowen-Timmons, and ask her if she believes this could be her nephew. I don’t think she’s seen him for a number of years, and she might not be fit enough to answer, but I’d be very interested to hear what she has to say.”

Jed stared silently at the piece of paper in his hand, before glancing up at Clark. “OK, I’ll do that. You gonna be at The Planet for most of the day?”

“Probably, though I have to go back to that cafe this morning,” Clark said wearily. Tiredness clogged his mind and spread like a canker into his bones, but he couldn’t afford to rest. He flexed his shoulders, shrugging off the lethargy. “If you need to contact me, try The Planet, and if I’m not there leave a message with Lois.”

Clark walked away from the couple back to the driveway, but before he reached the gate, Officer Zymak caught up with him.

“Hey, wait for me,” she gasped, breathless and smiling. “You sure can walk fast.”

“I have a lot to do.” Clark explained, without slowing his pace and unable to hide his annoyance as he threw a sideways glance at policewoman. “What do you want? Jed found something else to complain about?”

But the grin stayed on Zymak’s face. “No. The opposite, actually,” she countered, before going on to explain. “Jed’s in a difficult position right now. His new partner has connections on

the force, and he’s watching him closely. But Jed does think you’re on the right track, and he suggested I could talk to the owner of the cafe for you ... unofficially, of course.”

Clark halted. “You?” he asked incredulously. “Why would you want to do that?” he added with uncharacteristic harshness, the difficulties with this investigation shredding his nerves. Without waiting for an answer, he marched on.

“For a few reasons,” Tracey replied patiently, matching his stride. “One, because Jed asked me to — I’m off duty in a few hours, and no one in the department is keeping a check on me. Two, you have your hands full investigating Timmons. And three, and most importantly, my dad always said you and Lois Lane had the best instincts in the business.” She put a hand on his arm to make him slow down. “I want to help you, and I won’t let you down. Please, let me do this?”

Clark glanced toward the eastern horizon where the sky was faintly tinged with a rusty hue. Dawn wasn’t that far off, and Tracey was correct. He had to do a deep background check on Thomas Timmons, and god knew how long that might take. But first, he had to find Matt. He had no idea yet where Matt was, but he sensed that his son needed him.

“OK, Tracey,” he replied after a few seconds. “I’m sorry for snapping at you, and I appreciate your help.”

The grin on Zymak’s face became brighter. “Good. You give me the address and I’ll get down there as soon as I can. When I find anything concrete, I’ll get in touch with you at The Planet.” They had almost reached the gate. “Boy, wait till Dad finds out I have been working with you. He’ll get a real kick out of that!”

Chapter Fourteen: Faith, Hope and Charity

Clark drove slowly back to the city, his concentration completely focused on locating his son. He only hoped Matt didn’t do his soul-searching on an ice flow in the Arctic, where he had gone on more than one occasion when he’d first donned the suit. There was no way he’d ever reach him there.

He contemplated calling Lois, but he didn’t want to worry her. He’d driven down Hyperion Avenue on his way back to the city center and had checked out his home with both his hearing and x-ray vision. Thankfully, after a couple of attempts, his x-ray vision had co-operated and his hearing was almost back to normal —

Superman normal — allowing him to know that his daughters were sleeping peacefully, while their mother was in bed, but tossing and turning restlessly in her sleep. If he couldn’t find Matt soon, he decided he would ask Lois where her son would go to think.

Meanwhile he stretched out with his mind. <Matt, son, can you hear me?> The channel remained totally silent.

Clark negotiated a second set of traffic lights, tempted to run a red light on the eerily deserted streets, but his inbred habit of being a law-abiding citizen won out.

<Matt, I know you have got to be hurting, so please talk to me. Maybe I can help.>

OK, so Matt could brood as well as he could at that age ... but he’d learned that brooding wasn’t helpful.

<Come on, Matt!> he thought, letting a tiny amount of frustration leak out of his mind. Maybe his decision not to trouble Lois immediately was wrong.

He breathed deeply to calm himself. Nagging his son wasn’t going to get him an answer. Instead Clark reached out with his consciousness, trying to tap into the same link he shared with Lois. Burgeoning from somewhere deep inside him came the certainty that Matt hadn’t flown to the North Pole, or any other distant spot. Listening with neither his hearing nor his telepathy, but with his heart, Clark realized that Matt had gone to the one place where he had found comfort as a teenager.

Deftly, Clark turned the car around and headed to his parents’

home, thankful they no longer lived in Smallville; he wouldn't have been able to fly there either.

The sky had brightened further as Clark drew up in front of his parents' apartment, while far to the south east a line of steely red edged the horizon. What was that old adage he'd heard Mac quote? Red sky in the morning, sailor's warning. Of course, that referred to the weather, but his feeling of impending dread didn't need any type of encouragement.

Clark used his key to let himself in, surprised to find the apartment in silent darkness. For some seconds he held still, listening, letting the sounds of his parents restful breathing soothe his stress levels. But they were alone in the apartment, yet he'd been certain this was where he would find his son.

He extended his senses and soon picked up another heart beat, coming from outside. His parents lived in the ground floor apartment of an old mansion that had been converted into condos, giving them the advantage of a rather large garden, which the other residents were happy to allow Martha and Jonathan to cultivate. It still gave his parents satisfaction to work the soil, if in a much smaller capacity.

Right now the enclosed garden was being used as a refuge by a very troubled superhero.

Clark passed quickly through the room and out of the patio doors to confront his son, but what he saw drew him up short. Matt sat hunched on the rustic table, back in his civilian clothes, his eyes staring northward, beyond the city limits, to the ghostly snow clad hills, yet Clark doubted if the scene even registered in Matt's brain.

"Matt," Clark said quietly, not wanting to wake the neighbors, walking softly to stand by his son's shoulder. "Want to tell me what's wrong?" There was a wealth of understanding in Clark's tone.

"What do you think?" Matt came back with a whisper, though self-disgust bubbled beneath the surface of his hushed tone.

Careful not to make any sudden movements, Clark settled himself in a chair at the edge of Matt's peripheral vision, and when he spoke, his voice was light, but full of compassion. "I know what I think, son, what interests me is how you see what happened tonight."

Matt continued to stare straight ahead, but there was a wrenching pain in his voice when he finally spoke. "I killed someone. That's what happened!"

"No. The bomber did that, the one who sent the package. He was solely responsible for that woman's death."

For the first time, Matt turned to his father. "But she was alive when I got there. I made a decision. It turned out to be the wrong one, and because of that she died!"

Not for one moment did Clark think to dismiss Matt's account with platitudes, instead he leaned forward in his chair until he could almost touch the young superhero. "I wasn't there. Can you tell me what your decision was?"

"Dad, I'm not sure I want to go through this with you." And Matt, once again, was supposedly fascinated by the winter vistas.

Following his son's gaze, Clark asked softly. "You find comfort in the countryside, don't you? You know, I used to do this in China — sit out late at night on my own and watch the mountains change under the glow of the night sky ..."

And dream of a totally different landscape, he mused, choosing to keep that thought to himself. In this instance, he was not the one suffering. Clark pulled his coat around him, feeling the cold. It was weird but his vulnerability seemed to be the last thing to kick back in ... that and flying. "The world is a wonderful place, and yet there is such evil in it too, mostly man made."

"I like it at the farm," Matt offered another one-liner, before clamming up tight again.

For some time, father and son sat in almost companionable silence, letting the beauty of the scene seep into their veins.

Clark understood Matt needed to open up, so finally he addressed his son again. "Matt, I know you're going over and over your actions from tonight in your head." He leaned forward and pushed a lock of Matt's tousled hair back from his brow. "Would it be so difficult to tell me about it?"

Matt pulled away from his father's hand, but at last he conceded. "I guess not. There really isn't much to tell. I arrived at the nursing home and scanned the place for casualties. There was the danger of fire, so I used my freezing breath to tamp it down for the moment, so I could get to the injured woman," he related his tale as if he were reciting a laundry list. "I cleared the wreckage from her, and, believe me, there was quite a lot ... and that's when I got it wrong."

"In what way wrong?"

Matt jumped up, ready to fly away, but Clark rose with him and moved to confront him.

"The first rule of saving people's lives is getting them to the hospital for treatment as quickly as possible," Matt snapped at his father. "And I didn't do that. I should have flown her there immediately, but I didn't!"

Clark steeled himself and buried his pity deep inside. "Why not? If you think that's the best policy, why didn't you carry it through?" he demanded, his voice unsympathetic.

"Because I scanned her for injuries and it looked like she'd broken a couple of vertebrae in her neck. I was afraid if I just picked her up and flew her to the ER, she'd end up completely paralyzed ... or worse."

"Did she have other injuries?" Clark kept up the interrogation, though inside he was hurting for his boy ... a boy who was trying so hard to do a man's job.

"Yeah. She had some internal injuries, but they didn't seem too bad. I believed the neck trauma was the worst."

Clark nodded and eased off a little. "So what did you do then?"

By now, Matt looked like he'd encountered a ton of Kryptonite. "I heard the sirens, so I flew in the closest paramedics. They put her in a neck brace and on a back board, stabilized her and then I flew the ambulance with the woman to the ER."

"Do you think that took very long?"

"Not all that long, I guess." Matt stuffed his hand in his pockets and went back to sitting on his grandparents' patio table. "They ER team did their best for her, but she bled out due to her internal injuries ... so I chose wrong, Dad. If I hadn't waited, if I'd gotten her to the hospital right away, maybe she'd be alive ..."

"And maybe she would have died from a broken neck," Clark countered. "Matt, you're not a doctor, but you had to make a split second decision, and it's very easy to know what was the best thing to do with hindsight, but that's not one of our special abilities. No matter what choice you made, that poor woman could have died." Clark too hoisted himself on the table next to his son. "Did the ER doctors tell you anything?"

"Not really ... only that her injuries were too extensive for them to save her." Matt was back to talking in whispers.

"And do you think you're more qualified than these doctors to judge the extent of this women's injuries?"

Again Matt jumped up, staring at his father. "No, of course not. Dad, why are you being this way?"

Clark sighed deeply and locked his gaze with his son. "Matt, I'm not trying to attack you, though I know it certainly seems that way. I'm just trying to remind you that we aren't gods. We don't have the power of life or death over everyone, and if you don't realize that you shouldn't be wearing the suit," Clark finished on a somber note, though his hidden tears threatened to choke him.

“But I put on the suit because I thought that’s what you would want me to do,” Matt almost sobbed. “To make a difference ...”

Dropping all pretense, Clark placed his hands on Matt’s shoulders. “And you do make a difference.” He wanted to pull Matt in for a hug, but wasn’t quite sure if his son was ready for that. “Think about it. Tonight, you gave that woman a chance at living, but she was just too hurt to make it. Not your fault. But if you hadn’t been there, she would have died under the rubble, waiting for the ambulance to reach her. If you hadn’t been there, the fire would have taken hold and a lot of those old people would have been killed too, or at least injured.”

Clark moved his arm till it was resting along Matt’s shoulder and started walking him back indoors. “At the theater fire, all those people who were trapped on the upper floors would not have made it out if you hadn’t been there to help them. So many people will enjoy Christmas with their families because you made a decision to become a superhero. Matt, you do what you can and that does make a difference, but it’s not possible to save everyone.”

Now Clark decided his son was ready for a hug and the two clung together for some moments, before Clark leaned back.

“Matt, you might make mistakes, but, believe me, tonight wasn’t one. You have to have more faith in your judgment, just as your mom told me to have faith in mine.”

At last, a tiny smile crossed Matt’s face. “I guess you got the lecture too — you can’t do everything but whatever you can do is enough. You give us hope.”

Clark joined in his son’s soft laughter, as he closed the patio doors, shutting out the cold. “You know, I’ve always thought your mother was a very wise woman, and just because it’s been repeated down through the years doesn’t make it any less true. It’s as true for you as it was for me.” He placed his arm around his son in a sideways hug, before letting him go. “And speaking of your mother, she’ll be ready to hamstring me for not getting you home at a reasonable time. You might have forgotten, but you’re still taking exams today.”

As Clark finished talking, the lights were switched on and Martha came rather slowly into the room.

“Oh, my, what are you doing here?” she asked, sounding sleepily surprised, which quickly changed into worry. “Is there something wrong with Lois and the girls?”

“No, Mom,” Clark reassured her quickly. “Lois and the girls are fine, but there was another bombing earlier tonight ...”

“Another? That’s horrible, and your father and I never heard a thing,” Martha walked into the kitchen. “Your dad is a bit hard of hearing these days, but I thought I might have heard the explosion.”

Clark followed behind his mom, crossing to the coffee maker; since he’d woken her up, he felt he owed her a morning cup of coffee. “It happened after midnight; I’m sure you were asleep. Besides it was over by Hyperion ... not our home, Mom,” he added as Martha’s eyes opened wide with shock. “It was a nursing home called Hyperion Vistas, and it wasn’t as big an explosion as the Metro General one.”

Martha sank down onto a chair. “Who is doing this and what gives this person the right to think he can take other people’s lives?” she asked angrily before glancing up at her son with perfect trust. “Clark, you have to catch this terrible person!”

“I’m getting close, Mom, and hopefully after today, I’ll know all there is to know about our mysterious bomber, though I think he’s gone to ground, so finding him might be difficult.”

Martha didn’t doubt Clark’s words for a moment. “I’m sure you’ll get him, son.” She looked across the breakfast bar into the living room to see Matt sitting on the sofa with his eyes closed. Her heart ached for the exhausted boy. Most people only saw the competent superhero, but this was her grandson ... “Since Matt

turned up here, I’m assuming that the rescue didn’t go so well.”

“Mom, Matt did all he could, but one woman died. I believe she couldn’t be saved, not by Jor-El or Superman ... or the ER team. But because of his presence, there was only one fatality and no other serious injuries. I’d say the rescue went pretty well.”

A sad smile warmed Martha’s face. “But getting Matt to see that is a little more difficult, isn’t it? He is so like his father ... but so young.” Martha gazed up at Clark as he placed the steaming mug in front of her, and her hand captured his. “Do you believe we did the right thing in allowing him to take on your mantle?”

“I think Matt understands about life and death. He’s not happy about the situation, but I think he realizes it isn’t up to him, no matter how powerful he is.” Then Clark’s head cocked a little to the side as he considered his mother’s second question. “To be honest, Mom, I’m not sure I would have agreed to Matt becoming Jor-El if I’d been here, but perhaps the situation wouldn’t have arisen; Matt would have had time to grow up a little more before donning the suit.” He sat down at his mother’s side. “But I think your question is moot. Matt made up his own mind, and he’s shares his parents’ stubborn streak. He’d have created Jor-El regardless of Lois’ or your backing, and I am so glad he didn’t have to go it alone. Thank you for being there for my son ... the same way you were there for me, and you have no idea how much I admire Lois for nurturing two superheroes. She’s the real hero ... and the world will never know how much they owe her.”

“I don’t think Lois wants anyone’s thanks, not for that anyway,” Martha said, smiling again. “Though she does a great job herself in making Metropolis a safer place to live.”

Leaning closer, Clark whispered. “That’s why I love her so much.” He gave a quick laugh. “The bad guys were more afraid of Lois Lane than Superman.” Clark’s eyes closed for a few seconds as he relived his years as a member of the reporting team of Lane and Kent, while moonlighting in tights. Memories to cherish, but, at present, he had a very tired son to take care of. “And as I said to Matt, I’m afraid of what Lois will have to say if I don’t get her son back home right now. He has school this morning.”

Clark stood and walked back into the living room, crossing to his son, whose eyes were still shut. Clark bent, and shook Matt’s shoulder. “Come on, son. You need to go home.” Matt’s eyes opened, but his gaze was unfocused. Clark took his arm and pulled him gently to his feet. “You need to go to bed. Now! A couple of hours sleep before you go to school is better than none at all.”

“I don’t know, Dad,” Matt said reluctantly. “Maybe I should go back to Hyperion Vistas. There might be stuff I could do to help, and the police will probably want to talk to me.”

“No, Matt. The emergency services will have it under control, and the police can wait for their statement until after your exams. Waiting another few hours for your information isn’t going to make a huge difference to this investigation.”

At that, Matt perked up, but it was obvious he was almost running on empty. “Hey, about that investigation ... how did it go? Were the police grateful for your information?”

Unable to suppress a grunt, Clark herded his son toward the front door. “Let’s just say that the investigation is still ongoing, and Peterson might be willing to believe me, but his superiors clearly need a lot more proof ... which I am going to give them.”

“You bet you will, Dad,” Matt said with a grin, which was overtaken by a huge yawn. “Maybe I should try to get some sleep. I do have to take these tests in ...” Matt looked at the clock on the wall. “Oh boy, is that the right time?”

His grandmother and father both nodded.

“In about three hour’s time,” the young superhero added a little sheepishly. “Mom is going to kill me. She’s really big on my

super duties not ruining my education.”

Laughing ruefully, Clark assured his anxious son. “I think it’s me she’ll send to the doghouse. I had strict instructions to get you home at a reasonable time ... and almost 5.00am probably isn’t quite what she meant.”

They had reached the front door, and Clark turned back to his mother. “Sorry for dropping in on you without warning, Mom, and in the middle of the night.”

Martha linked her arm with her son’s. “Don’t apologize. I haven’t lived on the farm for years, but I still keep country hours. I would have woken up pretty soon anyway,” she finished with a smile.

“Actually, that was my fault, Grandma,” Matt said, suddenly looking very much the abashed teenager and not the hero. “I needed somewhere quiet to think, and I didn’t have the heart to wake you.”

“Oh, honey, that’s OK. You know you’re welcome here at anytime and with any problems. Come here,” she directed, pulling him into her arms. “Your dad tells me you did a good job tonight ...”

“That’s up for debate,” Matt groaned, still not quite willing to absolve himself of some of the blame, at least.

“Matt!” Grandparent and parent spoke warningly in unison.

“I know. I know,” Matt jumped in. “I accept what you’re saying in here.” He tapped his head, before his hand covered his heart. “It’s just a little more difficult to come to accept it in here.”

There was a minute of silence, before Clark admitted. “I’ll let you into a secret, Matt. It was something I never really came to terms with in my heart, either. Logically, I realized I was just a man with special abilities, but I wasn’t a god.” Clark shrugged self-consciously. “Didn’t mean that I didn’t cry inside for every time I was just that little bit too late, or lost someone I thought I’d saved.”

Matt studied his father’s face. “How do you learn to live with it, Dad?”

In the shadows of the hallway, tears glinted in his father’s eyes. “You just do ... because if you let the stress and the sadness overpower you, you’d stop trying to make a difference, and that’s not an option.”

Small though Martha was, her embrace enveloped father and son, and she said quietly, but with total conviction. “It’s that strength and endurance that makes both of you superheros ... and I’ve been blessed to help raise you.” She stepped back and scrubbed her eyes with the cuff of her robe. “Now get out of here. I think you both have non-superhero jobs to do,” she ended on something which was both a laugh and a sob. “And, remember, I’ll want a progress report later.”

Clark and Matt said their goodbyes and as the door closed behind them, Clark turned to his son. “You want a lift home, or can you make it on your own?”

A cheeky grin twitched at the corners of Matt’s lips. “I’m not that wiped out, Dad. I could give you a lift home, and you can have someone pick up the car tomorrow.”

Clark shook his head. “I’m not going home. I have work to do at The Planet,” he said, opening the car and sliding into the driver’s seat. “I just can’t rid myself of the feeling that this guy is planning something big, and that we’re running out of time to stop him. Tell your mom I’ll meet up with her at work.” Clark started the engine, but before he drove off, he called out to his son. “See you don’t make any detours on the way home. You’ve helped out enough for one night ... and good luck with those exams.”

With that the Kents parted — one driving down the street, the other taking to his grandparents’ bushes and from there straight up into the sky.

The newsroom was quieter than normal, with just a few

members of staff on duty in the hours between the late shift ending and the day shift beginning, yet Clark Kent sat at his desk, staring intently at his monitor.

He flexed his back and shoulders, untangling the kinks in his muscles, while he shifted his glasses aside to rub his tired eyes. In fact, his whole body felt achy and exhausted, which, he supposed, wasn’t too surprising since he’d gone almost twenty-four hours without sleep. He’d often managed a lot more than that in his Superman days, but that fact no longer appeared to be true.

Thinking back over the last few days, he acknowledged he’d been using his recovering powers more often, and he was afraid the effort had drained him. Even his hands felt painful, and as he peeled off the two remaining dressings, he noticed the new skin looked slightly angrier than before.

Was this how it was going to be from now on?

Use a few minor superpowers over a short period of time and feel drained and lethargic afterward? Sara suggested he tapped into the powers when danger threatened; if that was true, he hoped that his family stayed safe until he recovered. Right at this moment, he doubted he’d be able to save himself, let alone anyone else.

But there was one consolation; his deep background check on Thomas Timmons was coming together, albeit slowly, thanks to Jim’s refresher course on how to hack into computers.

Across the newsroom, the elevator doors opened with a quiet swish, but Clark was so engrossed in his research he didn’t notice the new arrival. He continued scanning the screen, reading with some relief and a lot of satisfaction, before clicking on the print key.

If Peterson’s bosses were demanding proof, then he was going to make sure they got it. With a little luck and perseverance he would soon have information linking Timmons to all the targets, and he couldn’t suppress an uncharacteristic desire to say ‘I told you so!’

Clark heard the printer begin churning out his copies and he pushed his chair back to go fetch them, almost mowing down the person standing close behind him.

There was a squeal and Clark whirled quickly, but unfortunately not fast enough to save the person from falling to the floor.

“Lois! What are you doing here so early?” Clark asked, concern sharpening his voice, as he helped her to her feet. “Did you speak to Matt?”

Rubbing her right wrist, which had taken her weight as she fell, she allowed Clark to press her into the seat he had seconds ago vacated. “Yes, I spoke to Matt, which is why I’m here.”

Clark took hold of Lois’ arm and began massaging her wrist. He tried x-raying it to see if she’d broken any bones, but his supposition that his powers were missing was obviously right.

His hope that his family remain safe was already in tatters, and he’d been the one to hurt Lois.

“Honey,” he whispered, a deep frown on his face as he continued to try to look at his wife’s bones. “I’d love to be able to check your wrist, but I don’t have any of my powers at the moment. Maybe we should take you to the ER to see if you have broken your wrist.”

Lois had her eyes closed, as she enjoyed the feel of Clark’s warm fingers easing her pain, but at her husband’s words, her eyes flashed open. “Clark, I’m fine ... well, I’m not exactly fine, but I don’t think I’ve broken any bones.” She pulled her wrist from his grasp and held it aloft, wagging her fingers. “See, I can move all my fingers, and the pain isn’t too bad. I’m sure a cold compress will do just as well ... unless you still have a little blast of your freezing breath.” The last part of her statement was barely audible.

A dejected air descended on Clark like a cloak. “Sorry, I doubt I could manage the tiniest puff, and even if I could, I

wouldn't trust myself to be able to control it. Everything has gone, and to tell the truth, I feel like I'm sleepwalking."

"That bad, eh?" Lois commiserated, giving him a gentle smile and taking hold of his hand. "You have been pretty busy over the last few days, so don't be too despondent. I'm sure you'll be fine with a little rest."

"I can't rest, honey. Not now. Not when I know this guy is still out there. Oh, and I'm really sorry about Matt. I know you told me to get him home at a reasonable hour, but he wanted to go to the rescue and I decided not to stop him, even if I could have."

"I know," Lois said with a tiny shrug. "He's very determined. I would have forbidden him from going to Jilin, if he'd waited for permission ... and look how that turned out." She stood up and wrapped her arms around Clark, resting her head on his chest. "You'll never know how grateful I am to have such a disobedient son."

"Very true," Clark said, smiling, until his wife occupied his mouth with an entirely different, and more pleasant, exercise. When the kiss finally ended, he leaned back and asked, "You're not angry at me?"

Lois planted another kiss on Clark's lips. "No. Unless you're apologizing for Matt inheriting your stubborn streak ..."

Clark's brows rose. "My stubborn streak?" he asked in shock, but his eyes were twinkling.

"I suppose he might have got a little of that from me," she acknowledged, her fingers running down the front of his shirt. "But never be sorry he inherited your powers, or your caring heart. I never will be. Besides, when I left, he was fast asleep, and he'll be fine in a couple of hours."

"Did he tell you how upset he was about the woman who died?"

"Yes, and he told me how you gave him a pep-talk." She tightened her arms around him again. "Thank you for that. You understand how he feels better than anyone, though I do try to help him when he feels depressed about a rescue that hasn't gone quite the way he hoped."

Clark cupped Lois' face with his hand and ran his thumb softly over her cheek. "Don't say that, Lois. You have more insight in dealing with broken-hearted superheroes than you'll ever know, and, believe me, I'm speaking from experience here. There were times when I felt I couldn't go on, yet you always gave me the strength to go back out there."

Lois smiled into his face, though tears clouded her eyes. "Then why don't we agree that Matt is twice blessed."

This time it was Clark who initiated the kiss, and though a fleeting memory of Perry warning them not to 'make out' in the bullpen flashed through his mind, he dismissed the warning entirely. After all, Lois was the boss, and, right at this moment, she didn't seem to mind being kissed by her husband. Besides, there were hardly any staff around.

But, clearly, Lois was on a mission. He broke the kiss again.

"Honey, much as I enjoy kissing you, why are you here at this hour?" His gaze lifted to the big wall clock. "I know you like to be the 'early bird', but you're not usually here quite as early in the morning."

Lois ducked her head, blushing a little. "I got the impression from Matt that you might like a little help. You know, a temporary return to Lane and Kent ... not that I think you can't do this on your own, but I hoped another perspective ... might help." Her last words faded to an almost inaudible whisper, but Lois was ever one to speak her mind, and she continued strongly, though staring directly at the middle of Clark's chest. "Of course, if you want to do this on your own, I understand ... after all, I haven't really been an investigative reporter in quite a long time."

Clark's fingers slid beneath her chin, lifting her eyes to lock with his. "Honey, you will always be the best investigative

journalist this newspaper, or any other, will ever have." His gaze deepened until it seemed they were communicating soul to soul. "No one has your instincts, and I'd actually be honored to accept your help. I have no idea why, but my instincts are telling me Timmons is building up to something big, and though I might have convinced Jed, I've got to find proof that he's the man the police should be looking for before he strikes again."

Lois needed no further encouragement as she pulled up her chair. "OK, what have you got so far?"

"I checked the DMV data-base, but I didn't find a match, not at first ... not until I checked their archive." Clark retrieved a number of documents from the printer, which he handed to Lois. "Timmons let his license lapse. I have no idea why, but he did apply back in the late eighties, and that's not the only thing I discovered," Clark said, with just the tiniest amount of smugness. "I found out he worked as a driver ..."

"For Speedy Deliveries?" Lois jumped in quickly.

Clark pulled up a chair and sat down next his wife. "Correct! Only that wasn't their name back then. Same company though, but they were called Handy Andy Deliveries, after the owner, Harold Andrews."

A grin flashed across Lois' face. "I can see why he might have wanted to change that name." Lois scanned the documents. "What made you think Timmons might have worked for them?"

"Just a hunch, I guess." Clark pulled his keyboard in front of him and brought up his research on Hyperion Vistas. "Lois, I think Thomas had a privileged upbringing; his aunt was rich, but for some reason he ran away from home. Ina Bowen-Timmons used to live in Hyperion House and she appears to have been quite an influential person in the neighborhood, yet there is no mention of her having a family. But according to the aide who looks after the aunt, Ina admitted to having a nephew called Thomas Timmons, who sent her the chocolates which allegedly contained the bomb; hopefully forensics will confirm that later. I think Timmons is trying to take revenge on people who might have let him down in the past."

"What did 'Handy Andy' do to Timmons?" she asked, and again Clark was reminded of how street-smart and intuitive his wife was.

"He fired him," Clark replied shortly, before settling in to explain. "As soon as I realized Timmons might be getting back at certain people, I took a chance and called Speedy Deliveries; fortunately, the boss is very conscientious, and he was already at work ..."

"Like someone else I know," Lois interrupted teasingly.

Clark smiled back. "You know what they say ... it takes one to know one." But, he was distracted only momentarily and very quickly resumed his story. "Because it was such a long time ago, Andrews had pretty much forgotten about Timmons, so when the police asked him if he knew of anyone who held a grudge against him he said no. Mentioning Timmons by name jogged his memory and it all came back to him ..."

"And?" Excitement was bubbling through Lois' veins; unearthing the truth was exactly the thing she missed most now that she was an editor.

"He remembered Thomas, and not favorably. He said the guy was a sloppy worker who hardly ever showed up on time for work, and who continually delivered his packages to the wrong people. But more than that, he remembered Thomas as a moody guy; a loner with a chip on his shoulder, and who was pretty disgruntled when he got laid off. Wallace waited for Timmons to commit some act of petty vandalism against his business, but as time past and nothing happened, he forgot all about him. He changed the company name, moved premises as his business grew, and Timmons faded completely from his mind."

"Until you reminded him," Lois said with a lot of satisfaction. "So what's next? Are you trying to tie Timmons in

with all the other places that were bombed?”

“That’s the plan,” Clark replied, a crease wrinkling his brow. “I just hope that his connections aren’t all so far back in time as this one.” He tapped the paper in her hand. “Timmons seems to drop from the radar pretty frequently. I hope my computer hacking skills are up to scratch.”

A matching frown appeared on Lois’ face. “Banking systems are pretty difficult to hack into ... far more secure than the DMV. It might have slipped your mind, but they tightened everything after the financial crash of 2008, even their online security. Only the regulators have access to their data.”

“Maybe Jim could help me out there?”

“Sorry, honey, I’ve already sent Jim to do the follow-up story on last night’s explosion.” Lois stood, placing her hand on Clark’s shoulder. “Not the investigation, that’s your baby, but the story on the victims, the woman who died, and the ones who were injured. Then I asked him to chase down Jor-El for a quote ... after exam time, of course.”

Clark’s brow furrowed again. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. Matt,” Clark mouthed his son’s name and continued in a whisper, “Is pretty traumatized about last night ...”

“Not so much now, thanks to you,” Lois replied, squeezing Clark’s shoulder. She glanced around her as the elevators spilled a few more staff members into the newsroom, but no one was within hearing distance. “He told me about your talk, and how you made him see that he couldn’t blame himself; that the paramedics and the doctors probably couldn’t have saved the woman no matter what choice of action he’d taken. He’s also beginning to realize that the people in the emergency services face these types of decisions on a pretty regular basis: now he thinks that if they can do it, and you kept on doing it for all those years, that he just might make it too.” She bent down to place a kiss on his cheek. “Thank you for taking care of our son.”

“I want to help him,” Clark said fervently before sighing deeply. “I just wish I could do more ...”

Lois’ head snapped back, her eyes flashing fiercely, nailing him to the spot. “Clark Kent, do I have to remind you, too, that what you can do is enough?” She leaned closer to him, whispering in his ear. “That applies whether you’re flying around in tights or not! You got that?”

Clark couldn’t suppress a tiny smile. Lois in Mad Dog Lane mode was still pretty impressive. “Yes, Chief!”

“Good!” Then, regardless of the audience, Lois sat on Clark’s lap and kissed him ... hard. When she felt she’d made her point, she stood again. “OK, so what’s next?”

“Huh?”

Clearly, she could still render her husband speechless. Lois’ smile was dazzling. “Come on, Clark, keep up with the program. What’s next with the investigation?”

Her husband blushed sheepishly. “Right, the investigation,” he said, quickly resuming his professional manner. “The school was the next target, and as Timmons lived in the Hyperion area, I’m thinking he might have been a pupil. It’s still a little early, but I plan on calling Mrs Perez. Last time I checked, the school records went back only as far as the nineties, and Thomas probably attended elementary school during the seventies. Maybe she can point me in the direction of someone who can help me out.”

“Sounds like a plan.” She started walking toward her office, but paused half way. “Oh, and if you need a hand, you know where to find me ... and remember,” she said, holding out her hands, typing on a virtual keyboard, “Jim taught me how to hack too.”

Clark rose quickly. “Actually, Lois, there’s something you can do for me. Do you still have that friend over at City Hall?”

“Amy Collins?”

“She still works in records ... right?” When Lois nodded,

Clark continued. “Can you see if she can find a marriage certificate for Timmons? According to what I can find, this guy has been in and out of jobs all of his life ... mostly out, except for a period around 2006 when he went to work for Lemco. He managed to stay with them for almost three years, until they got rid of him, as well.”

“Any idea why?”

“Not yet, though I plan on finding out ... but I thought maybe he had a steadying influence for a while.”

“Like a good wife?” Lois’ cocked her head sassily. “It’s amazing what the right woman can do for a man, or I should say partner, since we have no idea what this guy’s sexual preferences are, but I suppose that raises the question of what happened to drive him off the rails again. Leave it with me. Your good woman,” she said, gesturing quotes in the air around those words, “won’t let you down.” Then, with a flick of her hair, she turned and headed for her office.

For some seconds, Clark watched as his wife disappeared inside, a dreamy, yet very satisfied expression on his face. Some time in his life he had to have done something really good, to deserve to find such a wonderful wife ... twice!

The morning had moved on considerably when Clark finally concluded a very interesting phone conversation with Mr Wilson, the retired principal of Vicky’s school. The elderly gentleman had moved to stay with his son and daughter-in-law in Wells, Maine, but was perfectly happy to talk about his years at the private school in Metropolis.

Clark was about to tell Lois what he’d discovered about Miss Bowen-Timmons’ long reign as head of the school board and her nephew’s very unhappy childhood, when he was interrupted by the arrival of Zymak and Peterson.

He halted in his tracks, his eyebrows arching. “This is a surprise. I didn’t expect a visit from both of you.”

Peterson gave a lopsided grin. “Actually, I came to offer you an apology for earlier. I’m sorry I was so skeptical.”

Clark shrugged but kept silent; there was no denying that the detective’s attitude had stung a bit.

Taking hold of the privacy partition around Clark’s desk for encouragement, Jed continued. “I took your advice and spoke to Miss Bowen-Timmons and her aide, even showed the old lady your sketch. Without prompting, she recognized the guy. She admits she hasn’t seen Thomas in over twenty years, but she thinks he looks exactly like his ‘no-good’ father.” The detective ran his fingers along the glass. “She wasn’t surprised that her nephew might be the bomber either; said the way he used to look at her sent shivers up and down her spine ... and he was just a kid back then.”

“From what I just found out, Aunt Ina wasn’t totally without blame either.” Clark gestured toward the editor’s office. “I was on my way to talk to Lois ... why don’t you join me and we can compare notes.”

“Sure,” Officer Zymak spoke up with a huge grin. “I get to meet my hero at last!”

Seconds later, Clark was knocking on Lois’ door, but without waiting for an answer he stood aside to let the two cops pass by him into the room.

Lois looked up from her desk. “Hey, a delegation. Come on in,” she said, standing, glancing between her husband and the two members of Metropolis’ finest. “Does this mean there’s been a break through in the case?”

Clark ignored the question in favor of the introduction. “Lois, I’d like you to meet Officer Zymak. Tracey, this is Lois Lane.” He watched the two women shake hands, before adding with a smile. “Tracey is a fan, Lois.”

“I definitely am,” Tracey admitted unashamedly. “You almost made me give up my goal of becoming a cop ... but I guess

family ties won out.”

“There’s a lot to be said for following in your father’s footsteps,” Lois replied with a short smile directed at Clark as she returned to her chair. “Please, sit down. I take it this isn’t a social visit?”

As Tracey and Jed sat side by side on the couch, they exchanged uneasy glances.

“You talked to the cafe owner, Tracey?” Clark asked, sitting on the edge of his wife’s desk. “From the looks on your faces, I’m assuming the news isn’t good.”

“The owner’s a guy called Kinski, and he wasn’t too eager to talk, but I managed to persuade him.” Again, Tracey grinned. “He hasn’t seen Timmons since last week, maybe before, and he sure is mad. When Timmons left, the night’s earnings went with him. Kinski went around to confront his ex-employee, but it seems our suspect left his digs too, and Kinski hasn’t been able to find out where he’s gone. I followed up on the address. Even asked some of the neighbors, but no one has seen Timmons.” The young policewoman fell silent for a few seconds, before delivering her final clue. “Oh, and Kinski also mentioned that Timmons had stolen an old hot-dog stand from his back room.”

“The concession stand that exploded at Metro General,” Lois declared, pointing a finger directly at Peterson. “Clark was right! Peterson, surely your bosses have to concede that he’s the main suspect now.”

Jed swallowed. “I’ve passed on the information, and I’ve strongly advised that they put out an APB on Timmons immediately.” The detective turned to Clark. “The Chief of Police isn’t going to be making any public apologies . . . not yet anyway, but he did finally admit that Tanner might have been only an accomplice. We have no idea where the suspect might have gone, so any information you might have uncovered would be appreciated . . .”

“Only if The Daily Planet gets the exclusive on the story,” Clark stated firmly, as Lois looked on with admiration.

Jed shifted uncomfortably on the couch. “I can’t speak for my bosses, but I’ll do all that I can to keep you in the loop.”

There was a second or two of silence as Clark weighed up the offer; he trusted Peterson, but did the sergeant have sufficient clout to keep his word? Finally he gave a tiny nod of his head. “I suppose I can live with that.” He turned to his wife for confirmation. “Lois?”

The Daily Planet’s Editor-in-Chief leveled a piercing glance at the sergeant. “I think Peterson knows the score. The Planet reporters have cooperated with the police over the years to the benefit of everyone involved . . . mostly the public. I doubt even his bosses will want to change the status quo.”

A self-conscious grin turned up the corner of Jed’s mouth. “I think you totally understand my superiors, Mrs Kent.”

“Good. I’m glad we know where we stand,” Clark stated, locking his hands together and resting them on his thighs. “I can certainly give you a motive for Timmon’s bombing the school. His Aunt Ina was head of the board, so naturally she sent her ward there, but he hated it . . . and he hated his aunt. I’ve just spoken with one of his teachers and was told that Thomas had a miserable childhood. His mother died when he was around five and left him in the care of her sister. Mr. Wilson remembers Ina Bowen-Timmons as a strict, narrow-minded spinster who cared for nothing but her standing in the community, and he felt sorry for Thomas living in that mausoleum alone with the woman, at least, at first . . . but he also said there was something very strange about the boy . . . something not quite right.”

“In what way not right?” Lois asked thoughtfully, lifting her pen from the desk and sliding it through her fingers. She was trying to picture the Thomas from the sketch as a child, and not quite managing.

Clark glanced around at his audience, shrugging slightly.

“Mr. Wilson was quick to remind me that nothing was ever proved, but there were a few allegations, over the years, that Thomas was a thief. Some of the other kids accused him of stealing their property, but when it was brought to the Aunt’s attention, she hushed things up, saying she would deal with it. Since Thomas was often bullied by the other boys, no one could be sure that he hadn’t been set up, so no further action was taken, yet Mr. Wilson never really trusted Thomas.”

Peterson nodded in agreement. “Apart from mentioning the stealing, that pretty much confirms what Miss Bowen-Timmons said.”

“And Harold Andrews,” Clark added, noticing Lois checking her watch; his wife had an important appointment to keep.

“Of Speedy Deliveries? He knew Timmons?” Jed inquired, looking impressed.

“Yes. Timmons worked for Andrews back in the early nineties for a few weeks. He fired him for late time keeping and sloppy workmanship. He told me Timmons was furious and threatened all kinds of revenge.”

“It’s kinda strange he waited twenty years to get back at Andrews. All this is circumstantial, isn’t it?” Tracey finally gained the courage to speak up.

“Yes, to both these questions, Trace.” Peterson leaned back on the sofa, studying the ceiling. “So far, we’ve only got vague motives for three of the bombings, but if forensics can prove the residue on the detonator was definitely chocolate . . .” His gaze returned to the other people in the room. “We know Timmons sent the candies, so that ties him to this particular bomb.”

“It was a hot-dog stand that blew up in front of Metro General Hospital,” Clark reminded Peterson. “Timmons had access to Kinski’s stand.”

“But no motive for that bombing,” Jed stated flatly, though he appeared more disappointed than doubting.

“I think I can help there.” Lois dropped the information into the room, placing her elbows on her desk and waiting as everyone turned in her direction. “I’ve been making a call of my own. Clark asked me to check if there was a marriage license in Timmons’ name. There was. In 2006 he got married to a woman called Mary Kane . . . but there was also a death certificate for Mary. She died in Metro General in January 2010, the cause of death was ovarian cancer.”

Tracey frowned and glanced around the room. “Lots of people die of cancer, and their relatives usually don’t blame the doctors or the hospital.”

“Not in most cases,” Clark conceded, “but we’ve established that Timmons could be unstable. I think I’ll check with the hospital to find out the circumstances of her death.”

“Good idea, Clark. If you need backup, ask Jim to help you when he gets back in.” Reluctantly, Lois rose from behind her desk and walked over to her clothes-rack to pick up her coat. “I’m sorry I can’t be anymore help, but I’m due on Stern’s Network talk show this afternoon, and they like the guests to be there by lunchtime to go through the outline of the show . . . then there’s makeup. It’s not something I’d choose to do, however the Sterns do pay my salary.”

Clark helped his wife into her coat. “Come on, Lois, the topics on today’s show are pretty close to your heart. You’ll be great! No one knows better than you how to balance a successful career with motherhood, and online newspapers versus the printed copy is your favorite debate!”

“True, but I’m not comfortable being on TV.” Lois glanced over her shoulder at her husband, who winked back.

“I’ll be very comfortable watching you,” Clark said.

She turned around and stuck her finger in his chest. “You are going to be far too busy to watch TV, though there is Tivo . . .” Lois looked keenly at the two cops. “Is that all for now, or do you have more to discuss with Clark?”

Jed stood and gestured Tracey to follow him. “Not really. We’ll be pursuing our own investigations, and trying to apprehend Timmons for questioning, at least. Clark, I’ll keep you informed, but can you do me a favor and print that sketch of yours. We have a better chance of catching this guy with the public’s help.”

Clark’s hand rested on Lois’ back as the group left her office. “We’ve missed the morning edition, but it could still make the afternoon’s online update. What do you say, Lois?”

“I agree. I’m all for helping the MPD,” Lois said, grinning at her husband. “I’ll leave it up to you. Bye for now, honey, and good luck with the rest of your investigation.” Blowing him a kiss, but promising him more with her eyes, she left him by his desk and headed for the elevators. “Come on, Peterson, I’ll walk you out. Tracey, it was nice to meet you.”

“Good luck with the show, Lois,” Clark called, sitting down and pulling his keyboard closer; he didn’t have much time to load up Timmon’s picture.

“Thanks, I’ll need it!” Lois wasn’t sure why, but she felt apprehensive about the show. Maybe she just wasn’t comfortable with TV as a medium ... not since the fiasco with Luthor all those years ago.

Thomas Timmons was a thief. He’d picked up the habit very early in life. When he’d lived with Aunt Ina it had been a survival skill; the miserly old spinster had never given him the things he wanted voluntarily. Besides, it had given him pleasure and a sense of satisfaction to take some of Ina’s treasured possessions away from her ... especially when he’d destroyed them.

At school, he’d gotten the same thrill when he’d stolen from the boys who’d bullied him. He’d never been a match for them physically, so he’d learned how to be sly. Of course, in the beginning, he hadn’t been a very good thief, and Ina had punished him for his crimes, but that had never put him off. Instead he’d simply perfected his craft over the years. Not that he’d ever been brave enough to break into people’s houses or businesses, but he’d become very adept at slight of hand.

While he’d been with Mary, he’d gone straight. He’d found himself a job, and for a time life had been good, but when she’d gotten sick, he’d lost his job for taking too much time off. The company was down-sizing, and they’d jumped on his poor attendance record to let him go. Lemco was on his revenge list, too, but he’d always allowed Mary’s pin to guide him, apart from in the case of Aunt Ina. Since he only had enough explosives left for one bomb, he had agreed with Mary’s final choice. What better way to bow out than in the eye of the media?

After Lemco had dumped him, he’d reverted to picking pockets. He’d always been careful, and only taken people’s cash, dumping the plastic, because it was too easy to trace. Getting arrested and sent to prison was never an option. Who would have looked after Mary?

Besides, even if Mary would have understood and forgiven him, he couldn’t risk the thought that he might have slipped a little in her estimation.

Presently, he was about to employ his pick-pocketing skills again.

Thomas stood in line at Stern’s Global Network building, studying the people around him. If he’d had a choice, he would have preferred to target The Daily Planet and certain reporters, but he knew, from past experience, how tight the Planet’s security system was, and how, eventually, he’d been barred from its doors. They’d threatened him with an injunction if he came anywhere near the place again.

His mind drifted back to the time when Mary was still alive ... alive, dying of cancer. It shouldn’t have been a terminal disease, but for people who couldn’t afford to pay for the expensive treatments and medication, there was no choice, and

Thomas’ health care had disappeared along with his job.

In his desperation to help Mary, he’d written to Aunt Ina, but she hadn’t replied ... not to any of his letters. So, despite the promises he’d made never to go back to that house, he’d worked up the courage to visit her, but he’d turned up at the gates of the old mansion only to discover it was now a nursing home called Hyperion Vistas.

The old girl must have lost her mind ... or she’d be spitting nails, turning her beloved home over to outsiders. Mind you, Aunt Ina never missed out on a chance to make money. If she still lived there, she would be getting the best of care, she’d make sure of that, while earning a buck or two.

There was only one way to find out, and Thomas steeled himself to walk through those gates, but as he made his way up the drive, he felt sick. Dread coiled in his stomach, turning his blood to water.

He forced himself onward, but as he neared the grim doorway of the prison of his youth, he found it more difficult to breathe. Pictures flashed into his mind; of being locked in that tiny closet, of going to bed in the dark, hungry and cold ... of being forced to read aloud passages from the bible that promised hellfire for those who sinned. According to Aunt Ina, he’d sinned a lot. Didn’t she realize she had driven him to it? She was to blame.

It was her fault that he hadn’t been able to enter Hyperion Vistas that day, why an invisible noose seemed to strangle him and his palms felt like they were sweating blood. As he stood looking up at the hateful facade, a full-scale panic attack had struck him, and he’d turned tail and fled.

Why should he put himself through such an ordeal? If Ina had been going to help him pay for Mary’s treatment, she’d have answered his letters.

No, he would have to find another way ... and he would. He had to.

He’d picked up a copy of The Daily Planet, Mary’s favorite newspaper, and gone home to his wife. She had been very weak, but always insisted on getting up to lie on the couch. He’d moved the furniture so she could see out the window, and she’d spend her days watching the world pass by and reading the exploits of Lane and Kent from her newspaper.

How she’d praised them, always talking about how they uncovered crimes and fraud ... putting crooks in prison, even one or two murderers. Yet the stories that had most attracted Mary’s attention were the human interest ones. She’d admired Lane for her fearless determination to unearth the truth, but she’d loved Kent’s more compassionate approach.

A real team she’d said they were ... just like he and Mary.

It wasn’t a secret, either, that Lane and Kent were friends of Superman. Even if they couldn’t get Mary satisfaction from the health system or the big insurance companies, maybe they could approach the Superman Foundation on her behalf. He should write an email to them right away. Mary would be over the moon!

On his way home from Hyperion Vistas, he’d formulated his plan ... but one which was destined to fail before he’d written the first letter.

Both Kent and Superman had gone and got themselves killed in North Korea!

They’d let him down. Of course, some people would argue that you couldn’t blame either of them for that. They hadn’t asked to be killed ... but why had they gone off to help foreigners half a world away when the people of their own city needed them?

When he and Mary had needed them! Didn’t they know that charity begins at home?

Despite Kent’s and Superman’s disappearance, he’d gone ahead and written his letters to Lois Lane — over and over again. When she deigned not to reply, he’d gone to visit her at The Planet’s offices, only to be told that Ms Lane had taken compassionate leave. He guessed he could understand that, after

all, he was losing his wife too ... but Mary was still alive then. There was still a chance that she could be saved, and surely Lois Lane would want to help. More than most, she'd know what it was like to lose a loved one.

After his useless visit to The Planet, he'd called to ask for Lane's home address or telephone number, but was told it was against company policy to give out such details about their employees. The snippy young female who'd answered his call suggested he talk to another member of the reporting team if he had information for a story, but he'd insisted on talking to the best ... and that meant Lois Lane.

Besides, he'd been picketing The Planet building, and he knew she came to work now and then. Like every other institution he'd had any contact with, they were just trying to give him the brush off. He had no intention of letting them!

But he'd never been able to get near Lane ... except for that one time.

It was the last time he'd picketed The Planet with his placard demanding the public's help in saving Mary. He'd arrived early in the morning, hoping to catch the staff going into work, and his patience had been rewarded when a yellow cab drew up, depositing Lois Lane with another male reporter.

He'd stepped forward immediately, but just as quickly, Lane's escort had moved in front of him, pushing him backwards. Calling out to Lane, he'd requested some of her time, feeling sure that once she understood what he was trying to do, she'd agree to his request. Yet before he had a chance to state his case, a number of security men appeared and hurried her inside, obeying the orders of an older man, who he'd learned was the editor of the newspaper.

As the doors closed behind Lane, the guards turned on him, led by Editor White. In no uncertain terms he was told to stop harassing one of The Planet's staff, and more importantly, one who was actually on leave on compassionate grounds.

He'd tried desperately to fight his case, shouting out his reason for being there, waving his poster energetically in the editor's lined face, but that had only served to antagonize the guards, and more particularly, the reporter who'd arrived with Lane.

Thomas had been pushed back by the younger man who'd lowered his voice and told him in a grim tone, reminiscent of Superman, that Ms Lane was a dear friend of his who had just lost her husband and her friend ... a friend who the whole world was mourning, and that, at present, he took stalking Ms Lane very personally and would report Thomas' harassment to the police.

Perry White had come up behind his reporter and warned Thomas, in a less menacing, but perhaps more compelling, way that The Planet's lawyers would be taking an injunction out against him if he showed his face anywhere near Lois Lane in the near future.

At first, Thomas was inclined to defy the threats, but after a short consideration, he'd chosen to retire to review the situation. In one way, he would welcome the publicity for his campaign, yet on the other hand, could he afford to have the police look into his current movements?

Without the money to pay for the little luxuries, which he felt Mary was entitled to in what might be her final months, he had taken to polishing up his skills as a thief, doing some shop-lifting in small stores with little surveillance, and picking the pockets of people who weren't too careful with their possessions. From the stores, he only took the little things which he thought Mary would like ... a bar of chocolate, a magazine, or a book she might like to read. He'd been more careful when he thieved wallets, using gloves, taking only cash and discarding the rest, and he'd never stolen from anywhere close to his home area.

Most of his petty criminal activity was not a high priority for

the MPD. As long as he didn't get caught in the act, and he wasn't brought to the attention of the police, he'd considered himself safe.

Even Mary had never suspected the little gifts he'd brought her were stolen goods; he'd told her he'd gotten a part time job distributing advertising leaflets and that the bank had extended his overdraft. Neither of these facts were true. He'd hated lying to his wife, yet she deserved some comfort and she'd very soon grown too sick to question his lies.

The reason he'd never pursued Lane after that day had been fear of discovery, but, also it had been Mary's decline that had kept him by her bedside ... and then it had been too late. Mary had left him.

He remembered feeling angry that she hadn't held on longer until he had found a way to save her, that she'd left him alone to face the world again. But very quickly his anger had turned against the crass commercialism of a society that let people die through lack of funds to support their treatment. Other countries had National Health Systems, why not the, supposedly, most civilized country in the world?

When Mary died, the bottom had dropped out of his world, both emotionally and physically. The bank had soon foreclosed on his mortgage, repossessing his house. They had probably been waiting for Mary to die, not wanting the adverse publicity of throwing a dying woman out of her home.

He'd been left with nothing, and his futile anger had turned into depression. Within a matter of months, he'd become one of the homeless he despised. Without his reason for living, he'd started drinking and sleeping on the streets ... but after a year or two of licking his wounds he'd come to see that Mary would be disappointed in his descent into uselessness.

He'd pulled himself together for her sake, but his anger had never dissipated. Instead it had rushed back from the recesses of his memories ... from the time before he met Mary, burning and festering, replacing her as the driving force of his life.

For so long, he'd dreamed up plans to get back at those who'd let his wife down ... who'd insulted and belittled him through out his life, making him feel he was a failure, a waste of time and space.

He'd even gone as far as putting himself in a position to carry out those plans. He'd pretended to find religion, contacting the Salvation Army, who'd been so pleased to rescue another lost soul that they'd never questioned his identity or commitment, but had given him a change of clothing and found him a job as a cleaner in a gentlemen's public washroom. Pretending to be grateful, he'd stuck at the disgusting work for almost a year, until he had enough money to find a place to stay and a job of his own.

Even then, though he'd begun to research and solidify his ideas of revenge, he'd never really believed he would have the resolution to carry them through. But when he'd heard on the news that Clark Kent had returned from the dead, all his hostile, envious thoughts coalesced in a toxic rage. The man who could have helped Thomas save Mary was still alive and reunited with his family.

Something snapped inside his brain. No longer would he accept his torment in silence. He would take his revenge against all those who had bullied and disparaged him, and when he'd finally satisfied his craving and avenged Mary, he would go to join her.

Lane was now about to die for turning her back on Thomas, and Clark Kent, who had cheated death, would learn the torment of losing the wife he loved.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his 'mark' leave the line of people and cross the road towards a little cafe. Immediately, Thomas focused his attention, asking the person next to him, with whom he'd struck up a casual conversation for just this purpose, to hold his place.

The game was on!

Lois' foot tapped in time with the ringing of her cell phone. "Come on, Clark, pick up," she said tersely, beneath her breath as she watched the suave gentleman bearing down on her like a battleship, an almost salacious grin on his face.

There was a click, then a very welcome voice spoke up. "Clark Kent, Daily Planet."

My hero, Lois couldn't help smiling, he always showed up just in the nick of time.

"Hi, honey, it's me," she said, shrugging and pointing to her phone, as she turned her back pointedly on her hopeful suitor. "Thank goodness you answered, and how is the investigation going?"

"Slowly, but I'm getting there. I did some more research into Mary Timmon's death and discovered that her husband, Thomas, was not impressed with the care she received and made his feelings known aggressively. In fact, he was almost barred from the hospital. The person I spoke with thinks the only reason he kept quiet was that he wanted to be with his wife. After his wife died, he complained very loudly to anyone who would listen, threatened to sue, but the hospital staff had done everything they could for the poor woman, under the circumstances."

"What circumstances?" Lois asked, still glancing now and then over her shoulder at the guy who was hovering, ready to pounce whenever Lois cut the call.

"That they didn't have insurance, or the money to pay for the drugs which might have saved her ... and that is definitely a big might. The consensus is that Mary's illness was too far advanced by the time she showed up for treatment. Her cancer was terminal and there wasn't anything the doctors could do."

"I take it Timmons didn't accept that verdict."

"It never got to trial. Seemingly, Timmons couldn't get a lawyer to take the case."

"I'm suprised he hasn't blown up any lawyers' offices." Lois gave that idea a moment's consideration before adding with a mischievous grin. "I might not mind that so much, as long as no one died."

"We don't know what his plans are, which is precisely the reason why we have to catch him before he manages to strike again. Peterson is putting the sketch out on the wire and checking Timmon's known haunts. There aren't many and are all from a few years ago, but hopefully the police will get lucky."

"Did you get the sketch out on our online edition?"

"Yes, honey. Someone has got to spot this guy soon." There was a small pause, after which Clark asked. "How are you doing?"

Lois shrugged again. "I've been better. There was a very long lunch in the hospitality suite. The food was decent but I have better things to do with my time than socialize with the other panelists. We're supposed to be debating current issues, why do we need to be buddies?"

"Oh, oh. Who were you sitting beside?" Clark asked, making Lois smile at his insight.

"Brad Nixon." Lois was silent for a second or two. "You remember him, Clark. He's my counterpart at the NY Herald; the first newspaper to go over to full online reporting."

"That explains why you didn't enjoy lunch."

"Clark, I'm not against progress, but as long as I'm in charge of The Planet, I intend to fight to keep the printed version of the paper."

"You're preaching to the converted, Lois. I can't see myself reading the sports pages over breakfast on a computer, or a ... a blackberry." Clark's chuckle came over the line. "I'm pretty sure the kids would tell me these things are so yesterday!"

"Are we dinosaurs, Clark, to want to hang onto real newspapers? I mean, not everyone has joined the digital age,"

Lois said with some nostalgia. "I agree the internet has its place, but I don't believe it should intrude on every aspect of peoples' lives."

"I'm with you. There are countries in the world where computers are still considered a luxury."

"And that's not the only thing I dislike about Brad Nixon." Lois lowered her voice, as Nixon was creeping closer to her position by working the room. "I'll admit he knows how to dress to advantage, and that tan of his is probably natural. I mean, it's not like he has to stay in cold, wet Metropolis during the winter. You can edit an online paper from anywhere in the world."

"Some people might think that was an advantage ..."

"Hhmm! That man wouldn't recognize one of his reporters if he bumped into him in the street. Not unless the reporter was female, curvy and had a pulse, then he'd make a point of getting to know the woman well ... probably too well."

"Lois, would you like me to come over there to put him in his place?" Clark asked, obviously beginning to remember more about Nixon's habits.

Lois laughed. "I'm tempted to say yes, just to see the look on his face, but you have more important things to do than protect my honor, and, believe me, I'm perfectly capable of putting Nixon in his place."

This time it was Clark who laughed. "I don't doubt you. I'm almost feeling sorry for Brad Nixon already."

"Mrs. Lane-Kent!"

The call came from behind Lois, and she glanced around to see a young woman standing in the doorway.

"We're ready for you now in Makeup. If you'd come this way," the assistant said in a friendly manner.

Lois waved in acknowledgment, before turning back to her cell phone for a moment. "Clark, I'm needed in Makeup, thank goodness. I can get out of wasting more of my time in fending off Nixon's inane flattery."

"Great! Give it your best shot, honey, and you'll knock them out."

"Thanks, Clark. Same to you with the investigations. Call me if anything breaks! Love ya!"

"Love you too. Bye, Lois."

After Clark's goodbye, Lois snapped her phone shut and made her way to the door, skirting around Nixon and his little group of followers. Whatever did they see in the guy? He might be fairly attractive for his age, though his hair wasn't as thick as Clark's, but his attitude to women was purely Neanderthal!

Lois just wanted to get the show over and return to her normal work. She sensed the Timmons' story was about to break and wanted, as always, to be where the action was.

Chapter Fifteen: The Face-Off

Thomas followed his target into the deli across the street from the TV studio, hanging back just a little, not wanting to cause suspicion by overcrowding the man. The little café cum take-away was remarkably busy due to its close proximity to the Stern building where the popular talk show was filmed every afternoon for airing later in the night.

Trying to appear casual, Thomas perused the menu that hung on the wall behind the counter, while paying close attention to the elderly man he was about to rob ... or, at least, part the man from his tickets to see the TV show.

The guy was a few places in front of him in line. Thomas found himself smirking at how much you could learn from a mark just by studying them. Mind you, not many people were as observant as himself. He was able to deduce, just by watching, that this man was totally under the thumb of his partner, making him appear timid and self-effacing. The wife was a sharp-tongued shrew who reminded him of Aunt Ina, and he almost felt sorry for this schmuck — not, however, enough to let his one chance to get

inside the studio slip by. He needed to be at the heart of the proceedings. No way was he going to become a suicide bomber without taking out Lois Lane and a fair amount of Metropolis' well-heeled population.

Minutes passed while he waited in anxious anticipation. Thomas took time to scan the booths along the back wall, to see if anyone was watching the goings on in the front of the store. A number of teenagers filled the booth directly behind him, oblivious to his scrutiny, their attention completely focused on one of these new-fangled blueberrys ... or was that cranberrys? Whatever, it was the very latest evolution of the blackberry. Clearly one of these kids had rich parents who indulged his every whim.

But it was what appeared on the screen of the hand-held computer which caused Thomas' mouth to drop open: a drawing of a man the police were looking to interview ... a picture of himself.

He listened as the teens discussed the man on the small, though remarkably clear screen, calling him names: creepy ... scary ... evil. What did they know about the kind of man he was; what he had been driven to?

He had to admit the sketch was a good likeness. Kent had gotten a good look at him in Centennial Park, and somehow he'd managed to put the pieces of the puzzle together to figure out the identity of the bomber. As Thomas continued to listen in, he realized with fright that they even knew his name. It was a good job his run was almost over.

It was also a stroke of luck that he'd heard about the drawing when he'd been living on the streets. He'd been waiting in line outside The Rest And Be Thankful shelter when he'd overheard some homeless guys discussing the possibility of picking up the reward for information on some man a reporter was trying to contact. At that point, Thomas had surreptitiously left, merging into the shadows of the rundown buildings.

He'd spent the next night living in a dirty, dingy machine room of an old warehouse, but the privacy had given him an opportunity to review his plans. He needed another identity and, seeing his image splashed all over the the Internet, Thomas was grateful for the warning.

Risking everything, Thomas had chosen a few bars down by Hobbs River, places where dockers and construction men liked to hang out after work. With due care, he'd robbed only the most inebriated customers and, though he hadn't acquired a fortune, he'd gotten enough.

Mary would have been impressed by his temerity. These were big and brawny guys, and if they'd found him out, they could have knocked him into next week. But he doubted that any of his victims had realized they'd been robbed, not until they'd sobered up the next day. Maybe not even then, depending on the size of their hangover.

Hey, even Aunt Ina might have approved. She'd say it served them right for indulging in the evils of drink! But whether they deserved it or not, their loss had been his gain.

Thomas was pretty sure his change of appearance should fool the public long enough to get him inside the building across the way. At present, he was wearing dress pants, a sweater over a shirt and black tie, topped with a tailored, though old-fashioned overcoat, all bought in various thrift shops ... except the tie. The tie was special 'cause he'd worn it at Mary's funeral.

Last night he'd spent most of the remains of his ill-gotten gains on a room at the old Apollo Hotel. Hotel, hah! Doss-house would be a better description. The place should have been condemned long ago, but at least it had a shower so he could clean up and shave, though he'd decided to leave the beginnings of a mustache. With his change of clothes, his facial hair and a pair of glasses he'd taken off a drunk in one of the bars — it was amazing how a pair of glasses could alter your face — he felt he

looked different enough from the Thomas Timmons that the MPD and Clark Kent were searching for.

A movement in front of him drew his attention back to the work in hand. His mark was giving his order to the shop assistant and he tensed, readying himself for the sting. He moved toward the door to put himself in the way of the man's exit from the deli and waited, still pretending indifference to what was happening with the people around him. It was imperative that he get this right.

Thomas drew in a quick breath as the guy paid for his order, gestured to the assistant behind the counter and headed to the mens' washroom.

Telling himself to remain calm at the change of plan, after all, this would give him some privacy for his actions, Thomas walked quickly through the washroom door.

The room was tiny with just one closed in stall and one wash bowl, which was good, particularly since it was empty, meaning the mark was inside the stall. Thomas composed himself to wait again.

There was the sound of the toilet flushing, then of a lock being drawn back. Thomas was poised, and as the man came through the narrow door, he made a fast move to enter the stall, bumping the elderly guy's shoulder in the process. In the cramped space, the two men grappled, both trying to keep their balance.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Thomas said apologetically, while making sure his foot lodged behind the other man's ankle, sending his victim toppling backward.

Yet Thomas had no intention of letting the man fall. He held on tightly, the two bodies touching in the confined space. Stealthily he removed the show tickets and wallet from the man's pocket, while pretending to save him from a nasty fall.

"Are you OK?" Thomas asked the stranger, brushing him down. "I was in a hurry ... bladder problems, you know?" he stammered, pretending embarrassment. "But I almost knocked you over ... I'm sorry. There's no excuse ..." Thomas bobbed from foot to foot, giving a good impression of someone who was in desperate need of relieving himself.

Clearly falling for Thomas' act, the man replied, if a little breathlessly. "No, no. I'm fine. No harm done." He smiled and gestured toward the stall. "You should ... you know ..."

Looking grateful, Thomas muttered a quick thank you before locking himself inside, deciding to avail himself of the facilities as he waited to see if his victim would leave the washroom. He heard the tap turn on as the guy washed his hands, then the outer door opened and closed, but Thomas stayed where he was for a some minutes, just to be sure.

He checked the electronic tickets and wasn't surprised to discover they admitted two people; the guy was with his battleaxe wife, after all. That wouldn't be a problem; Thomas could come up with an acceptable excuse. However, he had heard that some studios wanted proof of identity, which was why he'd taken the wallet.

With hands that were now threatening to tremble, he was so close to his goal, he rifled through the leather billfold. This guy didn't believe in plastic; there were two bankcards and one credit card. Those wouldn't be any good, though. He had to return the wallet before the guy realized it was missing, and those were the first things he'd check for ... along with his cash.

Thomas felt his heart sink. He couldn't take the driver's license because that included a photograph. His fingers continued to work through the wallet, until they discovered a rather crumpled card stuck way at the back. He drew it out, heaving a sigh. It was a library card; granted it looked like it hadn't been used for some time, but, at least, it didn't bear a picture. Would that be acceptable? He sure hoped so.

Security had been relaxed for a number of years, but since

he'd gone on his bombing spree public buildings might have tightened up their safety measures. Yet he'd mainly used mail bombs, and there was still a lot of controversy about the one at Metro General Hospital.

Whispering a prayer to Mary that Stern Network had no reason to suspect they were in danger from a suicide bomber, Thomas exited the washroom and the cafe at a run. He looked up and down the sidewalk. There on the corner he saw his mark, waiting patiently for the sign to change to walk.

"Excuse me," Thomas shouted, lifting his hand to wave the wallet in the air. The man didn't turn around, and Thomas speeded up to reach the pedestrian crossing before the lights changed. He shouted again. "Sir! Sir, you dropped your wallet!"

When he was just a couple of steps away, the stranger turned. Thomas held out the wallet, saying quickly. "I think you dropped your wallet. I found it on the washroom floor."

For a second or two, the man looked confused, studying Thomas' face before his gaze dropped to the article in Thomas' hand. It only took a moment for enlightenment to dawn. "Oh, yes," the man said. "You're the man I bumped into ..."

"Does the wallet belong to you, sir?" Thomas asked politely with a faint trace of friendliness. He didn't want to get into a conversation with this guy, but he didn't want to alert him to the fact that anything could be wrong either. "Because if it doesn't, I can hand it over to the sales assistants. I guess it could have been dropped before."

"No, no," the man replied, reaching out to retrieve his lost property. "It's mine. I recognize the wallet ..."

Thomas maintained his act, there was time for a little misdirection. "Are you sure? I mean, I wouldn't like to be giving it back to the wrong person ..." he added, with just the correct amount of doubt. He started to look around at the passersby. "Perhaps I should give this to a policeman and let the cops sort it out."

"Oh, no! There is no need," the man said hurriedly, glancing over the road at the line of people in front of the studio. He obviously wasn't too keen to let his wife know he'd misplaced his wallet. "I can prove it. My name is Albert Wilson ... you can check the name on my driver's license. It's inside."

"I'm not sure I want to intrude on someone else's private property." Thomas prevaricated for a second or two, while watching the man's pale skin flush. He'd judged his patsy well. This guy was so browbeaten, he didn't want to cause a fuss. Thomas let the moment stretch out. From the corner of his eye, he could see Mrs Wilson searching for her husband, and he knew that Mr Wilson was aware of that fact too. Not wanting to give the woman a chance to interfere, he continued quickly. "I don't suppose it would matter too much, especially since the wallet is probably yours."

Thomas looked inside, studying the said license. Time was getting on and the studio would be letting people inside soon. "Mr Albert Wilson," he read aloud. "Yup. It's yours!" He handed the wallet over. "Mr Wilson, if I were you, I'd be more careful with your possessions in future." He smiled. "Not everyone you bump into is as honest as me ..."

The lights change and people began crossing the road. "Thank you," the grateful man stammered, watching the other pedestrians cross the road, clearly wishing to follow them. "Do you want some reward?"

"Reward? No! Definitely not. It's a sad day when we can't help a fellow human being out. Mr Wilson, you'll miss the lights," Thomas said, pointing to the crossing.

"Yes ... of course!" With one final thank you, Mr Wilson hurried across the street.

Thomas watched him rejoin his wife, who it seemed was about to give him the third degree, but Mr Wilson stayed silent, which was exactly the outcome Thomas had counted on. Feeling

more relaxed, he went back into the deli. He'd crossed one hurdle; with just one more to go, he might as well have a final coffee.

Clark scrolled through the interactive section on the cyber version of The Daily Planet, scanning the information speedily. Already there had been hits on the thread about Thomas Timmons' location, but very few seemed genuine sightings. In fact, most appeared to be from crackpots claiming Timmons was a neighbour, a workmate ... or even a relative, but from his research, Clark knew these were bogus or out-of-date assertions.

Shaking his head, he quashed his frustration, telling himself he shouldn't expect concrete results so early, but he still couldn't rid himself of the feeling that time was running out.

He had the illogical desire to be outside searching, covering the streets, just as he had once patrolled high above the city when seeking out various felons. Yet, if his memory served him correctly, he hadn't had much success then either. Even Superman had found searching for one person among the millions in Metropolis was impossible without a clue to their position.

Perhaps listing Timmon's future targets would be the way to go ... but Clark still hadn't been able to complete a full background check. The guy had more or less dropped off the radar for a year or so after his wife's death, and both his place of work and his address since that time had proved to be deadends. Clark looked up from his computer screen to the large window on the newsroom's far wall and heaved a sigh. Timmons was out there, plotting more acts of revenge, and it was up to himself, without the benefits of superpowers, to stop him.

The flickering of a news report coming over the digital wire caught his attention. An avalanche in the Swiss Alps had buried a small village, including a large group of American tourists partying at a chalet. The rescue effort was being hampered by the darkness and bad weather, and it was feared the death toll could be substantial.

A vise closed around Clark's windpipe and for a few seconds he found it difficult to breathe. If only he could help ... but there was no use pining for what couldn't be. He was lucky to be alive.

Taking a deep breath, he opened the channel to Matt.

<Matt, are you there? There's a ...>

<Relax, Dad,> Matt's upbeat reply came back over father and son's personal communication line. <If you mean the avalanche, I'm on it. I overheard the breaking news on the staffroom TV, and I'm on my way already.>

<What about your exams?> Clark asked, though relief echoed in his voice.

<All done, Dad. I finished before lunch and we have a free study afternoon before tomorrow's test. Don't worry. I don't break Mom's embargo unless it's absolutely necessary.> Matt chuckled, before becoming serious again. <I might have in this case, though. The rescuers seem to be having difficulty getting to the disaster site.>

<That's what I'm hearing too.> Clark tried to shrug off the tiniest surge of envy. He did count his blessings, he really did, yet Jor-El and Superman could do so much more together. It wasn't to be, not now ... and maybe not ever. He closed his eyes, smothering a sigh. <Matt, I'll let you go. Do your best, son, though I know you will.>

<Yeah, sure ...>

A note of uncertainty had crept into Matt's tone, probably undetected by anyone other than his father ... or perhaps his mother, though she hadn't yet mastered the telepathic link to her son.

<Son, don't worry. You've tackled every disaster you've come up against, and I can't see how this one will be any different.>

<I've never helped out at an avalanche before ... and this one sounds huge.> The link went silent for a second or two. <Dad, can I check in with you when I arrive? Just in case ...>

<Sure, Matt. I'm here whenever you need me.> Clark tried to make his voice sound warm and comforting. <There will be rescue workers on the spot who can advise you, though. You'd best talk to them before you get down to work. They'll keep you on the right track.>

<I guess. But I like having you as back up ...>

<Back up that's half a world away!> Clark snorted.

<Dad, don't! I can talk to you, and you know me.>

Clark was immediately contrite. Matt wasn't to blame for the loss of his powers: the man who was responsible for that was long dead. Besides, playing the blame game didn't do anyone any good ... neither did wallowing ... and he'd upset his son.

<Dad? Are you still there?> Matt asked before Clark could answer.

<Always, Matt ... and I'm sorry for being crabby ...>

<You weren't ...>

<Yes, I was. Just because I'm an adult, doesn't make me always right.> Clark cut in with a disparaging laugh. <I let envy get the better of me for a minute there. That's wrong. I just wish I could be there with you.>

<Dad, you are. That's what's so great about our link. You are always there when I need you.> Matt mentally sighed as he changed his focus back to the work in hand. <The other people you spoke about ... the rescuers ... they're strangers.> There was a slightly longer pause. <I'm not so good with strangers ... and I don't speak foreign languages the way you do.>

Clark was reminded that his son was only a teenager ... a very special teenager, but one who had taken on a huge role. Like every other adolescent he occasionally needed a hug, albeit a mental one. A sense of shame for his green-eyed thoughts swept through Clark mixed with an overwhelming love for his son.

<Matt, you are an amazing person,> Clark said with pride. <Go on, son. Give it your best shot. Whatever you do, that will be enough.> He borrowed one of Lois' favorite sayings from the past. <If you do need any help, just call me. I will be here for you whenever and however you want ... always.>

<Thanks, Dad.> Matt replied quietly, before cutting to the chase. <I'd better get a move on, or there won't be any work left for me to do.>

<Right, son. Take care.>

Clark shut down the connection, but he'd heard the smile come through Matt's last words and felt relieved. Jor-El would be fine.

His eyes switched back to his screen and the reply forum where posts were still coming in. Quickly, he browsed through them, but there was still nothing that appeared useful. Some posters were genuinely trying to help, but those others ... What kind of people got their kicks from claiming a connection to a man who would kill so indiscriminately?

Perhaps he was obsessing; Lois and Martha often used to accuse him of that ... perhaps he needed a short break. Time to clear his mind and start afresh later.

He'd promised to help his son, so perhaps he should check out what was happening on the ground in Switzerland. He quickly changed screens to search for information on the weather and terrain in the region which might help him understand the problems the rescuers were facing and assist Matt, if he needed advice.

The studio doors had opened and people had begun filing through. Close to the front of the line, Thomas carefully, and with some trepidation, studied the protocol for allowing the audience inside. The staff seemed to be checking out purses and asking some of the men to empty out their pockets, but other than that

there wasn't much security.

OK, even if he was picked out, there wasn't anything in his pockets that would interest the studio personnel ... just a packet of tissues, an old wallet, some loose change and a door key. Not his door key, but they weren't to know that, and it had seemed a plausible thing to have.

He was thankful they weren't actually frisking people down, because he couldn't be totally sure that the bodybelt he'd stitched the explosives and the trigger into would go undetected under his clothes. Sure, he was wearing a heavy coat and a sweater over his shirt and tie, and he'd managed to sew some padding over the pouches of explosives which might have fooled all but the most stringent of searches, but for the sake of his nerves he was very glad security wasn't going that far.

Patting his waist and nervously touching his black funeral tie for luck, he moved forward in line. Sweat gathered under the thick belt as he was called to step up to the counter. He couldn't fail now! With what he hoped was a friendly grin to the young man, he produced his ticket, his knees threatening to give way as it was checked over.

"Mr Wilson, welcome to the Stern Studios." The assistant looked up at him, asking him a question. "Do you happen to have any ID?"

The ticket clerk wasn't sticking to the script. He hadn't even mentioned the ticket was for two and Thomas was alone. The excuse had been on the tip of his tongue. Thomas swallowed hard. "Huh?"

"ID, sir?" the assistant repeated.

"Oh, I'm not sure," Thomas replied, steadying his nerves as he fished the wallet from his pocket. "I don't drive anymore ... but I might have something." He rummaged through the few contents of the wallet. "Would a library card do? It's a bit old, but still in use ..."

The assistant took the proffered card and gave it a quick scan before returning it. "That's fine, Mr Wilson. If you'd just step over to my colleague and show him the contents of your pockets." The clerk gestured to the two guards standing behind a table at the foot of the stairs and closed his preamble with a very bland. "Enjoy the show."

"I always do," Thomas answered, staying in role.

Seconds later, having passed the security check, he was climbing those stairs along with some other members of the audience. It had been easier than he'd believed. Nothing was going to stop him ... though he still had some small adjustments to make, like fishing the wires from under the belt, but he had time. He hadn't been practising his slight-of-hand just for stealing, and if he had any difficulty, he'd just ask to go to the washroom

At the snack station above The Daily Planet newsroom, Clark poured himself a cup of black coffee. Normally, he'd have real cream, with at least two sugars, but this afternoon he felt he needed the extra kick from a strong cup of java. He hadn't eaten lunch, though he had grabbed one of Lois' chocolate bars from her desk drawer. Without the full range of superpowers, Clark had found that he needed to eat to keep his mind alert, which wasn't too much of a hardship when compared with some of the other problems he'd encountered since his memory returned. Besides, being normal wasn't really a problem, as he continually assured his family; he actually enjoyed eating. Today he'd been too preoccupied to stop for lunch.

He lowered his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose between his index finger and thumb, trying to rid himself of the vague headache, probably due to the amount of time he'd spent in front of his monitor, that hovered behind his eyes. But he couldn't give up now.

At least he was satisfied with the current facts he'd been able

to collect on the disaster in Switzerland, plus he'd prompted his computer to flag any pertinent updates. If Matt called him, he'd be ready to support, advise or comfort the young superhero.

Meanwhile, he had to continue researching Timmon's background. Somewhere there had to be a clue that could lead Clark to the bomber's next target.

He was almost back at his desk when he heard his telephone ringing and he quickened up his step, sloshing some of the hot liquid on his hand, yet hardly noticing. Setting the mug down, he lifted the phone.

"Clark Kent, Daily Planet!"

"Hi, Dad!" Came the young voice over the line. "You'll never guess where I am!"

"Princess Tory!" Clark sat down, his spirits brightening at this unexpected call from his daughter. "Shouldn't you be in school?" he added a little more seriously, assuming his parental hat.

"Most days. But today is special — Mom's on TV!" Vicky enthused, rushing on excitedly. "Grandma Martha got tickets for us ... but it's OK. She asked permission from the principal, and Mrs Perez said it wasn't just an entertainment show, it was educational ... and I deserved a break after what happened before. Don't be a spoilsport, Dad. Semester's almost finished ..."

"I guess that's true," Clark replied, mulling over the fact that his younger daughter was the one child most likely to follow in her parents' footsteps, and goodness knows what form the media would take when Vicky was grown. "Is Grandma there, Tory?"

"He wants to talk to you, Gran." Clark heard Vicky say, seconds before his mother's voice took over.

"Clark? You're not angry at Vicky's afternoon off school ... are you?" Martha sounded somewhat unsure. "I didn't think it was wrong, and even Mrs Perez was encouraging ..."

"No, Mom!" Clark cut in quickly. "I'm just surprised you didn't say anything ..."

"I didn't say anything because it was a last minute idea. We were talking the other day about Lois' TV debut, and Vicky mentioned that she'd love to see her mother being filmed live. It just came to me that it would be a nice treat for the girls, but I didn't know if I was too late to get tickets," Martha explained, her words tumbling one over the other. "To tell the truth, I cheated and asked Jimmy if he knew anyone at Stern Studios ... But I didn't want to say anything to anyone else in case he couldn't swing it for us, because the girls would be disappointed. I only got the tickets yesterday. And we wanted to surprise Lois, too."

"Mom! Mom, slow down. I'm not upset." Clark's free hand patted the air metaphorically, as he reassured his mother. "I wanted to be there for Lois, but things are heating up with our investigation into the bomber. We're not there yet, but getting close. I really couldn't get away, so she'll appreciate your support."

"That's what we thought."

Clark could feel his mother's smile, but he couldn't help but wonder who was included in the 'we'. "Is Sara with you?"

"I'm afraid not," Martha sighed. "She had some tests this afternoon at school. But she's such a sweetheart, she didn't want Vicky to miss out. Jimmy got us three tickets, so Jonathan took Sara's place." There were sounds of movement in the background. "We're about to go inside, Clark. It's exciting. I'm looking forward to seeing Lois giving the opposition a piece of her mind!"

"Yeah, she'll knock them dead!" Clark agreed with a grin. "Mom, could you put Vicky on again for a few minutes?"

"Sure, honey. Our little reporter is people watching. She doesn't miss a thing," Martha said, laughing, but, clearly, proud of her granddaughter's inquisitive mind.

"Yes. She's her mother all over again."

"Vicky, your dad wants to speak to you." Martha's muffled call came down the line. "Bye, Clark. Good luck with the investigation."

"Thanks, Mom. I'll need it ..."

"Hi, Dad. What's up?" Vicky's question interrupted Clark's words.

"Nothing much," Clark said, his mood lightening at his daughter's quicksilver disposition. "Grandma Martha went to a lot of trouble to get these tickets, so be good."

"I'm always good," Vicky protested.

"Oh yeah! This is Vicky Kent I'm talking to?"

Vicky giggled, when, suddenly, a raucous cry emanated from the phone, making Clark wince. "What was that?" he asked, shaking his head, while holding the receiver a little way from his ear.

"You heard that?" Vicky sounded amazed. "It's just an old couple up front who've lost their tickets. They're fighting."

Clark could just make out a woman's shrill tirade and a quieter, groveling male voice answering.

"Oh, she's such a witch!" Vicky expressed her opinion to her father.

"Victoria, we don't call adults names," Clark scolded, yet, judging from the disembodied voice, he was inclined to agree with his daughter.

"Well, Dad, she is. She's telling her poor husband that he's always forgetting or losing stuff." Vicky gave a running commentary. "Now that's just silly. If she knew that, why did she give him the tickets in the first place?"

"I have no idea, Tory," he answered, impressed by Vicky's logic. "I don't know anything about them, but married couples often do strange things."

"The man says he had the tickets earlier and he didn't forget them or lose them," Vicky continued relating the strangers' argument. "He says he thinks they were stolen ... some weird guy stole them in the toilet ... but she says that's stupid, because a thief wouldn't be interested in tickets for a show ... he'd have stolen his wallet, and he's still got that!"

Clark stifled a laugh at his precocious daughter's voice-over, but much as though he enjoyed talking to her, he had work to do. "Tory, I'm sure that's all very colorful, but I have to go."

"Sure, Dad. Me too. Grandpa Jon is at the ticket counter. But just in case you're interested ... the old couple have just been thrown out, and, would you believe, she's still shouting at him, and the husband is telling her the thief gave him his wallet back!" Vicky said with reproach. "Doesn't seem like much of a thief, if you ask me."

"Sure doesn't," Clark answered, distractedly, already entering yet another search for Thomas Timmons into his browser. He wished Jim were here; Jim was still so much more savvy about computers than he was. "Tory, I really have work to do. Bye for now, sweetheart. Enjoy the show and I look forward to hearing all about your visit later."

"I have to turn off my cell anyway. Bye, Dad."

Vicky was gone, but her enthusiasm stayed with Clark as he settled down to resume his search. For some time, he was so engrossed in trawling through copious amounts of data, mostly irrelevant, that he didn't notice Olsen's arrival until Jim was standing next to his desk.

"Hi, CK. How's it going?"

Startled, Clark looked up at Jim with an expression which was half grin, half grimace. "Hi, Jim. You're just the person I'm looking for." He leaned back in his chair, tipping it up on its back legs and waving at his monitor. "I'm trying to do a deep background check for the 'alleged' bomber, but I'm getting snowed under with unrelated info. Who knew there would be so many Thomas Timmons in the state of New Troy!"

"You need some help, buddy?" Jim asked, pulling up a chair. "I'm glad you asked. I think I need your magic fingers to work a miracle, otherwise this guy is going to blow up another target before I get to first base," Clark said, his shoulders once again adopting a dejected slump.

James' eyebrows rose enquiringly. "Mind if I take a look at what you've got?"

Clark pushed his keyboard toward his friend. "Be my guest."

For some minutes, Jim flashed through different screens, stopping every now and then to read. "Looks like you've managed to find out quite a lot ..."

"Yeah." Clark nodded. "But nothing that tells me where to find him, or gives any clues as to where he'll strike next."

"Don't worry so much, CK. He bombed the nursing home last night, and, according to his MO, his hits are usually further apart. We have time to find him."

Clark allowed his chair to fall to the ground with a thump. "That's just it, Jim. I don't think we have time. Call it a hunch, or anything else you want, but I believe this guy is getting desperate. He must know we're closing in on him."

"Hey, you won't get any arguments for me on hunches. Yours and Lois' were the most reliable in the business," Jim said, continuing to study the computer data.

"Maybe my instincts aren't as good as they once were." Clark's head dropped, so he didn't see Jim edge closer to the screen.

"That's crazy, CK. You-know-who might be a little rusty, but Clark Kent is back up to speed." Jim's voice was encouraging, though it was clear he was preoccupied as he stared at the sketch of Timmons. "I think I've seen this guy before ..."

Clark's head snapped up. "You have?"

"Yeah ..."

"Where?" Clark demanded, agitation edging his voice. "When?"

Jim shook his head. "Not recently, I think." He stretched out a hand to hold Clark off. "Wait a minute, CK. I'm trying to think."

Giving Jim some space, Clark waited, though his long fingers tapped an impatient tattoo on the desk.

"It was here ... at The Planet," James mumbled, his brow furrowed, still studying the face of Timmons.

"He worked here?"

"No. It was outside ... on the sidewalk." At last, Jim glanced sideways at Clark, pointing at the screen. "CK, I'm almost sure that this is the guy who picketed The Planet ... or should I say Lois."

Alarm rose within Clark, threatening to cut off his breath. Yet what could this man have to do with his wife?

"Lois?"

"Yeah. He was trying to get Lois to write a story about his sick wife," Jim explained slowly, as if searching his brain. "It was just after you disappeared. Lois wasn't back at work, but this guy called and showed up day after day. He practically stalked Lois."

"You saw him?"

"I did. Once or twice." Jim's memory of the time was flooding back and his voice grew firmer. "I remember one time Lois came into the office. He was outside, as usual, with his placard. The minute she stepped out of the cab, he rushed at her, but I doubt she noticed him. Perry and I made sure of that. Perry even threatened him with an injunction if he didn't leave Lois alone." Jim shook his head. "After that, I never saw him again, so I have no idea what happened to him and neither did Perry. We all had other more important things on our mind at the time, CK."

A dull flush colored Clark's face. "I'm sorry for putting you through all that."

"Hey, stop apologizing. It wasn't your fault." Jim sympathized, patting Clark's shoulder lightly.

Silence descended as both men relived their very different experiences from four years ago, but, within moments, the present problem intruded into Clark's thoughts again.

"Mary Timmons died of cancer in Metro General Hospital, soon after the time you're talking about," he continued, quietly. "Timmons holds the staff responsible for her death ... mistakenly, it would appear ..."

"And you believe he bombed the hospital out of revenge?"

"Metro General, and every other place or person he thinks has done him wrong." Clark lips tightened in a thin line as he turned the pages of his notepad, letting the younger reporter read his notes.

James' gaze flew across Clark's scribbles. "You've managed to link Timmons to all the bombings?"

Clark shrugged. "Almost. The school he went to and hated; the nursing home which was originally the home he grew up in with his aunt ... and hated both. He also worked for Speedy Deliveries, the company involved in the first bombing."

"Don't tell me, he got fired from there?"

"You got it in one." Clark nodded with a slight quirk of his eyebrows. "And I'll bet if you hack into the bank's computer system, we'll find he had issues with them too."

Jim nodded in unison. "I wouldn't take that bet ... but does that mean The Planet and Lois could be on his revenge list?"

"Please, not Lois ... not again."

"Excuse me, Mr Kent. I have a letter for you." Another voice interrupted the two reporters' conversation.

Clark swung around to see one of The Planet's security men standing behind him. His gaze dropped to the white envelope being held out to him. "Who's it from?" he asked, turning it over in his hands, giving it a quick x-ray ... or attempting to.

"A young boy handed it in. He didn't know the guy who gave it to him. Just knew he was told to deliver it at 3.00pm on the dot, and he got a couple of dollars for his trouble."

"Is the boy still downstairs?" Clark twisted to face the guard.

"No, sir," the guy replied. "I asked him to wait ... but by the time I'd got around the desk, he'd run away," he explained apologetically, beginning to back away. "Wait! Don't open it," he cried out, too late, as Clark tore into the envelope. "It could be a bomb."

"Not a bomb," Clark said flatly, displaying the contents of the envelope to Jim and the security man. The card with black edging, a spray of lilies and gilt lettering, which said 'With Deepest Sympathy' sent shivers along his nerves.

The guard cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Mr Kent. I didn't know you'd lost anyone ..."

"I haven't ..."

"Is it signed?" Jim asked.

Checking inside, Clark shook his head, reading the spidery writing aloud. "'Sorry for your loss.' That's all. No signature," he finished bleakly.

"That's sick, CK!" Jim said, taking the card carefully from his friend's trembling fingers, as if it were toxic. "Who would send you a sympathy card?"

"Timmons?" Clark suggested, almost inaudibly, afraid to process what his gut was telling him. "He is after Lois ..."

Reality slammed into Clark as he recalled his conversation with Vicky from outside the TV studio. 'Some weird guy stole them in the toilet.'

Vicky had overheard the woman say the wallet was still there, but the tickets were gone. What if the thief had only wanted the tickets ... wanted to get in to see the show?

"Lois!" Clark choked out, standing abruptly.

"You think Lois is in danger?" Jim asked, his face paling.

Clark's chair fell over but he didn't stop to pick it up. He was already moving, his earlier sense of horror threatened to paralyze him, but he thrust it aside. Lois needed him, Tory needed him ...

and his parents. Matt was in Switzerland. He was the only one who could save them.

“Jim,” he called over his shoulder. “Call Peterson and the bomb squad. Tell them to get over to Stern Studios ... Now, right now!”

That afternoon, Metropolitans in the down town area of the city swore a mini hurricane swept through the concrete canyon streets, snatching at their heavy winter clothing, even blowing a few hats from people’s heads and swirling litter high into the air, yet it passed so quickly that no one could be sure.

Clark didn’t care. Flying wasn’t possible, so he did the only thing he could. He ran, fear lending him a speed nearly as fast as in his days as Superman. Just before he reached the porticoed entrance to Stern Studios, he slowed. Becoming more than an invisible force, he pushed his way through the glass doors into the foyer where a sense of chaos reigned. He watched as a steady trickle of frightened people hurried down the stairway, while security men shepherd them outside.

Clark marched forward, only to be halted by one of these uniformed guards.

“I’m sorry sir, but I can’t allow you to go any further,” the security man said, placing his considerable bulk firmly in Clark’s path. “I’m afraid there’s some sort of incident happening in one of the studios ...”

“I know. There’s a guy in there called Timmons, and I believe he’s carrying a bomb.” Clark tried to keep his voice low. Perhaps many of these people, who seemed to be milling about haphazardly, were unaware of the type of incident that was playing out upstairs, and it wouldn’t help his chances of rescue to create a full scale panic. Pulling the man aside, Clark continued tersely. “My name is Clark Kent and my wife, Lois Lane, is a member of the panel on this afternoon’s show. The bomber is threatening my wife, and not you, nor anyone else, is going to stop me going in there.”

The security man gulped, but stood his ground. “How did you hear about the bomb?” he asked, clearly confused. “We don’t even have a full picture of what’s going on in that studio ... just what we’ve been told by the people who’ve managed to get out.”

“I’m a reporter from The Daily Planet, and the bomber decided to send me a message,” Clark replied, without giving away the details of the said communique. “That’s why I’m here. The police and the bomb squad are on their way, but I suggest you start evacuating the building as calmly and quietly as you can. We don’t want to spook the bomber. Understand?”

As the guard nodded, Clark started to walk away, but the man held him back.

“Sir, I still don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go into that studio.”

Looking down at the hand on his arm, Clark quickly disentangled himself. He wanted to push the man aside, to rant at him for wasting his time. Instead, he instinctively assumed his Superman stance, while his voice deepened with authority. “My wife and family are in that studio, and I intend to protect them. Now, please, stand aside and let me do my job.”

The guard’s hands dropped to his side, no match for the desperate determination, nor the sheer power which seemed to emanate from the reporter’s bearing. In seconds, Clark had gone.

The corridor at the top of the stairs was empty; anyone who had managed to leave the studio had already made it down to the first floor and an eerie stillness had fallen on this floor of the building.

Clark subdued a shudder while he crept toward a set of double doors across the landing, only to be alerted by a stealthy step behind him. He squinted around to see the guard who had accosted him, following in his wake.

Exasperation furrowed Clark’s brow as he gestured the guard to go back, but the guy answered in a whisper. “I’m not letting you go alone. The safety of the public in Stern Studios is my responsibility. I’ve told my colleagues to clear the rest of the building as unobtrusively as possible. They can use the stairwell at the other end of the building.”

“There is more than one stairwell?” Clark asked abruptly. He really didn’t want company, nor did he have time to chat, but he decided it might be prudent to learn the layout of the place.

“Yeah, at either end of the corridors. There’s the elevators as well, but I take it we shouldn’t use them, not if there’s a bomb ...” The man looked doubtful. “Are you sure there’s a bomb?”

“As sure as I can be. This is the same guy who’s been blowing up parts of Metropolis ...”

Clark cut the conversation short. He’d prefer to do this alone, but arguing with the guard was obviously futile, and he could use his powers covertly. The guard need never know.

In the few seconds it had taken Clark to resign himself to the other man’s presence, the guy had crossed to the doors and was about to peer through the small rectangular windows. Hardly touching the floor, Clark was by the guard’s side. “Don’t. Don’t show yourself,” he hissed.

“What? You think we should go in there blind?”

“No!”

Clark did believe in checking the interior of the studio out. However, he couldn’t mention he’d been going to attempt to look through the walls. Besides, that might not be the best of ideas, since over using his powers usually meant depleting them, and he’d already used super speed to get here. Perhaps he could take a quick, surreptitious glance to see where Timmons was situated in relation to Lois and the rest of his family.

“Of course not,” Clark whispered. “Go ahead, but be careful.”

Being careful didn’t seem to be an issue for either man. Judging by the guard’s movements, Clark guessed he’d probably had some military training in his past. At least, the man was too busy concentrating on his reconnaissance mission to pay attention to what Clark was doing.

Pulling his glasses down, Clark peered at the wall, willing the bricks and mortar to disappear. To his relief, a hazy picture shimmered into being, blurred but distinguishable. His first concern was Lois, and his eyes were instinctively drawn to her.

Why was he not surprised to find her standing close to the edge of the stage, confronting a man, most likely Timmons, while the host and the rest of the panel were covering in the background? His wife was talking to someone he was pretty certain was on a suicide bombing mission.

“Oh, Lois!” The words escaped his lips, even if they were hushed, as a surge of fear and pride ripped through him. “Please be careful.”

His second thought was for his daughter. Looking over the audience, he was astonished to see Vicky standing in a row, close to the middle of the auditorium, being encouraged to move along by his parents. What in the world was going on? Whatever was happening, it seemed Vicky was, once again, proving she was her mother’s daughter.

“Two o’clock!” The guard’s voice broke into Clark’s musings.

“Excuse me?” Clark pushed his glasses back in place, throwing the man a questioning glance.

“The bomber ...” the man said quietly, gesturing with his chin. “At the foot of the right hand steps.”

The guard’s description had confirmed Clark’s suspicions that he might have been in the military, and for that Clark was also thankful. At least his companion was unlikely to charge in and panic Timmons.

“How do you want to play this?” the guard asked again,

instinctively submitting to Clark's seeming knowledge of the perpetrator.

"Very carefully." Seeing that Timmons was totally focused on the stage, Clark peered through the glass window in the door. After a moment he commented, "He seems to be holding something in his hands. The detonator?"

"Are you sure he has a bomb?" the other man asked again, hardly believing his own eyes.

Clark's eyebrows rose as he squinted at his momentary partner. "I'm certain. Don't you think so?"

"It's a pity these studios are soundproofed. We can't hear what's going on, but the audience does look terrified."

"Yes. You can tell he's talking ..."

"Probably making demands?" the guard suggested.

"I doubt it. He doesn't want anything ... only revenge. This guy is very disturbed and he feels like he doesn't have anything left to live for. I'm pretty sure this is a suicide mission." Clark sent an appraising look at the security man. "You don't happen to have a firearm on you?"

The man shook his head, giving a tiny lopsided grin. "This is a TV Network, not a high security unit, and if that guy is holding a detonator, shooting him might not be an option."

"True," Clark conceded, dispiritedly, before straightening his shoulders. "I guess we have to talk him down."

This time the security man's eyebrows rose. "You think you can do that?"

"I have no idea. He does feel he has some sort of connection with me." Clark straightened up. "Let's say, I think I can keep him talking, at least until the MPD arrive." He began to inch silently toward the far door. "Could you go down stairs and wait for the police? If I can't persuade Timmons to surrender, tell them we need a shooter. Someone who can take him out before he has a chance to move."

The fact that he was requesting that a person, even a bomber, be killed, was contrary to everything Superman had once stood for, and Clark felt bile rise, sourly, in his throat. But what choice did he have? He would try his level best to get Timmons to give up, but he wasn't about to sacrifice his wife and family, and all the rest of the people in the building for a man who had lost his respect for human life.

Superman had had other options; regrettably, Clark Kent did not. But he would do his best.

"OK," the guard replied without conviction. The man's expression was ambivalent, but he seemed to accept there was nothing else to be done. "Be careful. If that's a detonator that guy is holding, and he's as crazy as you say he is, you might not be given much time to talk."

"True. But do you have another idea?" Clark didn't wait for an answer. "Go on, and thanks for your help."

The guard shook his head, then shrugged. "Sorry, I couldn't do more," he said, making his way to the stairs, where he stopped, briefly. "By the way, my name is Ryan."

"You were with me, Ryan, and that was enough. Hopefully we'll get to renew our acquaintance later." Clark gave a tired grin, watching his new friend leave before hurrying to the left doorway. Going in from this angle, he hoped to have a clear line of sight to Thomas Timmons.

If all else failed, he'd try to take Timmons down himself.

Calm. Stay calm, Lois' inner voice reminded her as she stood on the edge of the raised platform which served as a stage in the TV studio, staring into the abyss. You've been in tight spots before! She inhaled deeply and tried her best to exhale slowly. But not when your daughter is in danger, she cautioned her courageous, take-no-prisoner-self.

All the more reason to stay alert and work your butt off to diffuse the situation. She regarded Timmons closely, evaluating

whether he could be reasoned with. Unfortunately, her conclusion wasn't hopeful. Matt, I really could use some help about now.

Lois was weighing up whether to call for the super hero when a soft voice sounded in her head.

<He's in Switzerland!>

"Clark?" she gasped, so astounded she spoke his name aloud. Her heart raced as she waited, thundering in her ears, but no reply came back. Had she imagined her husband's voice?

"Kent?" Timmons spoke up instead. "Oh, he knows you're in danger, but I doubt he'll get here in time to save you. No one can," he sneered. "I sent him a sympathy card, just so he knows exactly how it feels to be helpless in the face of his wife's death."

"What are you saying?" Another voice came from the stage behind Lois, smooth as velvet, yet barely hiding a tremor. "Are you threatening all of us because you have a quarrel with Lois Lane? That is hardly fair. You should let us go free."

So much for support from her fellow panelists! Brad Nixon was a snake ... a slimy, gutless, soulless wonder.

"I don't know who you are, but I suggest you keep quiet," Timmons addressed the speaker. "The Daily Planet and Ms Lane-Kent might be my first priority, but I intend to cause a lot more heartache and chaos than a single death ..."

"No!" Lois shouted. "No, please. I understand you might have an axe to grind with me and my newspaper for sins of omission, perhaps, but the people in the audience are innocent. They've done you no wrong; couldn't you find it in your heart to let them go?"

Thomas' gaze scanned the rows of seated people, young and old, male and female, diverse races, and all of them fixated on him ... terrified. The power made him giddy.

Then his eyes settled on the youngest member of the viewers, a girl who was flanked by an older couple. She seemed to be the only child present. Mary had liked children ... there was a time when they'd hoped to have one of their own, but her illness had denied them that pleasure.

Why should this child's parents not experience his and Mary's disappointment? Yet, his long dormant conscious stirred, as Mary's warm-eyed smile was resurrected in his mind. For the first time, his resolve faltered.

"The girl," he said, flatly, pointing at Vicky. "The one over there."

Martha allowed Vicky to stand.

"You mean me?" Vicky asked, defiance deepening her youthful voice, while Lois prayed for her daughter not to argue.

"Do you mean she can go free?" Lois asked quickly, and much louder than she'd spoken before, hoping to prevent Vicky from revealing their connection.

There was deathly silence in the studio, everyone waiting for an answer. Only Vicky fidgeted, as her grandparents tried to keep her still, joining Lois in silently willing Vicky to say nothing.

Thomas thought. He'd bombed a school, yet none of the children had been hurt. There had been fatalities at Metro General, and a couple of those had been teenagers, he'd read that in the newspapers, but he'd never come face to face with a child victim before. This one was so pretty ... like Mary. She was a little distance from him, but he thought she had eyes the same color as his wife.

Perhaps he should be merciful. Mary would like that; she would thank him when he went to meet her.

At last, he spoke again. "What's your name?"

Immediately, Lois' heart sank and she stuck her hands behind her back to hide their shaking. Once Timmons learned Vicky's name, he'd never let her go.

"Victoria," the youngster stated, eyeing the stranger in the thick overcoat who was threatening to blow everyone up. Vicky wondered why he was still wearing his coat, when the studio was already too hot.

Her parents had told her this man was sick, and that's why he had tried to hurt the people in her school. It hadn't been a big bomb then. No one had died, but this time she was sure people were going to get killed, including her mother and her grandparents. Dad wasn't super anymore, and unless Matt knew what was happening, there was no escape.

The madman grinned when he heard her name. "Victoria," he repeated, sort of dreamily. "Mary would have chosen that name for our daughter ..."

Vicky had no idea what he was rambling on about, or why her mother was not shouting for Jor-El. There had to be a reason for Mom doing nothing, because Mom didn't usually take things lying down. Vicky had been expecting her mother to jump off the stage while the bomber was dreaming. But it would have to be a pretty big leap ...

Did that mean that her mother was scared of spooking the crazy man into setting off the bomb? Apart from her mother and that other sleazy guest, no one else had tried to help. Maybe because no one could ... except a super hero. Maybe she should get outside and call her Dad or Matt ... The bomber would never know.

Glancing over at her mother as she deliberated on her choices, Vicky saw Lois staring right back at her. Her mom was lifting her chin a little in the direction of the way out, and she could feel her Grandpa Jon's hands on her waist, gently edging her in the direction of the stairs.

"Mr Timmons?" Lois asked, keeping her voice cool and steady, but watching Vicky out of the corner of her eye. "Can Victoria go?"

Timmon's head snapped up as he turned to face The Daily Planet's editor. "You know my name?"

With a little shrug of her shoulders, Lois admitted, "My newspaper has been running the story since you first blew up the delivery van. Clark Kent put a face and a name to the murderer." She watched Timmons frown at the word murderer and reminded herself again to be careful, to do nothing rash; the guy was holding the detonator in his hands. "Since I'm sure there is only one bomber in the city, I'm assuming you are he."

"You and your husband are so smart," Timmons sniped, a jeer curling his lip, making him appear more sinister.

Lois wanted to snap back, but she resisted the temptation and explained reasonably, "Hard work, Mr Timmons, intelligence and dedication is what it takes to be a good investigative reporter." Actually, that wasn't the complete truth, but she felt Timmons would not appreciate hearing about Clark's other qualities, especially since the man seemed to lack basic human feelings.

"Ha! You did nothing to help my wife when I asked you, again and again."

"No, and I am sorry about that, but if I'm correct about the timing of your wife's illness, I was dealing with my own problems, and Clark didn't plan on getting kidnapped ..."

"You got him back! I lost my Mary," he cried, whining like a petulant child. "How can you know what it's like to have the only person you love taken from you?"

Lois knew only too well ... for four years she'd lived with that pain. Biting back a rebuke, she tried to remain sympathetic. After all, a woman had died, but Lois couldn't smother the uncharitable thought that Mary Timmons was in a better place. Yet, this man must have loved his wife very much, if he was willing to go on a rampage to avenge her.

There was something very wrong with that scenario. Remembering what Clark had discovered about Timmons' past, she realized this man had always been unstable. Whether it was due to his genetics, or his abusive childhood or both, he'd been a time bomb waiting to go off, and poor Mary's death had only been the catalyst.

A movement on her right drew Lois' attention. Vicky had

edged her way along the row and reached the steps. No matter how she despised this man, her daughter's safety relied on her being able to negotiate with him. Lois cleared her throat, prayed for patience and began again.

"Mr Timmons, I know you won't believe me, but I am sorry for your loss. I just don't understand why you would want to kill so many people ..."

"You don't need to understand," Timmons cut in sharply.

Lois raised her hand in submission. "No, of course not. But from what you've just said, I'm sure Mary wouldn't want you to kill Victoria."

"Victoria?" Timmons frowned.

"Yes, the little girl." Lois nodded toward Vicky. "You mentioned Mary would like her to go free, but she's still here. Is she free to go?" she asked again, trying to disguise her eagerness.

There was a blank expression on Timmon's face as he followed Lane's line of sight, almost as if his spirit was already gone, but a spark of life kindled in his eyes as he saw the girl.

"Get out," he said softly, gazing at Victoria almost as if he could see his wife standing at her shoulder.

For a few moments, Vicky stayed frozen to the spot, watching her mother as she took advantage of Timmon's momentary distraction to quickly mouth the words I love you.

"Go!" Timmons repeated much louder and much harsher. His wife wasn't here. His wife was dead. "Now, before I change my mind."

Tears blurred Vicky's eyes as she stumbled up the stairs. She might never see her mother and grandparents again. She was so scared, but she was already forming her cry for help as hands dragged her through the door.

Familiar arms lifted her into a hug as a voice, caught on a sob, breathed into her hair. "Tory, princess, thank god!"

"Daddy, you're here." Vicky allowed herself to weep into her father's chest for a second or two, before pushing herself back. "We have to call for Ma ... for Jor-el," she quickly corrected herself when she spotted a man in uniform poised at the head of the main staircase.

"Sweetheart, the super hero is in Europe, there's coverage on the news. I'm not sure he could get here in time ..."

"Then we have to save Mom and Grandma Martha and Grandpa Jon," Vicky said breathlessly, as if she'd run far more than the short distance.

"I intend to, sweetie." He conjured up a smile for his princess. She might be smart and gutsy, but she was still a child. His and Lois' child. Their miracle. The proof that Earthlings and Kryptonians had become compatible.

"Is everything OK?" the security man asked.

Giving himself a mental shake, Clark answered quickly. "Yes. It's fine. Ryan, this is my daughter, Vicky. Please, look after her." "Dad!"

Clark knelt in front of Vicky. "Tory, listen. I know you want to stay, but I'm going to have to concentrate on helping your mother and grandparents," he said, staring intently into her eyes. "And I can't do that if I have to worry about you getting hurt. Please, princess, go with Ryan. He'll make sure you get to somewhere safe." Vicky looked like she might argue, so he continued. "I'm sure you'll find Uncle Jim out there, and I want you to tell him what's happening, and ask him to try to get in touch with Matt. He'll know what to do." He pulled Vicky into another hug and whispered in her ear. "Tell him I don't dare waste my powers or my energy in contacting Matt telepathically." He held her away from him. "You understand?"

Without argument, Vicky nodded, kissing her father's cheek. "I love you, Daddy." She turned and ran to the guard who was holding out a hand to her. She glanced back one final time. "Bring Mom home safe."

"Don't worry. I'll take good care of her," Ryan said before

heading down the stairs. “Good luck, Clark.”

A lump formed in Clark’s throat watching Vicky go, but she, at least, was safe. He still had a job to do. Straightening his shoulders, he marched back to the door and slipped quietly inside, bending low, praying not to be noticed.

Yet he needn’t have worried. Inside the soundproofed studio, a cacophony of sound had broken out as many members of the audience tried to explain why they too should be allowed to go free. The voices were brought to a sudden halt by a banshee like scream.

“No! Never!” Thomas Timmons had spoken. He raised his hands until they were almost touching. “Silence!”

“Thomas, wait.”

Lois projected her voice but refrained from shouting, and at the sudden quiet, her words dropped like stones into a whirlpool, as people gasped in awe at Lois’ nerve.

“Why?” Timmon’s voice was devoid of inflection, but his hands stilled, leaving a gap of a few inches. “There’s no way out for you, or any of these people.”

From Clark’s position at the top of the opposite staircase, he could see clear across the heads of the audience. Mainly because most of them had crouched low in their seats, seeking protection. Clark doubted that would save them, given the fact that Timmons’ bombs had grown larger with each successive incident.

Narrowing his eyes, he could see wires hanging from the bomber’s hands, snaking inside the edges of his open coat. The wires were probably connected to explosives and some kind of trigger, and all Timmons needed to do was touch the wires together to detonate the bomb.

If he could focus his heat vision and cut the wires he might prevent the explosives from going off. It would be tricky, because he had to make sure there wasn’t enough wire left for Timmons to reconnect the trigger. In fact, if Timmons didn’t know what had happened, he might have a few seconds to knock the guy out.

But he needed time.

Clark was about to stand to attract Timmon’s attention when Lois spoke up once more.

“No, I don’t expect to survive. Neither do you,” Lois said evenly. “But I would have thought you wouldn’t want to die without telling the public why you are doing this.”

“I’m already on camera ...”

Lois gave the tiniest of grins as she let her eyes stray, momentarily, to the man who remained unnoticed at the back of the studio. She had known Clark would come. For the first time, she believed they stood a chance of getting out of this alive.

“Thomas, I hate to disappoint you,” she continued, as if explaining to a child, “but the cameras aren’t on. I believe that you’re carrying enough explosive to kill everyone in here, so no one will be left to tell your story.”

Thomas turned his head toward the nearest camera. “Is she right?” he asked, a twitch at the corner of his eye proving he was getting nervous.

The camera man shook his head and the show’s host spoke up for the first time. “We never started filming.”

“Ha! Very clever Ms Lane-Kent, but you said yourself that your husband knew all about me. I’m sure he’ll tell my story ...”

“True! But Clark will tell it from his point of view. You’ll go down in history as a mass murderer, a psychopath. Wouldn’t you like to tell the world why you were driven to kill? Not many suicide bombers get that privilege.”

“She’s right,” the host said, standing and walking forward. “I could interview you. Jake could film it and it would go out tonight on the evening news.”

“You can film your own obituary,” Lois added, watching as an eager glint flickered in Timmon’s eyes.

“I’d be famous ...” Thomas whispered. “Everyone would know my name. That would sure show all those people who

thought I’d never amount to anything.”

“Exactly. Your story would probably be picked up all over the world,” Lois said encouragingly, while inside she cringed. She’d known a lot of twisted people in her life, but Timmons might rank up there with the most extreme. “You could tell everyone how badly your Aunt Ina treated you.”

The situation might be dire, but Clark couldn’t help smiling in awe. His wife was an amazing woman and she was winning him the time he needed. He just hoped Timmons kept his hands in that position, where the wires were on display. He needn’t have worried.

“OK. Let’s do this,” Timmons stated, having made his mind up, but his sly gaze once again scanned the auditorium and the panelists behind him. “But just in case anyone gets any bright ideas about jumping me, I’m gonna hold these wires just a fraction of an inch apart. If I see or hear anyone coming near me; if my hands shake, or even if I breathe funny, they’ll touch ... and then POW! Everyone dies. Understand?” he concluded with a yell.

There were various noises of agreement and nodding of heads from the audience who seemed to sink lower into their seats, which suited Clark’s purpose. He just hoped Lois wouldn’t try any heroics, though he was pretty sure she expected him to have a plan. He’d managed to slide his way down a few more steps, but this was it ...

Clark stood, concentrating on heat, directing his laser vision to destroy both targets. His powers couldn’t fail him now. Lois and his parents were relying on him. He reached deep within himself, focusing his gaze. A gossamer beam of red scintillated in the air, blinked infinitesimally, before flaring again ... and again.

Within seconds, a faint sizzling reached Clark’s ears and a slight smell of smoldering wool aggravated his sensitive sense of smell. He’d severed the wires where they disappeared inside Timmon’s jacket. He just hoped he hadn’t set the coat alight. Setting Timmons on fire hadn’t been his intention and could set off the bomb. To Clark’s relief, the odor swiftly dissipated. He doubted anyone else would have even noticed the smell, except perhaps Lois, who had been waiting for him to diffuse the bomb.

The time for covert activity was over. Clark took a deep breath and called out.

“Stop the cameras.” Almost as one, the gallery swung in his direction, as he took a few more steps toward the stage, purposely ignoring his wife. He couldn’t risk Timmons’ attention returning to Lois, not while there was still a chance the bomb had a backup trigger. “Please don’t give this villain the publicity he craves.”

Blanched faced and trembling with anger, Timmons stared at the person who had dared to confront him. “Kent! How the hell did you get here so fast?”

Clark forced himself down the final steps. As he passed his parent’s row, he shot a sidelong glance their way. They were scared, but Martha managed a transitory smile. His nerve steadied and he sauntered on, answering calmly. “I borrowed a colleague’s motor-bike. It’s amazing how these things can cut through the traffic.” Casually, he stuck both his hands into his pockets, desperately hoping Timmons couldn’t see through his act. “Besides, the boy you hired had a baseball game to go to, so he delivered your message a little early.” Clark also hated to lie, but he’d use every artifice available to prevent this tragedy. “And here I am.”

Timmons thought for a moment before grinning evilly. “Well, why not? I wanted you to experience the pain I’ve suffered ... but killing you along with Lane is just as good. I guess if you’re here, the police won’t be far behind you.”

“They’re already here,” Clark agreed. “I called them.”

“So, thanks to you, I’ll miss my moment of fame,” Timmons spat resentfully, before shrugging. “What does it matter anyway. I’ll be dead. Time has run out.” He took one last look over the

audience. “Say your goodbyes, everyone.”

With a final flourish, Timmons closed his eyes in resignation as he clasped his hands together.

Nothing happened.

Seconds passed, seeming to stretch out forever. Timmons looked down to see both wires dangling uselessly from his hands. He opened his coat which seemed strangely charred. There were no wires, either, jutting out from under his shirt. His gaze continued downward to see tiny pieces of cable littering the floor about his feet.

What the hell was wrong? Had his need to cut costs meant he’d used inferior materials? But this was the wire he’d used to blow up the hospital and all his other targets. Nothing had gone wrong before. Could his living on the streets in the cold and damp have altered the wire, made it somehow brittle?

He was totally confused, his heart pounding in panic. He had to get out of this place, find somewhere private where he could discover what had gone wrong and put it right. Today was his day to die.

But the noise in the studio was increasing ... menacingly. Members of the audience were slowly realizing they were still in the land of the living and might have a chance of remaining that way. They began to look threateningly at the guy who had given them the worst moments of their lives.

Clark sensed the change of mood and was afraid the situation could become ugly. He lifted his voice above the angry drone, hoping to take control. “Thomas, it looks like your bomb is a dud. You’ve failed.” He edged closer to Timmons. “Perhaps you aren’t meant to die. The police are right outside those doors. It’s time to give yourself up.”

Thomas glared at Kent. He had no intention of surrendering. After all, he still had the bomb strapped to his waist. He just had to find another way of detonating it.

The muttering around him drew his attention to the door. People were spilling out of the rows of seats onto the steps, blocking his path. Yet, not all were making for that door. From the look on some peoples’ faces, there were clearly a few who were considering confronting him.

He had to escape ... fast. His gaze flitted around the darkened, deserted area at the back of the stage, alighting on an emergency exit in the corner. He had a clear route out.

Timmons was turning to run when he felt something crash into his back, sending him crashing to the ground. He lay there wounded.

Clark’s heart almost stopped as he’d watched his wife launch herself at Timmons. “Lois, no!” he shouted. “Don’t touch him!” Lois obviously believed he’d disabled the explosives. If only he could be so sure. “The bomb is still live.”

Lois scrambled off her knees and backed away from the man on the floor, as did the erstwhile braver members of the audience. At Clark’s warning, their courage waned and they speedily reversed their direction, creating a pile-up at the top of the stairs as people scrambled to get through the door.

Only one person in the studio was pleased at Kent’s announcement. Timmons was so elated he didn’t question how the reporter would know the bomb’s condition for certain. He just read it as a sign that his mission was still possible. Picking himself up, he bolted for the exit.

Clark stopped to help Lois to her feet. “I have to go after him, honey. He might still find a way to explode the bomb.”

“Clark, you can’t,” Lois said, dread settling in the pit of her stomach. “You’re not invulnerable. Timmons is intent on killing himself and, right at this moment, I don’t really care whether he succeeds or not. We should just concentrate on getting people out of here.”

Resting his hands on her shoulders, Clark tried to speak evenly. “There might not be time. Lois, look at them.” He

gestured toward the scene of chaos. “In their panic, they’ve blocked the exits, and there’s the rest of the building to consider.”

Lois followed Clark’s gaze, and couldn’t disagree with his estimation. There were still some bemused members of the audience who were still in their seats; a few seemed to be searching for another, less busy exit, and one elderly lady had been knocked over in the rush.

“Honey, I cut the wires to the explosives, but Timmons could rig another detonator.” Clark’s voice sounded loud in Lois’ ear. “I have to try to stop him.”

Immediately, her attention swung back to Clark, her eyes wide. She tightened her grip on his arms. “But you said the police were here. Let them deal with Timmons.”

Clark cleared his throat. “I might have exaggerated a bit. I told Jim to call the police, then used superspeed to get here ...”

“You flew?”

Clark blushed, shaking his head. “I ran. I’m sure the police will be here soon and the bomb squad, but until then, I’m the only one who can stop Timmons.” He cupped Lois’ cheek. “You know I have to try.”

Tears sparkled on Lois’ lashes. “Superman was never about the powers.” She turned her head to press a kiss on Clark’s palm, her heart aching. “Go. Get out of here. I love you.”

Finding a smile, Clark replied, “I love you too, honey. But you’ll stay here to help these people escape ... and get out, too?”

She couldn’t trust herself to speak, she simply nodded. Clark pressed a kiss to her lips, before disappearing in a blur. For a couple of seconds, Lois stared at the place where her husband had been.

“Lois, what’s happening?”

The worried voice sounded from close behind Lois and she turned to see her in-laws staring at her, concern clear in their expressions.

“Jonathan, Clark says the bomb is still live. He’s gone to try to make it safe, but I don’t know how super he is ...” Her voice died as she continued to nervously watch the exit used by Timmons and her husband. “He’s afraid there could be an explosion while people are still in the building.”

“What about the police?” Martha asked.

Lois shrugged. “They’re on their way. They might even have arrived by now.”

“But Clark’s afraid there’s no time for them to reach Timmons before he sets off the bomb,” Martha concluded, knowing her son only too well.

“Yes! And he’s alone and he’s probably still vulnerable.” Unconsciously, Lois had taken a couple of steps toward the back exit.

“Lois, where are you going?” Martha asked, taking hold of her daughter-in-law’s arm.

“After Clark. Martha, please, don’t try to stop me.” Lois placed her hand on top of Martha’s, squeezing gently, seeking understanding. “Whatever limited superpower he has is diminishing. He needs me.”

Martha took a deep breath before replying. “Go ... go after him.”

Lois wavered for only a heartbeat. “But I promised I wouldn’t ...”

In the midst of her anxiety, Martha managed to grin. “And when did that ever stop you?” But she was already talking to Lois’ back.

“Lois! I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” Jonathan called, as Lois disappeared through the exit.

“Hush, Jonathan. If Clark doesn’t succeed, I’m sure we’re all in big trouble, and Lois might just be able to help.” With a look, Martha tried to ward off any further arguments from her husband. “Come on, Jonathan. We have to help with the evacuation.”

Yet Jonathan still stared at the empty doorway. “Martha,

Clark wants Lois safe.”

“I’m certain Lois wanted that for Clark too,” Martha explained with just a hint of impatience, “yet her husband, the one she thought she’d lost for four long years, is risking his life for the greater good, again ...”

“But Clark stands a better chance of surviving an explosion,” Jonathan argued.

“We don’t know that. He’s been hurt any number of times in these past few weeks. He’s most likely no safer than Lois.” Martha touched Jonathan’s face, in much the same way Clark had touched Lois moments before. “Jonathan, Lois and Clark are a team, stronger together than alone. Lois has as much right as Clark to risk everything to help the other.”

Jonathan sighed, but nodded slowly. Martha was right. “I guess we should go do our part, then.”

With fear, faith and pride in equal measures filling their hearts, the two older Kents went to do what they could.

Chapter Sixteen: A Leap of Faith

A cold blast of wind hit Timmons hard as he stumbled through the door onto the roof, snatching his breath away. Stern Studios might be dwarfed by the surrounding sky-scrappers, but it stood nine floors tall and the climb had exhausted Timmons.

He’d considered going down the back stairs, but Kent had said the MPD had arrived, and they probably had covered every exit. Thomas expected to die today, but not at the hands of the police. Chances were that not every floor of the building had been cleared yet, and if he could only find some private space to fix the problem with the detonator, he could still go out in a blaze of glory. He might not kill quite so many people as he’d intended, but there was a chance he’d take some with him.

With that objective, Timmons had started to climb, hoping to find a hiding place on one of the upper floors to make his repairs. Only, he hadn’t taken into account just how unfit he was; within four flights, he was breathing hard, and on the next floor he’d had to stop to catch his breath. Believing this floor might be far enough away from the police search, he carefully opened the door, but had to close it quickly. Obviously, the evacuation was well underway, because the staff was already emptying from their offices. He had to go higher.

He’d only climbed one more flight when he heard a door opening beneath him. Fright drove caution from his mind, and he looked over the banister. Kent was staring up at him!

“Thomas. There’s no way out. Give yourself up,” Kent called out to him.

But Thomas couldn’t do that. Today was his day to die ... and if he killed no one else, he would at least go to join Mary. And, if Kent followed him to the roof, he might be able to kill the interfering reporter.

Once on the roof, Timmons slammed the door shut, resting against it as he took in a few gulps of air. He was disappointed there was no way to lock the door from the outside, but he couldn’t let that distract him from his mission. He raised his head and looked around.

The roof of the Stern building was a barren place with a few metal vents, a tall mast and satellites protruding from the surface, steely gray against a lowering sky. The only building was a concrete block house which probably housed the various pieces of machinery which kept the studios running smoothly.

He ran to the door, but discovered it locked. Nevertheless, in the lee of the square structure, he gained a certain amount of shelter from the icy wind. Opening his coat, his frozen fingers fumbled with the smaller buttons of his shirt. He just needed a few minutes to close the contact and the bomb would go off.

The roof door banged open again and Kent stood framed in the opening.

Timmons’ hands stilled and his mouth fell open. How had the

reporter reached the roof so soon?

“Thomas, don’t!” Kent called out, his words almost snatched away on the wind. He moved closer. “Don’t do this.”

Eying the bigger, stronger, clearly fitter Kent, Thomas started to edge away from the side of the blockhouse. There was no way he could take Kent on and win. Instead he continued to struggle with his clothes.

“Stay away from me, or I’ll blow us both up,” Thomas shouted with bravado, hoping Kent wouldn’t notice that he hadn’t yet fixed the detonator. But Kent was either very brave or very foolish, because he kept coming nearer. “I’ll kill you,” he warned, but even he heard the tremor in his voice.

“No, Thomas. Please, don’t do that.” During his research, Clark had learned this guy had been mentally damaged at a very young age, yet he believed Thomas had truly loved his wife. Perhaps the way to reach him was through Mary. “Mary wouldn’t want you to kill anyone.”

“How would you know what my Mary wanted?” Thomas’ voice rose hysterically, while his hands worked desperately to get to the explosives around his waist. “You never knew her.”

Clark stood still for a second, weighing up the chance of Thomas rearming the bomb. Though what did it matter? He couldn’t risk the bomb going off, killing some innocent bystanders who might still be in the building. He couldn’t even leave Timmons to kill himself. That wasn’t the way he worked.

“You’re right.” Clark nodded his head sadly. “I didn’t know her personally, but I think I would have liked to. I’m a reporter and I’ve been checking out your story.” Clark took two more steps forward. Timmons didn’t move. “I discovered that Mary was a good person ... a special person. Someone who died far too young, but I’m pretty sure she wasn’t the type of woman who would agree to people being killed in her name.” He paused, allowing Timmons a moment to consider. “You know that too, Thomas.”

Timmons stabbed a finger in Clark’s direction, his expression sour. “Those people killed my Mary!”

“No, they didn’t, and I’ll bet Mary didn’t blame them either.” Thomas jerked, almost as if he’d been hit physically, and Clark guessed he’d touched on the truth. “The unfair health system might have contributed to Mary’s death, Thomas, but it was the cancer that killed her. You’ve been taking your revenge on all the wrong people. Most of the audience in that studio today are ordinary, hard working people with families who rely on them ... just like Mary relied on you. She ...”

“I let that little girl go,” Timmons interrupted, sullenly. His hands no longer tugged at his clothes, but they were shaking, and his eyes studied the ground.

“You did. That was a very good thing.” Clark inched forward, keeping his voice steady. “Can I ask you why?”

“Mary would have wanted me to,” Timmons answered so quietly Clark had to strain to hear.

“I agree. Mary wasn’t the kind of person to want innocent lives destroyed. I’m sure she would be very happy no one died today.” Since Thomas was still staring at the ground, Clark moved to within a few paces of him. “I think she’d be even happier if you got rid of the explosives and came down with me.”

Kent’s words whirled through Timmons’ brain, confusing him. He’d been angry and alone almost as long as he could remember; even escaping Aunt Ina’s clutches hadn’t improved his situation. Bad luck seemed to follow him around like a dark shadow. Then he’d met Mary, and for the first time in his life he felt normal. He’d dared to be happy. He had found someone who believed in him. Being with Mary made him feel good about himself. She kept the nightmares at bay.

When she died, his anchor was snatched away, plunging him back into his tormented life. Only this time it was harder to take; he’d had a taste of what most people take for granted. Someone

had to pay!

But Kent was right. Mary wouldn't like what he'd been doing.

Timmons glanced up to find the reporter just an arm's length away. No! He wasn't ready to surrender. He turned and ran for the wall surrounding the roof. "Keep back," he warned, his chest heaving as he reached his goal. "I've still got the bomb." Actually, Kent could be right about the explosives too. Unless he could find a way to complete the circuit, the bomb was just a mixture of inert substances.

Clark recognized desperation when he saw it. He took another step forward. "Thomas, I don't believe you can detonate the explosives ... and we've already decided Mary wouldn't want you to. There's no where else for you to go." Stretching out a hand, he repeated. "Please, come down with me."

For a few minutes there was a stalemate — Clark with his hand outstretched, calm and encouraging; Timmons standing, panting by the wall. He had to face facts; his bomb was useless. Kent could overpower him long before he had a chance to rewire it. He contemplated the reporter's offer, but that way led to a trial and conviction. He couldn't live his life in a cage, despised by the guards, bullied by the inmates. He'd already experienced too much of that ... and there was one other option.

He could go to be with Mary. She might be angry with him for the things he'd done, but in the end, she'd understand ... she'd forgive him.

Clark noticed the moment Timmon's expression changed. Immediately he was moving, as Thomas threw himself backward from the roof. Clark clutched at the falling man, managing to grasp Timmons' clothes. He started dragging Thomas upwards, hoping to gain a better hold, but his powers were almost spent. He was no stronger than an average man, but even an ordinary man could save a life.

Straining hard, Clark was unaware of the door opening behind him, or of Lois poised, frozen in the doorway. His concentration was totally on Timmons. Inch by painful inch, he was succeeding, but suddenly, his burden lightened as he was left holding an empty coat. Determined to die, Thomas had twisted out of the over large garment.

Timmons glanced once at the man who had attempted to save him, before closing his eyes as he plunged toward the ground, a welcoming smile on his face.

"No," Clark shouted. "No!" Life was precious, even this man's life.

Without hesitating, Clark launched himself over the wall after Timmons.

"No!" Lois' shout merged with her husband's, as she rushed toward the wall. She was almost afraid to look. Could Clark fly? She knew he'd been practicing with Matt, but so far the best Clark had achieved had been a brief hover. Rescuing someone from falling was probably beyond his capabilities.

Steeling herself, she glanced downward to see Clark make another abortive grab for the bomber, but he was already out of reach. A sickening, flat thud reached her as Thomas Timmons hit the concrete floor of the alley. Lois held her breath, waiting for the subsequent explosion, but none came, thank goodness.

Lois' relief lasted less than a second. Dear God, Clark would be next!

She prayed. She couldn't live without him again. She wouldn't live without him again!

Wait. Clark's rate of descent was surely slower than Timmons' had been ...

<Clark, fly!> she screamed out to him using their special link. <Up. Fly up.>

Clark twisted to face Lois, his arms flailing to retain his balance.

<Lois! I'm trying, but I don't have any more power. I don't

think I can even maintain a slow fall.> His eyes were wide with fear. <I'm sorry, Lois.>

<Don't you dare, Clark Kent.> Lois' hands gripped the wall, her knuckles showing white against the brickwork. <Don't you dare leave us again. The kids need you. I need you. Try harder!>

The fear on Clark's face was replaced by a single-minded frown as he used every ounce of his inner will. But he wasn't alone, Lois' spirit seemed to have linked with his and gradually he rose a floor higher.

Only some things were beyond even their dual strength.

Knowing his was weakening, Lois frantically searched right and left, catching sight of a row of open dumpsters next to a doorway. Perhaps the staff had left them open in their hurry to evacuate the building. If Clark had to fall, at least, she could find him a soft landing.

<Honey, don't waste your strength on flying. Look to your right. Can you control your fall in that direction?>

Clark's gaze followed where Lois pointed. He groaned aloud, but beggars can't be choosers, and anything was better than hitting the ground.

<Yeah.> he replied shortly, feeling Lois' hysteria come through the link. <I believe so.>

Staying silent, Clark gave up his quest for the safety and the comparative cleanliness of the roof, heading instead toward the dumpsters, standing outside what must be the studio's kitchen door.

Now that he was no longer fighting gravity, he found he could guide his fall with a small amount of effort. For a fraction of a second, he contemplated trying for a soft landing in the alley, but it wasn't an option. He might not be killed, but without his invulnerability, he would probably do himself some serious damage.

No, Lois was about to get her long-awaited revenge. Maybe the nearest dumpster was filled with cardboard and packaging, but the smell wafting toward him from its open maw told a different story. His wife was going to get her full measure of retribution. Of course, he could try for the second trash bin, but that was also out of the question. His energy was spent. Grimacing with anticipation, he allowed himself to drop the final two floors into the smelly, rotting, left-over vegetables.

Immediately Lois was sure Clark was safe, she left the roof, running down the stairs as fast as her legs could take her, her steps echoing in the hollow stairwell. She was certainly getting more exercise now that Clark was back!

Amazingly, the staircase was empty and quiet. The evacuation must be complete. Yet, she didn't doubt the bomb squad would soon begin a sweep of the building, searching for the bomber. A slow, diligent search, she hoped. Truth be told, she was somewhat surprised there had been no sign of any SWAT teams surrounding the studios, which was good. As far as she could tell, there had been no witnesses to Clark's erratic plunge from the roof. Timmons, she was sure, wasn't in a position to report what he'd seen.

Panting only a little after her breakneck trip, Lois pushed open the fire-exit door and stepped into the shaded alleyway, the light of the winter afternoon barely penetrating the narrow gap between the buildings. Gazing up and down to get her bearings, she was disappointed that neither Clark, nor the dumpsters, were in sight.

For a few seconds, she was disorientated, then she heard the sounds of sirens and frantic activity coming from her right. Clearly, the main street led in that direction, and the cavalry had arrived. Knowing they only had a short time of privacy left, Lois took off speedily in the opposite direction.

She rounded the corner, to see Clark bending over what looked very much like a bundle of rags, lying on the ground — the pathetic remains of the guy who had singlehandedly brought

terror to the streets of Metropolis.

Slowing her steps, she approached her husband. “Is he dead?” she asked quietly. Though she and Clark were in the heart of the city, she felt isolated ... disconnected from reality. “Silly question. Of course, he’s dead,” she added, forcing the words passed the lump which had formed in her throat. She didn’t regret Timmons’ passing, though she did regret its manner, and the fact that Clark had cared enough to try to save the man ... and might have fallen to his death in the attempt.

“Yes,” Clark replied, his tone dejected, his shoulders hunched, and Lois didn’t need superhearing to pick up his groan.

“Don’t, Clark. Please don’t obsess,” she said softly but resolutely, placing her hand on his back and rubbing gently. “You did everything you could ... and more. You risked your life to save a man who was probably beyond saving.”

“And didn’t want to be saved,” Clark added, glancing up at Lois with a wry quirk to his eyebrows. “I’m sorry, honey. What can I say? It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Lois’ lips curved in a tiny grin. “And now?”

Tiredness was beginning to seep into Clark’s bones and he accepted Lois’ hand to help him stand, before replying. “I think I ought to learn to live within my limitations.” He tenderly brushed a wayward strand of her hair off her face. “Putting myself in jeopardy like that isn’t fair to you or the kids. I know I’ve said that before and yet I keep on doing it, but this time was too close a call, even for me.”

Lois closed the small gap between them and wrapped her arms around his waist. “I’m glad you see that, sweetheart ... and it’s not like it will be for long.”

Leaning back to look at her, he asked, “You think?”

“I do.” She leaned in and whispered huskily, “You almost flew.”

“Almost being the operative word!” Clark snorted.

“Clark, you went four years with those kryptonite chips inside your brain. Bernie’s prognosis was that you’d never be super again, but your powers are on their way back, otherwise you’d be lying on the ground next to Timmons.” She gestured with her chin toward the body lying at their feet.

Leaving his arm about her shoulder, Clark turned his attention back to the guy he had failed to rescue, yet he didn’t feel guilty ... just sad. “Poor man. I can’t ever condone what he did, but it seems he never stood much of a chance of living a normal life ... and the one chance he had, he lost through no fault of his own.”

“That’s true,” Lois whispered, nodding, then rested her head on her husband’s chest. “But life is like that, Clark. Sometimes bad stuff happens, and people learn to deal with it or they don’t, but they do have a choice.” She let her fingers run down his chest. “No matter what they tried to do to you in North Korea, you never lost your innate goodness.”

“Maybe. But I grew up surrounded by the love of my parents, and later, I met you. I don’t know how or why I got so lucky, but being allowed to love you ... and having you love me back gives me the strength to be who I am ... even when I didn’t know who I was,” Clark finished with a poignant smile as he lowered his cheek to touch her hair. “Thomas wasn’t so fortunate as a child, or an adult. When you think of it, he lost the only two women who ever loved him.”

They stood together in silent grief for the young Thomas who had grown up in an atmosphere of grudging duty and cruel ridicule ... a square peg in a round hole for most of his life. A man whose soul had become so warped by his experiences he had exacted a terrible revenge on his fellow human beings.

Suddenly, Clark stiffened and his head straightened up. “I think we’re about to be joined by Metropolis’ finest.”

Lois swiveled to look behind her as the police in their flak jackets came around the corner of the building. “I wondered how

long it would take them to find us. I guess they’ll be wanting our statements.”

Clark slipped his hand through Lois’ arm to lead her toward the policemen, but she held him back. “Wait!”

She quickly went to work brushing him down, and it was only then he realized that a few remains of mushy vegetables were still sticking to his clothes.

“And can I suggest that we get out of here as soon as possible.” Lois leaned in and sniffed her husband’s coat. “Sweetie, I can’t say I approve of your new cologne. What is it? Eau de Zucchini?”

“Lo-is! That dumpster saved my life. Thank goodness it was open.”

“You won’t hear me complaining to city hall this time,” she hissed in his ear, trying to hide a smile. A piece of wilted green salad sticking in his hair had attracted her attention and she plucked it away, thankful that this time the color green was harmless. “But we can’t say anything about your falling into the dumpster, because I’m not totally sure that a bed of kitchen waste would actually save a normal person’s life. We ran down the fire escape together, after we saw Thomas throw himself from the roof.”

Clark nodded, though he looked doubtful. “Don’t you think they might smell me?”

“Hopefully, the police won’t get as close to you as I am. But look around you Clark, the ground is filthy. You can always say you knelt down to check if Timmons was dead and got dirt on your clothes ... and that’s the truth.” She patted his hand that was linked through her arm. “Are you ready for this?”

He sighed deeply, nodding once more, his voice firmer when he spoke. “As ready as I’ll ever be when someone dies unnecessarily. I guess Thomas couldn’t face spending the rest of his life in jail ...”

“Or execution, Clark. There’s every chance he would have gotten a death sentence. At least this way he chose the manner of his death,” she said, reminding him.

“You’re probably right, Lois.” He squeezed her arm. “Come on. Lets get this over with then go find Tory and Mom and Dad. I just want to go home and hug our kids. I wonder if Matt has finished in Switzerland.”

“Maybe you should take a shower before the hugging part,” Lois suggested helpfully.

“I couldn’t agree more.” Clark’s smile morphed into a grimace and a shudder coursed through his body. “I feel filthy. I dread to think what might have been crawling around in that trash. Maybe a long soak would be better, and you could help clean me up ... just in case I miss something.”

“Oh, no. This time you’re on your own!” Lois smiled up into his face, knowing that her husband was going to be just fine. Her eyes began to sparkle teasingly. “You know, I’ve waited a long, long time to get my own back on you for throwing me in that dumpster. I intend to savor every moment.”

“Lo-is, that’s cruel ...”

But the police had arrived and Lois walked forward to meet them with a quick sashay, giving Clark a suggestion of what he might share tonight with Lois ... if he was lucky.

Lois’ finger hovered over her mouse for a fraction of a second before clicking on the word send with a flourish. Satisfied, she closed the laptop and placed it on the bedside table. A recent picture of Clark held pride of place by her bedside, replacing the older one which had served her for four lonely years. Lovingly, she traced his face, before plumping up her pillows and relaxing back in the bed. A sparkling smile lit up her face. There was no doubt; reporter Clark Kent was back at the top of his game.

Some editors might have considered Clark to be too closely

involved with the standoff at Stern Studios to allow him to write up the story, but this was the culmination of Clark's hard work, and she wasn't about to rob him of his triumph.

From the very first explosion, Clark had investigated, researched and followed his gut instinct till he had discovered the identity of the bomber. He hadn't allowed himself to be duped after the bombing outside Metropolis General, as had City Hall, a number of the MPD and most of the media. No, Clark had stuck with it until he had uncovered the truth, and saved a great many people in the process.

Now he had turned in a first class article, which was neither prejudicial nor judgmental. He'd written the facts, yet in his distinctive style, he had drawn his readers into the story, making the events come alive. She'd been in that studio this afternoon, but she'd still felt on the edge of her seat as she'd read his prose.

That would have been enough to win Clark a Kerth, but her husband had gone further. In a sidebar, he'd given not just a name but a face and a personality to the bogeyman the people of Metropolis had come to fear. Without excusing Timmons or being overly sympathetic, he had stated Thomas' case with fairness and understanding, hopefully prompting people, particularly those in a position of authority, to ask themselves why Timmons had become a monster before condemning him out of hand.

The sounds of water draining from the tub and movement from the bathroom next door attracted Lois' attention, changing her smile of contentment to one of anticipation. She had toyed with the notion of joining Clark in the tub, but in contrast to what she'd told him earlier in the day, she'd decided not to out of consideration. After all, he had partly floated, but mostly crashed from a nine storey building this afternoon. Notwithstanding his landing in the squelchy trash, he must be feeling a little achy; she had noticed him moving with less than his easy grace since his fall.

The family had decided to order pizza for dinner and, thankfully, the girls had offered to clean away the aftermath. Martha and Jonathan had been taken home by Matt, who had shown up midway through the meal, wolfing down his share and some of his grandparents' leftovers. Judging from Matt's voracious appetite and relaxed demeanor, her son had, obviously, helped with a very successful rescue in Switzerland.

However, Lois had to face the fact that her in-laws were getting older, and probably less able to handle the trauma of dealing with superpowered savers. Not that they hadn't done a terrific job this afternoon. Martha was a trooper, and Jonathan would always backup whatever his wife chose to take on. It was just that, these days, they seemed to need a longer time out to recover. They had both been very grateful when Matt had offered to drive them home soon after dinner.

This time, not only did Martha and Jonathan need time to decompress, their son did too ... and their daughter-in-law!

The sounds from the bathroom warned Lois that Clark had almost finished his bathing, causing Lois to check her hair quickly in the vanity mirror and smooth down her new silk nightgown which clung seductively to her body; a body that had acquired a few lines and the odd stretch mark over the years, but one Clark still loved and desired.

His love was evident in every glowing glance he gave her, in the soft cadence of his voice when he spoke her name. She knew he loved her by the way he took care of her, often risking his own life. Yet he never stifled her spirit. Almost from the day they met, he had respected her independence, encouraging her to be all that she could be ... and more.

Today he had shown his love for her in a way she had never expected. For her sake and that of their children, he had promised not to risk sacrificing himself, despite his inborn commitment to help those in trouble ... and this time she knew he meant to keep his word. Of course, she would set him free of that obligation.

Just as Clark would never seek to diminish her, so she could never expect him to be less than Superman.

But that was for tomorrow, tonight was for reaffirming their need for each other in a more fundamental way. Another smile, slow and sensual, spread across Lois' face as she settled back in bed to wait for her husband.

Clark rubbed the liquid into his palms before patting briskly at his face, his breath catching at the sharp sting of the aftershave. Definitely not invulnerable! Over time, he'd become adept at shaving with a normal razor, so he'd caused neither cuts nor abrasions, but like any ordinary man, his skin was sensitive after the scrape of the blade. If his hair and stubble toughened in the near future, and his laser vision ever came back with any reliability, he or the bathroom might well suffer a few burns before he mastered the skill to shave and cut his hair using superpowers.

A self-deprecatory grin hovered around his mouth as he thought of asking Matt to give him a refresher course. Earlier, he had talked with Matt about the rescue in Switzerland. Regrettably, there had been a few fatalities, but those had happened before Matt's arrival. Like his father, the young super hero would never be happy at any loss of life, but he was starting to accept that he couldn't do everything. Besides, there were many more people who'd been pulled alive from their icy tombs who were extremely grateful for Jor-El's presence.

Actually, Matt had seemed more interested in hearing about the events at Stern Studios, and unlike his father, on this occasion, Matt was not surprised that Clark had saved the day. It appeared Jor-El had more faith in Superman's ability, if not to fly, to reach the ground semi-safely.

Clark's worries for his son assuming the role of a hero too soon were receding, but both his daughters were causing him some concern. In a very short time, Tory had been involved in two very traumatic situations. She'd coped amazingly well this afternoon, though both he and Lois had decided to keep a close watch over her, in case of delayed shock. Somehow, he didn't expect too many problems. Tory might be unusually healthy, never suffering from knocks or bruises, but she had not yet started to develop superpowers. Clark believed that when she did, she would take them in her stride.

Most of all, Clark was anxious about Sara, his wise, caring daughter, who continually thought of others before herself. Sara, who never courted the limelight, except in the auditorium, where she tried so hard to rely strictly on her human side to perform her gymnastics. Of his three children, he felt that Sara would be happier if her kryptonian powers remained dormant. He needed to be there for her, to let her know it was all right not to be a hero, if she so chose.

And this afternoon, regardless of Matt's confidence in him, he had to admit he had practically thrown his life away.

Wandering slowly around the bathroom, favoring his aching joints, Clark cleared away his wet towels, but as he bent to pick up the clothes he'd discarded when he'd first arrived home, a rotting smell wafted toward his nostrils, more pungent now that time had passed. He'd meant to put them in the wash immediately, but his desire to get clean had taken precedence.

He lifted them to his face and sniffed gingerly, then grimaced. Having floundered around in that dumpster before managing to climb out, his clothes really were beyond rescuing. Quickly fishing a plastic sack from the cupboard beneath the vanity bar, he rammed the offending clothing inside and tied the sack tightly.

If only he could get rid of his feeling of guilt as easily.

He'd hoped that Lois might change her mind and join him in the tub, but his little tornado had stuck to her guns, and he couldn't blame her. The stunt he'd pulled this afternoon had been crazy.

His eyes closed as he relived those seemingly never-ending moments when he had plunged to the ground. He'd always heard that your life flashed before your eyes when you were about to die, but Clark had fixated on the face of his wife, as she stared over the parapet.

Lois' expression, a melting pot of terror, pain and dreadful sadness would remain imprinted in his mind forever. Her look had been fleeting, and immediately replaced with one of determination not to let him die. It was Lois' strength of will that had saved him today. For her sake, he had found the effort to slow his fall. He owed his life to Lois ... and an open dumpster.

Beyond all doubt, he loved her in every way known to man and Kryptonian, and yet he had been responsible for putting that dreadful look of fear upon her face ... but never again. With a vow to spend the rest of his life making Lois' happiness his main priority, Clark finished tidying the bathroom, steadied his breathing, and walked into the bedroom.

Prepared to apologize for his lack of judgment, Clark was taken aback by the atmosphere in the bedroom. The lamps were turned low, while scented candles burned on the dresser, but his eyes were drawn to the woman on the bed. His breath caught and his heart took up a steady, pounding beat.

Thought escaped him. It was all he could do to remember to breathe as he moved toward Lois like a moth to a flame.

"Lois," he said her name with awe. "You are so beautiful." He sank down on the bed, stretching out his hand to caress the ivory skin of her arm. "You never cease to amaze me. This afternoon you were the target of a madman; Tory was in danger, and Mom and Dad ... and all those other people ... but you didn't panic." Clark's fingers moved on, reverently stroking the graceful curve of her neck. "I almost threw my life away, yet now you're so serene ... so lovely." In the soft light, moisture glistened in his brown eyes. "You've grown so much since I've been gone ... I have no words."

"Hush!" Her fingers pressed against Clark's lips. "That's good, because I didn't plan on talking," she said, sending him a sultry smile and patting the bed by her side.

Clark turned and scooted up the bed, but he couldn't halt the groan which escaped his lips.

Immediately, Lois' focus changed. "Clark, are you all right?"

Catching Lois' hands that were intent on examining his body, he replied. "I'm fine, honey. Just a few aches and pains is all. I'm lucky I got off so lightly."

But Lois wasn't about to be put off. "No cuts or bruises? Let me see?" she demanded, trying to extract herself from Clark's grasp.

"Honey, I promise. There are no cuts, no grazes." A teasing smile hovered around his mouth. "But I am very tired ..." he added, sliding down to lie flat on the bed.

Disappointment darkened Lois' eyes and settled like a damp blanket on her shoulders. "I guess that's only to be expected ..."

"Honey, don't!" Clark twisted to face her, brushing his fingers through the wisps of hair which curled on her cheek. "Believe, after all the trouble you've gone to ..." He waved an arm about the room. "I'm not that tired, and if you want to look over my body, I'm all for it ... just not in a medical way," he said, finishing with a sparkling grin.

"Oh, you!" Lois pouted, but she did refrain from punching him, just in case. She settled down beside him, resting her head on his chest. "Did you enjoy your soak?"

"I did, but I was lonely, having that big tub all to myself."

This time it was Lois who laughed tantalizingly, her warm breath tickling Clark's skin. "I told you I wanted pay back. You didn't help me when ..."

"Hah, sweetheart! I can imagine the sort of reception I'd have gotten if I'd tried back then. You'd have skinned me alive. And

don't tell me I was invulnerable, because I've never been that when it comes to you."

"More powerful than kryptonite?" Lois asked, enjoying this playful mood.

"Always," he said, dropping a kiss on her hair.

She snuggled closer. "It wasn't just revenge, you know. I was working. I edited your story and sent it to The Planet. The timing is tight, but I want it on the front page of The Planet on every newsstand in the morning. It will definitely make the online edition. There's no way the rest of the media can beat us." Lois' smile beamed with satisfaction, while her fingers drew circles on Clark's chest. "They might have the general facts, but we have the inside scoop. It's a great article, Clark. The best. You're as good a reporter as ever."

"I sure hope so."

At the faint note of doubt in her husband's tone, Lois sat up, shocked. She stared into his face, but he avoided her gaze. "Clark! Look at me." Clark hesitantly raised his eyes. "Have faith in yourself, honey. You totally nailed that story ... apart from withholding an infinitesimal part for reasons which I completely agree with. Clark, I'm not the only one who has grown in the last four years. I'd bet my life you'll win next year's Kerth for investigative journalism. And I'm talking as your editor not your wife, though your wife is also very proud of what you've achieved."

Lois smiled again, leaning in to demonstrate just how proud she was, and for some moments there was silence in the room as they shared a lingering kiss.

When finally she broke away, she spoke rather breathlessly. "You know, this cologne is a big improvement on the one you were wearing earlier."

"You think?" Clark joined in his wife's banter. "I kinda liked the way you showed me how much you appreciate my writing ... so much better than a Kerth, but I might need a lot more convincing."

"That could be arranged ... Oh ... oh!"

Lois shrieked when Clark's arms enveloped her, yet her moan died completely as she was drawn down onto his body and he covered her mouth with his own. Now there was only the whispered sounds of two people communing in ways more ancient than language.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, the strident ring of a phone broke the heated spell in the room.

For seconds the couple ignored the interruption, before Lois reluctantly pulled back. Clark, however, wasn't quite so prepared to let her go.

"Let it ring. It's probably Jim!"

The shrill noise continued while Lois glanced between her husband and the phone. She was clearly ambivalent.

"Clark, we can't. We both have elderly parents, and it could be an emergency."

Instantly contrite, Clark released Lois and sat up, stretching over to pick up the phone. "Clark Kent here," he said, sending his wife an apologetic look. "Hi, Perry." His expression lightened as he realized the identity of the caller. "What can I do for you?" he asked, switching to speaker mode so Lois could listen in.

"Nothing, son. I just wanted to congratulate you on a brilliant piece of writing. You're the best reporter in Metropolis. Heck, the best in the country, and you've made an old man very happy," Perry concluded, his voice gruff with emotion.

A Cheshire Cat like grin covered Lois' face. "I couldn't agree more, Perry, but what are you doing in the newsroom?" she inquired, changing the direction of the conversation.

"I'm acting night editor," he explained. "You know Anita's on vacation — a Caribbean cruise I'm told. Tonight her stand-in was involved in an automobile accident. Now before you start worrying your pretty head, Lois, it's nothing serious. He'll be in

the hospital for a couple of days, so they asked the old war horse to take over while he's incapacitated, and ..."

"And I guess you were only too happy to oblige," Lois finished the sentence for him.

"You bet your blue suede shoes I am. This retirement malarkey is fine, but printers' ink still runs in my veins. Alice says I'll die with my boots firmly planted under the editor's desk. Not that I want to step on your toes, Lois."

"You could never do that," she hurriedly assured him.

"Look, kids, I know it's late, so I won't keep you. I'm sure you've better things to do with your time than jaw with your old Chief." There was a pause as Perry's chuckle wafted over the line. "Clark, I'm more excited now than I was the night I saw The King play Vegas ... and that sure takes some doing. Clark Kent's byline will be on every newsstand and in every home first thing tomorrow, exactly as it should be!"

"Chief, I've already told Lois that byline should read Lane and Kent," Clark stated adamantly. "She was with me every step of the way today, and if she hadn't believed in me, I doubt I would have had the courage to persevere with the investigation. In fact, if it hadn't been for Lois, I wouldn't have been around to write that story ..."

Perry cut in, saying seriously, "I don't think I want to know what you're getting at, Clark, but if a shared byline is what you want, that's what you'll get. It'll be just like old times ... Lane and Kent, the hottest team in town."

Lois looked over at Clark, her eyes glowing. "I agree, with one provision; make that Lane-Kent and Kent, the hottest team in town."

This time, Perry gave a loud guffaw. "Sure thing, kids. Whatever you want. Now why don't you get back to doing whatever it was you were doing before I called."

"I think we can manage that, Chief," Clark said, his lips twitching in a grin as he glanced at Lois. "But thanks for letting me know how you feel. It's much appreciated."

"I'm only telling it like it is, son," Perry answered before concluding. "But some people have work to do. Goodnight to you both."

"Night, Perry," Lois and Clark answered in unison, as the receiver was replaced on its cradle.

Clark turned back to his wife. "Just where were we when we were interrupted?" He lifted his hand to gently trace the contours of Lois' features. "Oh, yes, I remember." His other hand tangled in her silky hair as he lowered his face to hers. "Lois Lane-Kent, did I ever tell you just how much I love you?" he asked, his lips close to hers.

"Once or twice," she murmured softly. "But actions speak so much louder than words."

And Clark didn't disappoint. This was the moment when their love blazed into desire. When his burning gaze seared her soul and his husky voice sent shivers through the core of her being.

"My wife the boss," he whispered against her lips. "My best friend, my partner ... my soulmate. I will love you in every way for all of my life ... and beyond."

THE END