

Pie Isn't All That Easy

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: Lois and Clark investigate the murder of one of Jimmy's motorcycle buddies. But why does the corpse change positions? And why is a restaurateur from a Metropolis pie shop hanging around the morgue along with a private eye and a mysterious woman? A "Lois and Clark" and "Pushing Daisies" crossover fic.

This story is for Kermtzu. It was written for the 2008 L&C Holiday Ficathon.

It's a "Lois and Clark" crossover with "Pushing Daisies." If you haven't seen the latter show, it's about a man who makes pies and has a strange ability.

This story is rated PG-13 for WHAM, violence, and character death, but I put the toys back where they belong.

Many thanks to rkn for an excellent beta on short notice and looming deadline. Rkn, you're appreciated.

Disclaimer: Not my characters. No money involved. It's fanfic and it's for fun.

Strangely enough, it was Jimmy who gave Lois and me the tip that led to it all. I would never have thought that Jimmy was observant enough to catch something like that. After all, he's a photographer, supposed to be able to "see" things, and yet he's never seen that I'm Superman — despite taking numerous pictures of me in both my identities.

Of course, maybe that's because I *willed* so hard not to be found out, not to have anyone make the connection between Clark Kent and Superman. I sometimes wonder if my fervent wishing to keep my identities separate actually makes it so. How else can you explain that no one sees Superman behind a pair of glasses?

Be that as it may, it started on Halloween. Some of the Planet support staff and gofers had dressed in costumes. Lois and I hadn't. We never knew when we would be called out to investigate a story. And surprisingly enough, meeting someone in a gorilla suit does not make them trust you as a reporter. I wore my usual work suit — not the Suit, just a basic coat and tie. Lois was radiant, as ever, in some sort of skirt and jacket combination. There are probably some sort of dressmaking or couture or tailoring terms for the style she wore. All I could say was that she made me run my finger along my neck to loosen my collar and help me breathe. Of course, she does that practically every day by just existing.

It had been a slow news day, and Lois looked as bored as I felt. She'd called some of her sources, but all our stories were stalled, going nowhere, on the back burner — nothing. There was news out there — we just hadn't heard it yet. So when Jimmy came to me with what he thought was a tip, I was ready to listen.

"CK?" he asked.

"Yeah, Jimmy?"

"Can I talk to you?"

I leaned back in my desk chair and looked at him. I hoped it

wasn't relationship advice — it would be ironic if he realized how little I knew. But he seemed to have a "not-romance" kind of diffident air to him, so I took the plunge.

"Sure. What's it about?"

"Can we go into the conference room?"

I raised my eyebrows. This was unusual for Jimmy. He was as open as the day is long. He had no secrets to hide. We were the ones who dragged him into the conference room when Lois and I had a sensitive investigation that required confidential research.

"Should I call Lois?"

"Call me for what?" Lois asked. Not a surprise. I'd had a mental bet — twenty seconds or less. She made it in "less." Her tone was polite but I knew her curiosity lurked underneath.

"I heard something really weird, and I think...I want to talk to you about it," Jimmy said. At least Lois wasn't flustering him too much anymore. Either she'd mellowed or Jimmy had hardened. Or maybe both.

"Come on, Clark," Lois said, taking the lead. She always did. I spent a minute admiring the way she flounced into the conference room, as I always did.

"OK," I said obediently, following Jimmy and Lois. Lois closed the door.

"Speak," she told Jimmy.

Jimmy was used to Lois treating him like a dog. Without protest, he launched into his story. "You know I ride with a motorcycle group," he started.

"Yeah...the Lab Rats, or something like that, isn't it?" I asked

"You remembered!" Jimmy seemed absurdly happy. "Yeah, there's a whole bunch of us...not just young guys, there's various ages...there's this older guy there, I've heard people call him "Doc" and he's got this amazing chopper..."

Lois cleared her throat.

"Yeah," Jimmy said hurriedly. "Well, one of the guys in the group, Jordan Major, was killed by a hit-and-run last night."

"I'm sorry," Lois and I chimed in together. I regretted any loss of life — I'd seen so much sorrow and destruction that every death, in some way, even if I didn't witness it, diminished me in some way.

I think Lois' regrets were a little more perfunctory.

"His parents were notified. They're on an Antarctic cruise. They know I'm good friends with Jordan, so they worked it out with the police to have me identify the body."

"Not a fun task," Lois said quietly. She had ID'ed her own share of corpses over the years.

Jimmy shrugged. "It's one last favor I can do for my friend and his family."

A moment of silence.

"Uh, you were saying, something weird?" Lois probed. A moment of silence was about all she could take.

"Oh, yeah!" Jimmy said, startled into remembering the beginning of this whole thing. "So there I was at the coroner's office, and I identified Jordan. I got some photos."

"Is that legal?" Lois asked.

"I don't know," Jimmy admitted. "I figured his parents might want them." His face wrinkled. "He was all stiff and everything...I had to leave the room for a minute..."

From his expression I guessed it was because Jimmy got sick. "And when I came back, I was just about ready to go into the room and finish up. But I stopped as I opened the door, because there were three people standing around...the body."

"Cops?" Lois asked sharply.

"No. They were civilians. And that's not what was weird," Jimmy said. "Here's what was really weird. The people were talking to Jordan. AND...And he answered them back."

Lois and I looked at each other skeptically. We silently voted, and I was unanimously elected. "Jimmy..." I began.

"I know you guys think I'm crazy, or I didn't know what I was hearing," Jimmy said defensively, "but I swear it's true. I knew Jordan pretty well. He was a good friend. And I know his voice. I swear to God, he was talking. It was him."

"OK, if it was him, what'd he say?" Lois asked. That was Lois. Get the facts. Get the story. It was one of the things I loved about her — her drive, her passion. Of course, too often she jumped off the deep end without checking the water level, but that was what Superman was for.

"I can't remember the exact words," Jimmy furrowed his brow, "but it was something like, 'I was shot. Then they arranged a hit-and-run.' Then one of the guys standing around said, 'Who did it?'"

"What did Jordan say?" Lois said, only half sarcastically. Jimmy's sincerity had lured her in. Me, too.

"Nothing," Jimmy said dejectedly. "I came up to the table then, and Jordan was dead. Definitely dead."

"Dead as a doornail," I muttered, remembering my Dickens.

"Yep," Jimmy agreed. "That's why I can't understand why I heard him talking. I mean, he was cold. He looked...well, really dead, if you know what I mean."

Lois and I both nodded. We knew.

"And, um, there was a lot of, um, damage, from the hit-and-run. I mean, I don't see how anyone could have lived after that." Jimmy got a stubborn expression. "But I know what I heard. And that was Jordan Major, talking, after he was dead."

Lois and I exchanged another glance. <<He's crazy>> and <<Yeah, but this is Jimmy and we owe him>> passed, almost telepathically, between us.

I took the lead. Lois and I both knew that I was better at the "touchy-feely stuff." "Jimmy, who were the other people in the room?" No sense in focusing on the obvious impossibility of his story.

"Oh!" Jimmy looked a lot happier for some reason. "I had a camera with me —"

That was no surprise. Jimmy went everywhere with a camera. Sometimes two or three.

"— and I got some candid photos of them. I don't think they knew they were being photographed."

"Good job," Lois said, approval in her voice. She respected sneaky initiative like that. "Got those photos for us?"

Jimmy smiled. "Why did I know you were going to say that?" He pulled several enlargements from the folder he carried. "See, there were two men and a woman..."

Several hours later, Lois and I meet for lunch at the Delmar, a small diner about six blocks from the Daily Planet. We eat there often — the food is good, the portions generous (not that Lois ever eats much), and the coffee cups bottomless. In honor of the holiday, the staff has put up orange and black streamers, and a carved pumpkin sits next to the cash register. The waitresses all wear Santa hats.

"Wrong season," Lois grumbles as she slips into the booth opposite me.

"Probably all they had in stock, and they can use them again in two months," I point out.

"Gee, what would it cost to get some Halloween hats?" Lois says, mimicking my tone and mocking me.

I decide to let that one lay where it fell. I pull out one of Jimmy's photos that show all three visitors to the coroner's shop.

"The man is Ned Smith," I say, pointing to the tall, thin man standing closest to the body on the coroner's table. "He owns and runs a...well, you could call it a restaurant, but all they serve there is pie."

Lois raises her eyebrows. "Just pie?"

"Well, coffee and tea and soda, and pie. Pie by the slice, by the whole pie, in little tartlets, and in little mini-pies." I grin.

"You'll get a kick out of this, Lois."

"What?"

"The restaurant is called the Pie Hole. As in, 'Shut your...'"

Lois gives a sour smile.

"Did you find out anything else about...this...this Pie-Maker?"

A Superman rescue had delayed me and I'd lost about an hour. Was I ready to tell Lois that? Definitely not today. Not right now, not here. "That's all."

"Not much for two hours work," Lois grumbles. "I'll bet you had some of that Pie Hole pie?"

"Lois!" I don't have to work too hard to chide her. "I wouldn't go without you. Pie without Lois?" My tone indicates that would be like Christmas without Santa.

That coaxes a reluctant smile from her.

"What about you?" I ask.

She moves her coffee cup over and points to the second man in the photo. He's tall as well, but shorter than the first man. He's also much burlier — in fact, downright portly. While Ned, the first man, is dressed conservatively in white shirt and tie, this gentleman apparently has a fondness for brightly colored patterned vests.

"Emerson Cod," Lois says briskly. "Private investigator."

"I could see he's got reasons to come to the morgue," I say, considering it, "but why a Pie-Maker? Why would a restaurant owner accompany a private eye to the morgue? Why look at a biker who died of a hit-and-run? What's the connection?"

"Good questions, Clark," Lois says. My heart gives a little thump. She doesn't compliment me all that often. She figures it only makes me soft. I can't tell her that I have a steel exterior, and under it is a soft candy center, just for her. I'm a sucker for any little scraps of praise she throws me, and she knows it.

Lois goes on. "I can't answer them. What I can tell you is what Bobby Bigmouth said about Emerson Cod."

She stops talking, takes a sip of coffee, knowing she's tantalizing me, and enjoying it. I try to be strong but give it up after five seconds.

"What?" I finally say, losing the battle.

"Just a regular P.I. for years," Lois says, "and then in the last six months it's like he's tapped into some sort of crystal ball. He's solved every case he's taken. And gotten the rewards." Another sip of coffee. "It seems that right now, Mr. Cod is only taking cases that have rewards attached to them."

"And does Jimmy's friend Jordan's case have a reward attached?"

Lois smiles. "Yes. Jordan's parents, who by the way, are quite wealthy, have offered a fifty-thousand dollar reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of those responsible for the hit-and-run."

"Always assuming that it was a hit-and-run," I muse. For some reason, Jimmy's story is tickling those "just-not-right" nerve endings deep in my reportorial subconscious. Lois must feel that too, because she's gone into full investigative mode.

"Who's the woman?" I ask, pointing to the third figure in the photo — the woman covered up in large hat, large hat ribbons (that effectively act almost as a veil), gloves, and large sunglasses. From her figure and posture, she's young.

"Bobby didn't know," Lois says. "Heck, it could be almost anyone under all that."

"That's true," I mutter. I take a last sip of my coffee. "Next step, partner?"

"Morgue," she says decisively, slipping from the booth. "Come on, I'll drive." She strides out.

I sigh and throw some bills on the table before following her. Stuck with the check again.

We're at the morgue, and Jimmy is great.

“Doctor?” he calls. “Doctor Richardson?”

The surly coroner comes out from behind his desk.

“I was hoping — you know Jordan Major — well, his parents asked me to take some pictures of him. You know, for remembrance.” Jimmy barely takes a breath. “You haven’t done the autopsy yet, have you?”

“No,” said the coroner. “Don’t have any help here. I’m sixty-two and I have a bad back and do they give me a full-time assistant? No!” He devolves into more grumbles. At Jimmy’s further pleading, he allows Jimmy to take some pictures but the most he’ll do will be to pull out the drawer. Jimmy will have to do all the heavy lifting and corpse moving, if any.

“And your friends?” Dr. Richardson says suspiciously.

“Erm... Clark and Lois... my friends are here to help me.”

Jimmy is such a bad liar. The coroner looks at us even more suspiciously.

“Lois Lane, Daily Planet,” she says briskly.

“Now why would the Daily Planet be interested in a routine hit-and-run on some teenager?” he asks. There’s mixed suspicion and curiosity in his voice.

“Doctor,” Lois says, dodging his question, “you graduated first in your class from Met U medical school, and you’ve been a medical examiner for over thirty years. You teach, you’ve published, you’ve written a textbook — why is someone of your stature in this office?” She gestures around the office — a small one, not at all commensurate with the credentials of such a man as Dr. Richardson.

“You’ve done your homework,” he says. He stares at both of us with a curiously calculating look. He seems to make up his mind because he says, “I’m tired.”

“What?” Lois asks.

“Do you know how many homicides there were in Metropolis last year?” the coroner asks.

“Over seven hundred and fifty,” I speak up. As Superman, I’d prevented many more. At the doctor’s querying glance, I introduce myself. “Clark Kent, Daily Planet.”

“Yes,” he says, “over seven hundred and fifty. Over two a day. And that’s not counting the suspicious deaths and the deaths-of-unknown-causes.” He sighs. “I just got tired of one more teenage gunshot wound, one more beating. So I came here. Not much happening in this neighborhood. I deal with what comes in, they get the benefit of my expertise, and I can rest.”

“Not much happens here?” Lois probes.

“This isn’t Suicide Slum!” the doctor protests. “I’m not doing three post-mortems a day. No, here we get the occasional drunk driver, and that’s about it.” He retreats behind his desk and assumes a more formal persona. “Now, why is the Daily Planet interested in this boy? And why you? Don’t think I don’t know who you are.”

Lois and I give each other another look. “We got a tip that Jordan Major had been shot and the hit-and-run was a cover-up,” I admit.

Some flare of professional curiosity wakens, and his eyes narrow. “Well, then, I guess we’ll pick it up at the X-ray stage, then, won’t we?”

“Um, yes,” I agree. I want to do my own X-raying, but I can’t say that.

Before we could say any more, Dr. Richardson makes shooing motions. “Inspector Henderson speaks well of you two. Go on in.”

I almost laugh at the expression on Lois’ face. Henderson, speaking well of us? Although we have a profound respect for each other, overt compliments break the code. Maybe Henderson feels that comments made to a third party don’t count.

“Jimmy, get to work,” Lois orders. He gratefully sidles his way through a door that leads to the autopsy floor. I know because I can see the tables and tools. The coroner follows him

and gestures at us to continue on in.

Lois engages Dr. Richardson in some small talk — primarily related as to how well he knows Henderson and what, exactly, did Henderson say about us — while Jimmy pulls out the slide and uncovers the body. Jimmy starts to set up some lights and I casually step next to Jordan’s body.

Of all the accidents I’ve seen (and there have been a lot), the one that caused the injuries I see must have been right up there in severity. <Squished and then dragged> would be a good description of the damage. Surprisingly, Jordan’s face is almost untouched — it’s the back of his head that was ground off against the pavement.

I casually look over my glasses, engaging the deep vision, and slowly sweep it over the young man’s body. As ever, I marvel at the infinitely detailed complexity that lies under the skin, the sheer perfection of muscle, nerve, vein, and bone all winding together in a pattern known only to God. As I move down to the remnants of Jordan’s chest, I know that the tip is good. There is a bullet in Jordan’s heart. I stare at it, trying to decide on caliber and type. He’d been shot in the back, and the bullet was deformed, probably by its impact with the vertebral column. Tiny pieces of lead had spalled off at the impact and remained within his tissues. The entrance wound had been destroyed by the dragging of the body. I squinted again, trying, despite the bullet’s deformation, to memorize the unique rifling marks that would tie this bullet to a particular gun — if we could find the gun.

Jimmy’s flash distracts me, and I quickly scan the rest of Jordan’s body, or what’s left of it. No other abnormalities to be seen, if you discount the pieces that are missing. Jimmy takes a few more shots of the face from different angles, then starts packing up.

“I think the parents will like these better than the official autopsy photos,” the coroner mutters. He obviously still has a heart despite thirty years of Metropolis post-mortems and big-city court cases.

“Yeah, good job, Jimmy,” I chime in.

“Doctor, would you care to give a quote?” Lois asks.

“No, I would not,” he snaps. Then he grins. “How could I? You were never here.” Jimmy looks blank for a moment, but Lois grins back. She and I both know that our presence with the body after the official “admission” to the ME’s office could be seized on by a defense attorney (if it comes to a trial) as a possibility of tainting the evidence — we could plant something on the body or to remove something.

It makes the doctor’s decision to trust us even more flattering. It’s a tribute to how much the medical examiners of Metropolis trust and respect Henderson. I won’t kid myself — it’s his recommendation that got us in. I’ll have to remember to thank him — in some oblique or sarcastic way, of course — the next time we see him.

I hear a distant cry for help and tense. Then I relax as I realize that local authorities have the crisis well in hand. I come back to myself and find Lois staring at me. The coroner is showing Jimmy back to the office, and Lois whispers, “You don’t have to run off and walk your neighbor’s dog or return a video or pick up a prescription or something right now, do you?”

She must know that look. I manage a twisted smile and say, “No, Lois. I’m all yours.” If only she knew how true that was.

“Glad to hear it,” she says, only semi-sarcastically. Dare I hope she is coming to feel something for me?

We go back into the office, make appreciative noises at the coroner, and walk outdoors. It’s a beautiful day and I get the usual charge of energy from the sun. Lois chivies us into her Jeep and takes Jimmy just far enough to where he can pick up a taxi.

“You get those photos printed,” she says. “And I want to know everything about Jordan. Who he was, who his friends were, who his enemies were, what he lived on, what he ate for

breakfast!” She stops to take a breath. “Clark and I will be in this afternoon and I expect it by then.”

“Lois!” Jimmy protests.

She just smiles as the cab pulls away. Then she turns to me and says briskly, “Clark, you feel like having some pie?”

I smile too. Great minds think alike. “Lois, I would love some pie.”

Lois and I both whistle at the sight of the Pie Hole. It’s on a “V”-shaped corner in not-quite-downtown Metropolis. What really gets our admiration is the exterior decor. Somehow the builder has managed to put up an awning in the shape of a fluted pie crust. It looks very realistic.

We walk into the restaurant, and the smell of baking pies immediately makes my stomach growl. We sit down at one of the booths, and casually look around. The Pie Hole is mostly empty, with only one other booth filled, and a blonde waitress pattering around the big central counter. In deference to the holiday, carved jack-o-lanterns and Halloween decorations are scattered around the room, and a large sign tells us that Today’s Special Is Pumpkin Pie.

“Clark,” Lois says quietly.

I don’t need her alert. I can see the three persons in Jimmy’s photos sitting at the only other occupied booth. But this time, the woman isn’t wearing any hat or sunglasses. She’s an attractive brunette with a thick mane of hair that’s tied back, probably because she’s dressed as a waitress and therefore is serving food.

I carefully extend my hearing. I must to be coming in on the end of the conversation, because the burly black man seems to be winding up.

“So it’s settled, then,” he says. “You and Dead Girl —”
What?

“— stay here and take care of business while I investigate Jordan Major some more.”

“Too bad he didn’t tell us more,” the brunette says.

What? This conversation is surreal.

The tall man, who is Ned Smith, the Pie-Maker, leans forward — he’s about to say something. I listen harder.

“You two want some coffee?”

I almost clap my hands over my ears as the painfully loud voice directly next to me drills into my eardrums. It’s the other waitress, who’s come to attend us. She introduces herself as Olive. Her voice isn’t really loud — that is, unless you have superhuman listening abilities and are extending your hearing to its most sensitive level. Then it’s excruciating. Whatever the Pie-Maker was going to say, I missed.

“Yes, coffee, please,” says Lois, who’s giving me a curious look. She knows something is off.

“Tell you later,” I whisper after the waitress leaves. The three in the other booth get up. The balding man — Emerson Cod, his name is — walks out the door. The Pie-Maker and the brunette waitress head back to the central counter. The brunette stays at the counter and says a few words to Ned, and the man walks through the swinging doors into the kitchen area. Curious, I x-ray through the doors, watching him.

A dog waits in the kitchen, lifting its head at the sight of the Pie-Maker. The man says, “Hi, Digby,” but doesn’t pet it. I get a little antsy at the sight of the Golden Retriever and start scanning the remainder of the restaurant. To my surprise, everything is scrupulously clean. I chuckle then, when I remember how many restaurants in France allowed patrons to bring in their dogs, and everything was fine there.

I keep on scanning and go through even more walls — past the kitchen now, into the restrooms. Fortunately no one is in either the Ladies’ or the Gents’. Both washrooms are clean too, which I take as a good sign. I move my vision over to the storeroom and almost flinch in surprise.

The walk-in cold room has racks of fruit — apples, cherries, kiwifruit, peaches, various berries. No surprise for a pie-making operation that, as far as I can see from the menu, has a pie made of every conceivable kind of fruit. The actual surprise is that much of the fruit is rotten. Some of it is only past its prime, and some is actually rotten — peels slipping off, bruising extending to liquefaction. On the other hand, there are shelves of cabbages and Brussels sprouts — these vegetables look in excellent, fresh condition. But I don’t see cabbage-and-Brussels-sprout pie on the menu. Thank God. I’ve always disliked Brussels sprouts despite my parents’ best efforts.

Why would a business spend money on ingredients — fresh fruits, major input to the product — and then let them go bad? I know the grim statistics for Metropolis restaurants — eighty percent of new restaurants go out of business in the first year. And wasting money on fruit that will have to be thrown away — that’s a rookie error, or sheer incompetence on the part of the buyer or the vendors. But I see from the menu that the Pie Hole has been in business for three years now. It doesn’t make sense.

I wish I could tell Lois about all this. But how would I explain how I know it? I think again about taking the plunge, telling her — just saying, “Lois, I’m Superman.” And once again, I creep away from the edge, too afraid of what her response might be. I’m pretty sure that “volcanic” might describe it.

So, as usual, I take the coward’s way out. I finish the scan — it’s only taken me a few seconds — and turn my attention back to the menu that the blonde waitress delivered with our coffee.

Lois is making little moaning noises at the thought of the pies available. “Umm... coconut cream... praline pecan...”

Those don’t hold much appeal to me. I’m a straight fruit-pie kind of guy. Comes from growing up on a farm in Kansas. We had apple trees. We didn’t have coconut trees.

Olive, the blonde waitress, says something to the brunette and heads off to the kitchen. I glance over my glasses again and see her attaching a leash to Digby’s collar and taking him outside through a side door. The brunette waitress comes up to our table.

“Hi, I’m Kitty,” she says brightly. Something in her voice and body language tells me that’s a lie. I read people almost instinctively now — very helpful when you’re an investigative reporter. Something about ‘Kitty’ is off. She gives us a cheerful smile as she says, “Have you decided?”

Lois looks at me. “You go first,” she says.

“Apple pie,” I say firmly. Always go with the basics.

“Ice cream?” the waitress asks.

“No. I like my pie to stand on its own,” I say. And I do.

“Caramel crust?” she asks. Wow, this is quite a pie place.

Options galore.

“Plain crust,” I say. “No a la mode, no toppings. Plain apple pie.”

Lois gives me a semi-disgusted look. “Clark, you have no sense of adventure.”

I only smile and nod. What would she say if she knew that I’m tired of adventure, that the definition of adventure is “someone else having a hell of a hard time a hundred miles away”? Too often, that someone is me, dealing with a typhoon-tossed ship or a high-rise fire. I’d actually prefer a little less adventure in my life.

Lois flips the menu closed. “Pecan-chocolate chip,” she says.

“Chocolate sauce on top?” the brunette asks cheerily. When she smiles like that, she looks familiar just for a second. I rack my brain trying to remember. I don’t think I’ve met her personally. Where have I seen that face before?

“Of course,” Lois agrees. After the waitress goes off, she mutters, “I’ll just put two extra hours in the gym this week.”

I diplomatically say nothing. Lois complains about how I never have to work out. She doesn’t know that the flying burns a lot of energy, plus it’s great for the abs. Holding that proper

position for optimum aerodynamics has really helped me develop my six-pack. I've thought about taking up yoga for increased flexibility — even a Superman can try to improve himself.

"Lois," I say quietly.

"Yes?" She recognizes that I'm serious now.

"Does that waitress look familiar?"

She stares at 'Kitty', and gets a considering look on her face. "I don't think I've met her..." Lois begins, "...but, you know, Clark, she does look familiar." After a minute, she says frustratedly, "I just can't place her. I know I've seen her somewhere, though."

Just then the waitress comes back with the pie, and perforce, we fall silent. 'Kitty' serves Lois first, and the rich smell of chocolate wafts over the entire restaurant. It drowns out the plain goodness of the apple pie smell, which she holds in front of me. I seize the opportunity.

"Umm... please, Kitty, hold it right there just for a minute." I lean forward, close my eyes ostentatiously, and stick my nose near the pie, taking big obvious sniffs, doing my best imitation of a connoisseur. From 'Kitty's' reaction, this isn't the first time she's been asked to hold a plate of pie just for someone to smell it.

The pie smells great. But I'm not interested in that as much as I am in 'Kitty's' arm and its odor. What's really fascinating is 'Kitty's' smell. It's *different*.

I should explain that. I have a sensitive nose, and I pick up readily on everyone's personal odor. Actually, since every animal on Earth descends from common ancestors, there's an underlying basic odor that means, to me, "Earthling." After that, it's almost taxonomical. Mammals have a different characteristic odor than reptiles, which are similar to but different from the bird odors. And among the mammals, each order, genus and species has its own collective smell, and then each individual member of the species has his or her own personal odor. I've sometimes wondered if I could speciate rodents, or bats, or something, just by their odors.

So, in the newsroom, I pick up on Perry, on Ralph — he really needs to shower more frequently — and on Jimmy, on everyone; especially on Lois. I know her delicate scent by heart even when she tries to disguise it with perfume. But all of them have an underlying component that says, "human," "primate," "mammal," "vertebrate," "Earthling."

I don't have that. In fact, I'm missing the underlying "Earthling" odor — obviously. Humans don't have sensitive-enough noses to detect that, but dogs do. I think that's why they're standoffish around me at first. They recognize me as nonhuman. I'm an alien and I have an alien scent. I've smelled my own clothing (especially after Kryptonite exposure, when I've really sweated) and I can tell. I'm different. Not better or worse, just *different*.

And 'Kitty' is different, too. She's got a subtle odor (almost drowned out by the glorious apple pie scent) that I've never detected on any human before. But the strange thing is, her smell is still human, still Earthling. There's just a different edge to it. Not the way I'm different, but different in her own Earth way.

I finish my sniffing act and let 'Kitty' set down the piece of pie. She sets down the check with it and walks away. Lois and I don't speak for a few minutes, giving the pies their proper respect. And they deserve it. This apple pie comes the closest I've ever had to matching my mother's. While the normal pie is earthbound, hers are celestial. This pie is low Earth orbit — not quite in the heavenly realms, but almost there.

"Ooh," Lois says, chewing a small bit of her pie. She rolls it around her mouth, and I gaze in fascination as her tongue darts out to clean a small crumb off her lip.

"We're agreed that she's the third person in Jimmy's photos, right?" Lois says.

"I wouldn't swear to it in a court of law, but you're right, Lois," I agree. Everything fits. Her height, her figure, the shape of her arms, her association with the Pie-Maker and with Emerson Cod. Who else could it be?

"And I don't think her name is Kitty, either," Lois says, surprising me. But then, why should it? Lois is as good as I am about detecting lies — better, in fact, given that she doesn't have super-senses.

I smile at Lois. "I've got a plan," I say. "Do you still have those plastic baggies in your purse?"

Lois frowns at me. I think she's afraid that I'm going to start teasing her again about the sheer volume of stuff she crams into her purse. Last time it spilled I quizzed her on why, actually, she needed to have a tourniquet, extra batteries, a stain stick, a retractable Phillips-head screwdriver, three tubes of lip gloss, a DNA collection kit, a squirrel call (*why that, Lois?* — I'll never understand), a directory of Metropolis used-book stores, and a combination Mini-Maglite and pocketknife in her purse. She looked at me like I was crazy. "I use all this stuff," she informed me haughtily at the time.

"Yes, I have the baggies," she says quietly.

"OK, be ready, then," I tell her. I gesture to the waitress and she comes over.

"This is great pie, but I need a glass of water to go with it," I tell 'Kitty'.

"Right away," she promises. And in a minute she does bring a sparkling clean glass of water. I take it carefully by the top, where she hasn't touched it, and drain it in one swallow. I look carefully at Lois, and we both look at the counter. When the waitress turns away for a moment, Lois grabs the glass (again, by the top) and stashes it in a plastic baggie. Then she packs paper napkins (available in large quantities from the tabletop dispenser) around it, and puts the whole thing in a second plastic baggie.

We go back to work on our pies. I finish mine. Lois has about two-thirds of hers left on the plate, and she's flagging. I wordlessly ask permission and she nods. I take a bite. It's as good in its own way as the apple pie was, but incredibly rich. I can see why Lois could only eat a small amount. I take two more bites. Now only a third of the piece is left.

"Ready to go?" I ask Lois. She looks longingly at the remaining pie.

"If we have Kitty wrap it up, she'll wonder where the drinking glass went," I warn Lois. She grimaces, and casts one last longing look at the slice of pecan-chocolate chip pie.

Surprising me, Lois grabs the check without any prompting, and throws some bills on the table, leaving a generous tip. We stand up and say, "The pie was great!" to 'Kitty', ignoring her cheerful "Come again!" as we hurriedly exit. We're escaping, stealing a water glass with fingerprints on it.

Later that day, after some definitely illegal computer tricks by Jimmy, we have our answer.

"'Kitty' is actually Charlotte Charles," Lois says.

"Charlotte Charles," Jimmy muses. "The name sounds familiar."

It comes to me. "It should," I say. "She was in the news a whole lot last year."

"Why?" Jimmy asks. Lois stays silent, a growing look of comprehension on her face. It's coming back to her, too.

"Because she was murdered," I say.

"She didn't look very dead to me," Jimmy says.

"Me neither," Lois says. "But... didn't she... wasn't she..."

We all start researching. After about fifteen minutes, the story is clear. One Charlotte Charles, commonly known to friends as "Chuck," had gone off on a Pacific cruise. She had been smothered by the Plastic Bag Killer. Her body had been shipped home and she had been buried in her hometown of Coeur

d’Coeur. She had led a quiet life at home, and her Lonely Tourist cruise was the first and last adventure of her short life. Her fingerprints were only on file because they had been taken at her autopsy.

The whole thing had been a nine-days wonder, with the Planet and other news organizations making much of this young, pretty woman being brutally attacked and murdered where she thought she was most safe.

“This makes no sense,” Jimmy says plaintively.

“How did they substitute the fingerprints in the database?” Lois asks rhetorically. “I mean, that girl isn’t dead. So it couldn’t have been her at the autopsy.”

“She does look like the photos of Charlotte Charles in the Planet,” I say, confused myself.

Lois is excited. Faking a murder, or at least body substitution, promises to be a heck of a story. It’ll take some good, hard investigative work to unravel all the lies and evasions. It’s right up Lois’ alley. Of course, we’ll work together. With any luck, there’s a chance this might lead to a Kerth Award. It has that smell to it, speaking of smells.

“We’ve got a lot of work to do,” she says, echoing my thoughts.

“I still don’t understand,” Jimmy says plaintively.

“I don’t either — yet,” Lois says. “We’re going to figure this out.” She makes that last a positive statement, the same way she says the sun will rise in the east tomorrow. As ever, her intensity and determination entrance me. “There’s probably insurance money involved in it somewhere. Unless the Pie-Maker can raise the dead — “ her voice drips incredulity, “ — that girl is involved in some sort of scam.”

Jimmy goes off to get information from his motorcycle buddies, and Lois and I continue our research.

“Anything on the Pie-Maker?” Lois asks me.

“Well, I found a Facebook page of photos of him and his dog,” I say.

Lois comes over to look. “Why is he always dressed in that blazer?” she asks.

“Well, according to this classmate’s page, Ned was sent to the Longborough School for Boys at age ten. The school took a photo every year, and I guess Ned would have to wear the school uniform.” I point to some other photos on the web page. “See? The classmate is wearing the same blazer in his yearly photos too.”

“Makes sense,” Lois agrees, “but the classmate doesn’t have a dog. Why the dog?”

“Why not?” I ask. “Apparently — from what I’ve found — his mother had died and he was sent to live at the boarding school. The dog was probably his only friend.”

Lois thinks about that for a minute. “That explains why the dog is in every picture, I guess.”

“Yep. It’s kind of interesting, actually — the dog looks the same in every picture. You can see Ned growing up in every photo, but the dog — no change.”

Lois narrows her eyes. “Is that unusual?” At my questioning look she defends herself. “Clark, you’re the one who grew up on a farm! Not me! My parents didn’t want any dogs or any pets!” She looks away. I’m not sure if she officially wants me to hear her next comment or not. “Heck, they couldn’t handle raising kids.” The restrained sadness in her voice is heartrending.

I decide to say nothing, but reach over and touch her arm gently, just to show that I heard her and I care. Then, carefully answering the question that was asked out loud, I say, “Maybe. Ned was only at the Longborough School for eight years. If the dog was young when he came there, say one or two, then it would only be nine or ten by the time Ned left. Most Golden Retrievers do live to about that age.”

“But?” Lois asks, knowing me well enough to know there’s something I’m not saying.

“It’s just unusual that the dog isn’t graying, that’s all,” I say. It’s one of those nagging little details. Mom and Dad and I had plenty of farm dogs, and they all got gray around the muzzle as they got older. But, of course, those were working dogs, and not dogs living as a pampered pooch at an exclusive boarding school. Maybe living there was the equivalent of a spa for Ned’s dog. I wonder how Ned had gotten to keep his dog there anyway. Maybe losing his mother had led the authorities to allow it.

I get a little catch in my breath when I think of Ned losing his mother. I’d lost my first mother — my biological mother. Finding that out, although it was sad news, was liberating as well. I’d never known where I’d come from, and I’d wondered for years if I was a genetic experiment, or some sort of cyborg. When the globe from my spaceship told me that I was from Krypton and the planet was destroyed, my race dead, it was painful. But at least then I knew. As I’d told Lois once, “It’s the not knowing that kills you.”

“How are you coming on Charlotte Charles?” I ask Lois.

“Not a lot to find,” she says, sitting on the corner of my desk. My eyes stray down to her legs — she’s wearing a short skirt today. She’s trying to kill me and it’s working. I determinedly haul my gaze up to her face. She has a half-smile on her face that tells me she knows exactly what she’s doing to me. It’s part of the game we play. But nothing is ever said. There’s plausible deniability in everything we say and do. That’s the whole point of flirting, isn’t it?

Some days that’s fun, and other days it’s torture. I’m not sure what today is. It keeps on changing.

“Her mother died in childbirth —”

Hmm... we have a plethora of mothers dying young here, I think. Charlotte’s mother in childbirth, my biological mother on Krypton when I was a few months old, and Ned’s mother when he was ten. I wonder if it’s significant. Of course I can’t tell Lois about my Kryptonian mother. So the apparent series of three is down to just a coincidental two. Not worth talking about.

“— and her father died when she was nine.” Lois gets down from my desk and I follow her over back to hers. Something about the date on the screen nags at me.

“Uh...” I mumble. Then it comes to me and I tell it to Lois. “Ned’s mother and Charlotte’s father died on the same day.”

Lois raises her eyebrows. “I wonder if that’s important.” She thinks about it for a minute, then puts it aside, just like me. It might call for further research. We’ll keep it in mind. Lois goes on. “Charlotte moved in with her Aunts Lily and Vivian, who were made her legal guardians.”

“Go on,” I say. I know Lois as well as she knows me. And just like her, I know when my partner has something else to say.

Lois giggles. “Did you know that Charlotte’s aunts were once synchronized swimmers who toured the country? Their act was called the Darling Mermaid Darlings.” Her monitor displays a carnival-type poster with cartoonish renderings of some mermaid-y looking women.

“Synchronized swimming?” I laugh. “I can’t believe that’s an Olympic sport.”

Lois gets mad. “Clark, you don’t know anything about it!” she huffs. “It’s a lot harder than you think.”

“Yeah?” I say challengingly.

“Yeah. For one, you’re not allowed to touch the bottom of the pool,” Lois says challengingly. “And second, you have to hold your breath for up to three minutes at a time.”

That would be hard for a human. No problem for me, of course. “But... I have a hard time with the costumes...” I decide to not push Lois on this one. She’s right — I know absolutely nothing about synchronized swimming except from what I’ve seen on TV. “The swimsuits...” I trail off.

"It's all part of the look," Lois says. "And I should ask Superman..."

"What?" Now she's got me really worried. Why would she ask Superman anything about synchronized swimming?

"Well, you know, those swimmers have to gel their hair so it stays in its style all the time they're swimming. I've always wondered if Superman uses hair gel — even though he flies, he never has a hair out of place."

Danger, danger! If Lois starts thinking on this topic....

"You got me," I say, forcing myself to remain casual. "But, Lois, back to topic here..." That's the best way to distract her. Get back to the story.

"Oh, yeah," Lois says. "So Charlotte Charles grew up with her maiden aunts in Coeur d'Coeur and basically had an unremarkable life until she was murdered on her Pacific cruise." Her eyes narrow. "Or until she wasn't murdered and worked out whatever her scam is."

"Do you have any information about the insurance?" I ask.

Lois frowns. "Yes."

"Why the frown?" I tease her.

"Because it doesn't fit," Lois says. "There were only a few thousand dollars of life insurance on Charlotte Charles. Enough for a modest funeral and the expenses of transporting her body back from the Pacific."

"I thought the cruise ship would have covered that."

"Well, they didn't." Lois looks pensive. "Maybe it's the cruise line that's running the scam."

I hope not. Then it'll be a more difficult investigation. Oh well — I never know where investigating will lead us. We've found some crazy things just by looking where others didn't. You just have to do the work.

"We need to get the autopsy records," I say. We'll probably have to go back and bother Dr. Richardson again. We always try to go to primary sources if possible. The computer is great for basic research, no question, but I never forget that 90% of the stuff on the Internet is crap.

"Yeah, that's next," Lois agrees.

We're interrupted by Jimmy coming back in. His biker attire causes some raised eyebrows in the newsroom but not many. By now, most everyone knows about Jimmy's hobbies, thanks to his habit of incessantly chatting about them with everyone he meets.

"I got information!" he says as he greets us. "Jordan was in a couple other motorcycle groups too. And one of those groups, well, you might really call it a gang."

It's getting close to twilight. Little kids are probably trick-or-treating right now. Of course, Lois and I are in Suicide Slum, where no one trick-or-treats, and there are no little kids here. There are just people of lesser calendar age. You grow up fast in Suicide Slum.

Jimmy had given us a name, that led to another name and place, which led to another. Somewhere in the trail of names and places, Lois and I dropped Lois' Jeep back at her apartment and changed our clothes to look, well, let's call it just a little less professional. It's unseasonably warm for Halloween and there's no need for coats or jackets. That's good for me and my voyeuristic impulses, because now Lois looks, let's just say, downright trashy.

I love it.

But right now I'm getting a little nervous. The last source gave us this address we're headed to, and my danger radar is pinging. I scan the area but these old crumbling buildings are only being kept from collapse by their multiple coats of lead-based paint.

Lois moves slightly ahead of me and I lose my train of thought. God, she's beautiful. Even when she dresses trashy. Especially when she dresses trashy. I give up my futile scanning

of the abandoned-looking warehouse we're moving to, and just drink in the sight of her figure. She walks with a particular bounce that's the essence of Lois. The way her hips sway, the peculiar gait she's forced to adopt due to the presence of her six-inch heels...

I move up beside her and take her arm. She doesn't pull it away, a sign that she's a little more nervous than she's letting on. Lois isn't very touchy-feely. It's only in the last few months that I've dared to brush her arm, to put my hand in the small of her back. Should I feel hopeful that lately, she's done much more allowing than pulling away?

I extend my hearing. There's the usual susurrus of background noise from a great city like Metropolis. I carefully filter it out. But the big distraction is right next to me — Lois, her careful breathing, her leather skirt swishing slightly against her thighs with each step, her slightly-faster-than-normal heartbeat. I tune into her heartbeat with the ease of long familiarity, feeling comforted by its steady count. For a moment, I relax my alertness and just luxuriate in Lois.

Of course that's the minute that the gunshots come. What seems like a fusillade cracks out of the darkness ahead. A few bullets ricochet off my chest before I belatedly slip into quick-time. The world takes on a reddish tinge from the light waves dopplering down, but I'm used to that. I'm deep enough into quick-time that the bullets appear to be moving only a few millimeters per second — plenty of time for me to change into the Suit and grab them from midair. I take a quick look back at Lois — she's frozen in mid-step, a surprised expression just beginning to form on her face.

I groan inwardly. This isn't how I wanted to tell the secret to Lois. I've made mental scenarios too numerous to count, various ways of breaking the news to her, starting with the unadorned "Lois, I'm Superman," and working up to elaborate pre-revelation dinners with chocolate desserts.

But there's no way I can hide what's just happened here. Lois will see me disappear (from her point of view) and Superman appear. It's obvious. I'm already dreading her reaction. Anger will probably be the least of it. I know she'll feel hurt. The whole lack of trust question will come up. I've spent a long time earning her trust, and she's going to interpret this revelation as a big fat vote of "No confidence" in her own trust. It'll be devastating. What if she never wants anything to do with me again?

I sigh, and go about the business of finding out who ambushed us and why. There are six thugs in the warehouse, all very well armed. I wrest their guns from them, flattening the weapons into steel strips which I use as impromptu restraints. I'll have to remember to snap the steel when the police come — I've been politely "spoken to" before, about how time-consuming it is to hacksaw bent guns off of bad guys' wrists.

I'm still in quick-time and I carefully flick a finger against each thug's head. It's taken me some time to get good at knocking people out, since my usual mission is to prevent harm, not cause it. But these men might have seen Clark Kent and Lois Lane (or at least two figures, a man and a woman) enter the warehouse, and now Superman is here. I'd rather not have them witness the conversation I'm going to have to have with Lois. Even if I remove her from the premises right away, I'm sure Lois will have something to say to me first. It's just better if these guys are unconscious for that part.

I come up about half-way out of quick-time, just to make sure that the men are taken care of. I see them all collapse into unconsciousness, and I suppress a tinge of guilt.

I scan the area, and almost curse out loud at the lead paint which obscures my vision. I'm especially touchy right now because I'm dreading the Lois talk. Usually I don't get this mad about regular crime-fighting. Restraining myself from saying more bad words, I start the tedious room-by-room investigation.

It pays off immediately when I see several small cameras. I fry each one with a blast of heat vision, but I'm worried. Where were those cameras sending their feed? I slow down the world again, move faster. Those cameras caught Clark Kent spinning into the Superman costume. Now it's imperative that I find out more.

The warehouse has been subdivided into a warren of tiny rooms. The whole building is ramshackle and dilapidated, which makes the presence of thugs and webcams even more perplexing. I go room-to-room, finding nothing but rat's nests and urban detritus in most. I fry more cameras as I go, hitting them before (hopefully) I enter their field of vision.

Then, toward the back of the warehouse, I hit the jackpot. It's a meth lab. I crack the door and I can tell, not only by the chemistry setup, but by the fumes. I take a deep breath and blow, forcing the toxic fumes back into the lab and breaking a reinforced window at the other end of the building. I walk through quickly and find a man, frozen (to my point of view) like other humans when I'm this deep in quick-time. His features are obscured by a breathing apparatus.

I casually take some of the lab fittings and mold them into restraints. I carry the man to where I've dumped the other thugs and flick him into unconsciousness too. Then I head back to the meth lab, turn off all the heat sources, and use my freezing breath on it. I hear glass cracking from the sudden temperature change, and since I'm deep in quick-time, I can actually see the cracks developing and the flasks shattering. It's kind of fascinating, really, to see that.

Once I'm sure the meth lab is secured, I check the rooms off to either side. Jackpot again. There's a generic cubicle with a computer and associated paraphernalia. With any luck at all, the cameras are feeding here, and with even greater luck, they're not feeding anywhere else. I turn off the computer and grab the hard drive. The criminals will argue that this violates their Fourth Amendment rights against illegal search and seizure, but I'm not a policeman. I'm a private citizen who has seen a crime committed, and the rules are different.

I take a minute to send mental thanks to Lois (I can't stop thinking about her) for making sure that I *am* a citizen. Superman, I mean. Clark Kent of course has a birth certificate (thanks to my parents' machinations), and is assumed to have been born within the territorial borders of United States, thereby automatically becoming a citizen.

When Superman first made his debut, it was Lois and Perry who sparked a campaign by the Daily Planet to give honorary citizenship to him. I'll always be grateful to them for turning the tide of public opinion from apprehension and fear to cautious acceptance, that later turned into pride and almost a sense of ownership. I may be an alien, but I'm *our* alien, darn it — that's the feeling in Metropolis these days. There's a kind of pride in it. Perry and Lois harnessed that and got the President to ask Congress to pass an act granting me citizenship.

Then, of course, other nations got into the act, and Superman graciously acknowledged that he was here to help all the countries of Earth. For a while, there was almost a bidding war for Superman's services with citizenship and passports granted galore, before it became obvious that Superman was based in Metropolis.

I shake my head, knowing that I'm distracting myself to put off the moment when I have to go back to Lois and explain things. I've unconsciously come up out of super-speed, too, and I'm moving not much faster than Clark Kent would — i.e., regular human speed. I sigh again and spin the hard drive to safety with my civilian clothing — I'll pull it out later. I hope that I can find and delete any evidence of my transformation from one identity to another. If I can do that, then I can have Jimmy make a copy of the data and then I'll turn the hard drive over to the

police.

I make one last run through all the rooms, conscientiously speeding up to do so. All is well. I can't put it off any longer. It's probably been sixty seconds since I left Lois and let my secret out. As I head back to her, I slip back into normal time, cravenly wanting to delay the Lois-volcano eruption for a few more seconds. I consider my actions — I have to call the police. Should I get Lois out of here before they come, or should I take my medicine and let her stay, assuming that she'll be able to act well enough that she won't betray me? I know she won't tell my secret deliberately — I've come to know her that well. But the knowledge is new and disconcerting — she might stumble. God knows I've made enough slips of the tongue on my own. It's only been luck, and the fact that Clark Kent is a supremely boring and nerdy guy, that's gotten me over those rough patches.

I decide to let her stay. Taking her away because I'm afraid of what she might slip would be an even worse violation of her trust. Maybe I'll delay calling the police, though, until she gets the initial explosion out of her system.

Feeling obscurely comforted at having made a decision, even such a one as this, I speed up again slightly and come to the entrance room where Lois and I were ambushed. I think about calling her but decide not to — if I'm quiet, maybe she will be, too. Then I see her and all my plans fly out of my head. Lois lies still, crumpled, on the floor.

I fly to her so fast that the air ionizes around me. Oh God Oh God Oh God what to do? I turn her over. Her eyes are wide and unseeing. She's not breathing.

I take a deep breath. Later I will thank those thorough Red Cross instructors who taught Clark Kent the basics, who knew that their pupils would be panicked when the time came to save a life. "A, B, C," they had patiently intoned. "Airway, Breathing, Circulation."

I quickly open Lois' mouth and do an oral sweep. No foreign body, nothing blocking her airway. Tilting her head back, I press her lips to mine and breathe into her mouth. Her chest rises. I go to her chest to start CPR. It's then that I see the blood.

I inhale sharply and scan with my deep vision. A bullet has penetrated her aorta. She's bled out into her chest, her delicate lungs crushed by the hammering spray of high-pressure blood leaving the heart. As I stare in horror, her laboring heart makes a few last despairing fibrillating beats, and trails off into eternal stillness.

I grow frantic. I breathe for her, then perform chest compressions. I can hardly keep myself from doing it at super-speed. Frothy blood bubbles from her nose and mouth. I move frantically, trying to keep blood circulating, keep the brain oxygenated. I feel a delicate rib break under my hands. I stop — I'm only hurting her more.

I cry out and scoop her into my arms. As I rise and punch my way through the ceiling, I hear an intruder re-tracing my and Lois' footsteps, entering the warehouse. It's Emerson Cod, the private investigator whose presence at Jordan Major's autopsy started this whole thing. I ignore him and fly straight up.

Lois gives out a forlorn sigh as I press her close to me. It's her last breath. I'm going to take her to the hospital but I stop in midair. The unblinking stars above me bear witness to what I know in my heart already — it's futile. Lois is dead.

I scream a great howl of loss. Why, oh why, didn't I check to see what became of the bullets that ricocheted off me? No, I caught all the other bullets and assumed everything was fine. Why didn't I go back to Lois sooner? No, I had to delay, acting the coward, not wanting to face Lois and admit my secret. Why did I assume, that in my presence, she was safe? It's the bitterest irony of all, that my presence, who and what I am, is what killed her.

I hang in the sky, clutching her to my chest, as tears stream

down my face. I pay no attention to altitude or position. I only feel the warmth slowly disappear from her slight body. I hear great choking sobs coming from someone and realize it's me.

I slowly descend. I fly to my apartment. I set her on the bed and arrange her carefully. I close her unseeing eyes. I ignore the great splash of blood on the front of my Suit. I sit in the chair and hold her hand. I remain there, unseeing, for a long time.

The ringing telephone breaks me out of my reverie. It's Perry. I don't hear what he says — the words are there but they make no sense to me, no sense at all. I let the answering machine pick up. I don't care.

But the morning sun streaming in through the window wakens me from my dark place. Slowly, reluctantly, I come back, at least part of the way. Perry will have to know, Jimmy too, the rest of the Daily Planet. Henderson will want a report. He'll be shocked and dismayed, and he won't be able to hide it, for once, under his usual mask of cynicism.

I start to weep again, at the tasks ahead of me. I can't do it. With Lois, I could do anything. I could be a Superman. Without her, I can't even make it out of my apartment.

Unwillingly, my mind begins working again, and I try to think of how, and what, exactly, I am going to tell Perry about this. Losing Lois will kill him too, or at least mortally wound him. I know it.

I turn my thoughts away from Perry and think of Henderson. It's a little easier, to think of telling him. I wonder what he will say. I wonder if Dr. Richardson will do Lois' autopsy.

And that makes me think of our investigation. Suddenly I have a reason. I want to finish our investigation. It's the last thing I can do for Lois. As my sluggish brain begins to trudge once more, I make a promise to myself that I will finish this. I will find out everything. It's what I owe to Lois.

Once it's done, Superman will retire. A Superman so uncaring and thoughtless can never work again, in Metropolis or elsewhere. He doesn't deserve to have people thanking him. They wouldn't if they knew what he did, how he failed his best friend when she needed him most.

I slowly remove my bloodstained Suit. I look down at the large splotch of red on my chest. It soaked through. I force myself to take a shower, put on a new Suit, and dress as Clark Kent over that. I knot my tie, thinking of all the times Lois pretended to be blinded by the garish patterns. Then I stop thinking of that. If I do, I will weep again.

I call a Planet number I know Perry won't answer, and leave a message on his voice mail. "Perry? Clark here. Lois and I are on a story. I'll check in later." I manage to keep the desolation from my voice.

I take Lois' hand. Then I sigh, and let it go. I head to the door. The sight of her body lying in the sunbeam makes me stop, though. After a minute, I realize the sun makes the top of the bed well-heated. That could be a problem. I go by the bed and take a breath, exhaling over Lois. She's frozen now, and I'm reminded of the fairy tale where Snow White is kept in a glass casket until her Prince comes.

But there will be no Prince to come and take the poisoned apple from Lois' mouth, to wake her from her deadly sleep. I have failed her.

The last thing I can do is finish what we started. That is my goal today. As I step out the door, I put on my Clark Kent mask. It's the day after Halloween. Everyone else has taken off their costume. I put mine back on.

I go to the putatively abandoned warehouse. The thugs have all been removed from where I left them. I see tire tracks that belong to MPD panda cars, so the thugs were probably collected by the police.

I check at the local precinct — my suspicion is correct. Six

men, booked on various charges of drug dealing, controlled substance manufacture, possessing weapons without permits, etc., etc., etc. I waste several hours talking with the cops and reading the police reports. I tell the cops about Jordan Major and they pull up his autopsy report. Dr. Richardson, of course, found the bullet. The cops know the perps — they're frequent offenders. The cops know the story too, and also know that a lot of it will never come out in court. They're friends enough with Henderson that they tell it to me, off the record.

Jordan Major was a naïve kid from a rich family who started running with motorcycle gangs. The Lab Rats were fine, but Jordan, perhaps impelled by a self-destructive impulse, found seedier and seedier gangs. Before long, he was running with a "bad element," as my mother might have said, and had been roped into the drug world. He'd either lost his nerve, or tried to get out openly. Whichever, he'd found out too late that some things are easier to get into than to get out of. Not trusting Jordan's promises, the gang had ensured his silence by murdering him. Whoever fired the actual bullet, whoever arranged the hit and run to cover up the evidence, wasn't known. It didn't matter. They hadn't done a very good job. Any halfway competent examiner would have found the bullet, and Dr. Richardson is more than competent.

The police grumble a bit to me, because they know I'm a Superman contact. They bitch about how Superman got the perps ready for them, but that he didn't stick around to get them out of their impromptu flattened-gun handcuffs. The cops had to send down to Central to get the special metal saw. I laugh hollowly along with the men in blue, all the while thinking of how this — again! — proves how careless I am.

As I leave, more than one officer asks about Lois. I tell them that she's working on another lead, and they buy the story. As ever, I'm impressed by how many people Lois knows, how many contacts she has, and how much they all admire her. Then, for the millionth time, my mind seizes up in a jolt and I realize she's dead. And, for the million-and-first time, I put it out of my head so that I can make it through today.

I go to the Planet, pulling my Clark Kent mask even tighter over my face. I sigh in relief when I see that Perry is out of his office, dealing with suits upstairs, according to the gossip. I can't face him right now. He'll ask about Lois and I can't think about that.

I got to Jimmy and ask him for everything he has on Jordan Major.

"Where's Lois?" he asks, instead of leaping to do my bidding.

"She's busy," I say forbiddingly.

"Is she OK?" he asks slowly. Maybe my Clark Kent mask isn't as on as tight as it should be.

"Fine." I say it shortly, trying to put a disapproving tone in my voice. Lois can — she could do it with no trouble at all. Clark is more mild-mannered.

Jimmy gets the message, though, and brings me his file. I flip through it. One picture catches my eye.

"Jimmy, when did you take this?" I ask.

He comes over to look. "Oh, that was the first picture I took, when I first came in to identify Jordan," he says.

"And he was stiff?" The picture shows Jordan's body, but the face is obscured by his arms being drawn up and over his head.

"Yeah. The morgue attendant had a real hard time getting him on and off the table. With his arms like that, he was too long."

So rigor mortis had set in when Jimmy took this picture. But something niggles at the back of my brain. Then it comes to me. In the photos I saw at the precinct, where the cops had pulled the autopsy report from the computer, Jordan's arms were folded across his chest. Maybe the coroner had done that, but that seemed odd. Part of the protocol is to take a full body photo

before doing anything else. And Dr. Richardson seems like a “by-the-book” kind of guy.

I head to the coroner’s office. The sunlight has disappeared under gray cloudy skies, matching my mood.

I check in with Dr. Richardson and ask to see Jordan’s autopsy report. By now Dr. R. has heard from the cops and is aware that I’m investigating. I drop Henderson’s name again, and Dr. R. stares at me. After a minute, he lets me see the report. I have a feeling, and I’m hoping this is the case, that he let me have it on my own merits this time, not because I’m friends with Henderson.

I look through the file carefully. Dr. Richardson is indeed a “by-the-book” — and very thorough — man, and there is indeed a pre-autopsy photo of Jordan. In this photo, Jordan’s arms are crossed on top of his chest.

“Doctor?” I ask.

“Yes?”

“Was there rigor at the time this picture was taken?”

The doctor frowns. “Yes, there was,” he said. “I remember it because you had just been in with your partner — by the way, where is your partner?”

“She’s working on another lead,” I say evasively.

He gazes at me for a minute, then goes on. “You had given me that tip and I wanted to start the autopsy, but I was forced to wait until the rigor had passed.”

“How long did that take?”

He ruffles through the pages of the report. “I took measurements every five minutes. The rigor departed from the feet and legs first and the arms last. You’ll see it right here...” He points to a page.

I stare at the page, unseeing. Jimmy had found Jordan, with Jordan’s arms over his head, in rigor mortis. The doctor had found Jordan, with Jordan’s arms crossed over his chest, also in rigor mortis. The two states were incompatible. Once rigor was broken, the body (or the limb in which the rigor was broken) would remain limp and flaccid. He couldn’t have rigor with his arms in both positions. It was impossible.

That reminds me of something else impossible.

“Doctor, can I please see the autopsy report for a Charlotte Charles?”

I’ve got him trained now, or maybe he figures I’m on to something again and that I’ll give him another tip. Or maybe that it’s a matter of public record, and if he makes me go through channels it’ll just delay me and I’ll still get the information. Whatever his reasons, I’m quickly thumbing through the report on Ms Charles.

I stare at her photo. It’s definitely the brunette I saw at the Pie Hole Restaurant. I flip the page and look at her fingerprints. Regular people would have to have the card in front of them to compare, but I remember seeing the prints that we lifted from the water glass on Jimmy’s computer monitor as he (illegally) ran them through the national fingerprint database.

The prints are the same. The girl in the restaurant was Charlotte Charles, and she was definitely alive. But the girl in this report — in this *autopsy* report — was Charlotte Charles too, and she was dead. Dead six months before I saw her in the Pie Hole.

I hand the report back to Dr. Richardson and go outside. This makes no sense. Night is beginning to fall and Dr. Richardson closes up his office — he’s stayed late for me. I decide that more investigation is needed and head to the funeral home where Charlotte Charles’ remains were taken after her autopsy.

The funeral home is closed — no surprise at this late hour. I go around to the back and break in. A few minutes searching and I’m reading the files. Charlotte Charles was sent to the Coeur d’Coeur Cemetery and buried in Plot #4783.

I won’t give up now so I fly to the cemetery. I don’t need to

break in here to find the plot map. It’s only a few seconds before I land quietly at Plot #4783. I adjust my vision to see through the dirt, through the coffin, through the casket lining.

The coffin is empty.

The world almost spins around me and I remind myself to be thorough. I look again, confirm the absence of a cadaver in what should be Charlotte Charles’ funeral plot. I take a cursory scan for witnesses — there are none — and I lift off, steadying at about fifty to seventy-five feet above ground. I can easily scan the entire cemetery. From above, it’s obvious which plots have been opened recently — the digging leaves a scar on the soil for quite some time. Methodically, carefully, I go to each plot that has been opened in the past twelve months. I scan each body. Half are men, automatically ruled out. Of the women, none are Charlotte Charles — all are too old, too short, too tall.

After a minute of considering this, I scan every grave in the cemetery, regardless of when the plot was opened. It doesn’t take me long and the evidence is incontrovertible.

Charlotte Charles is not buried in this cemetery. But she is waiting tables at the Pie Hole.

And just then I remember a conversation, where, with Charlotte Charles watching, Emerson Cod spoke to the Pie-Maker:

“You and Dead Girl take care of business while I investigate Jordan Major.”

A crazy thread of hope trickles through my gloom, like a beam of sunlight piercing through gray clouds. I’m hoping that Lois’s intuition was on target once again, that her unwarranted leap to a conclusion was correct again. Maybe she was really right when she said, in the Planet newsroom, “This is some sort of scam. There’s probably insurance money in it somewhere.”

“Or what?” Jimmy had asked.

“Or else,” Lois had said with sarcastic incredulity, “this Pie-Maker can raise the dead.”

The smells of baking pies are just as mouth-watering as they were on my first visit to the Pie Hole. I don’t care. I’m not in the mood for pie right now.

The restaurant is empty, except for the three people who have been persistently present throughout this whole strange episode. I wonder how Ned Smith makes a living, when it seems that no one ever comes to buy pie. Of course, I’ve only been here twice, and each time has been off-peak. Probably not many people are buying pie at nine p.m. In fact, I’m wondering why the Pie Hole isn’t closed by now. But it’s still open, so I walk in. Good. This will save me from having to track down the Pie-Maker.

It seems as if the three of them — Ned, Charlotte Charles, and Emerson Cod, the private investigator — have been having a little *tete-a-tete*. That’s probably why they forgot to close up. And it’s probably why, when I come in, the Pie-Maker stands up and says, “We’re closed.”

I walk away so he’s forced to come farther from the other two in the booth. “Clark Kent, Daily Planet,” I say quietly, so the others don’t hear, flashing my press pass at him. I catch the fleeting look of panic that crosses his face. “May I speak to you in private?”

He looks reluctant, but agrees. As he leads me behind the counter and into the kitchen in back, I see Charlotte Charles locking the front door. No more interruptions. Good.

The Pie-Maker is tall and lean, taller than I am. His hair is slightly ruffled, and I get the impression that he runs his hands through it on a regular basis. He slouches slightly, and I remember the constant chiding I got from my mother: “For Heaven’s sake, Clark, stand up straight!” Good advice, which I took to heart, until I needed to differentiate between Clark Kent and Superman.

I tear my mind away from pointless reminiscence and move

aggressively into Ned's personal space. He flinches back a little, until he's backed up against the counter. He doesn't seem like a very confrontational guy. I'm not either, but without Lois, things are different.

"I'm here to investigate your waitress, Kitty," I say. "Or should I call her *Charlotte Charles*?"

Definite panic crosses his face and I know I'm right. He tries to compose himself. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that your friend out there is dead."

He essays a hollow laugh. "She's not dead. You can see that! A dead person wouldn't be walking around." He's talking too much. Everything in his voice, his posture, his attitude, tells me he's lying.

"No, I think she is," I say. Time for what's usually Lois' specialty — reaching. She's better at it. But I'll try anything. "How did you do it? How did you raise her from the dead?"

Bingo! A hit. Now his face shows sheer horror. He's speechless. "Uh...um..."

I move yet closer and Ned is definitely cringing back now. "I don't care how you did it," I say, even though, underneath, I'm really interested. But the interest is buried in grief and the thin thread of hope. "I want you to bring back my partner."

He looks me straight in the eye. He's fighting off the panic. He squares his shoulders. He comes to some sort of internal decision.

"No," he says.

There's a ringing noise in my ears. The world whirls. Before I know it, I have him by the throat, pressed up against a wall.

"You can't say no," I hiss at him. I'm grinding him into the wall. It's so easy it almost scares me. But I don't care. If this is a chance for Lois....

He's grabbing at my hands, trying to get them off his throat. I loosen my grip a little and he takes a gasping breath. He tries to push me away but I'm angry now. I shake him just a little bit and his eyes wobble in their sockets. "You have to!" I cry out. The Pie-Maker stubbornly shakes his head.

"What's going on here?" the burly P.I., Emerson Cod, comes up and tries to hit me. I adjust my grip so that I'm holding the Pie-Maker with one hand and casually swat him away. He goes crashing down and hits his head on the far wall, unconscious. I don't care.

My breathing is fast and labored. I'm staring the Pie-Maker in the face. "You have to bring her back. You have to." He's squirming. Tears are in his eyes as he claws at my hand. He tries kicking me but it doesn't hurt me. "Bring her back!" I demand.

A rolling pin crashes over my head and I see the wooden pieces skitter over the floor. I turn halfway, ready to swat away another attacker. But my fury fades at the brunette who is holding the other half of the rolling pin, ready to hit me again. She's so much like Lois I almost cry. I stop my swing and suddenly I realize what I'm doing.

I let go of the Pie-Maker and step back. "I'm sorry," I say quietly. The Pie-Maker is gasping for breath and gives me a fearful look. He's halfway fallen to his knees. To my surprise, Charlotte hasn't gone to him, isn't helping him up. She stays on the other side of me, watching me warily.

I step away from Ned, away from Charlotte Charles. The Pie-Maker probably doesn't realize it yet, but when he told me, "No" he was tacitly admitting that he did have the power. I clench my fists. So close, and yet so far.

"It's... I love her so much..." And now the tears start. I find myself sobbing, great choking gasps. "I can't live without her..." I'm kneeling on the floor, hunched over, my head in my hands. In the background, I see Charlotte going over to Emerson Cod, who has regained consciousness. She helps him sit up.

"I can't," the Pie-Maker says. There's infinite sadness in his tone. I catch him looking over at Charlotte.

I take a few last sniffles. "Why not?" I ask him dully.

He sighs. He looks over at Charlotte Charles and Emerson Cod. They stare back and Charlotte nods. The way they communicate is so much like the way Lois and I...used to.

"Do you want her back?" the Pie-Maker asks. Foolish question. Of course I do. "Even if you can only have her for sixty seconds?"

I don't understand. I look at Charlotte Charles and my confusion must be evident. The Pie-Maker moves towards me and gently helps me up. "Here, have a piece of pie," he says. I move like an automaton back to the counter where he cuts me a slice of apple pie. It sits on the plate. I stare at it.

Emerson Cod and Charlotte Charles have flanked the Pie-Maker, and the three of them stand facing me as I sit at the counter. Then Charlotte nods again and the Pie-Maker comes and sits next to me.

"This is off the record, right?" Emerson Cod breaks in. He's obviously the tough one of the partnership.

"Right," I agree quietly.

The Pie-Maker sighs. I get a sudden sympathy. Talking about this must be as hard for him as revealing my secret is to me. I look away from him and take a bite of pie. He sighs again and begins to talk.

"Yes." He says it simply. "I can bring your partner back."

Tears clog my throat again. "Then why won't you?"

He looks me in the eye. "Because it would be murder."

I'm confused. "I don't understand."

He sighs again. "Because these are the rules of my gift. I can bring someone back for sixty seconds. After that, if they want to keep on living, someone else has to die in their place."

Oh.

I look at Charlotte Charles again. She correctly interprets my glance. "When Ned brought me back, I didn't know it. But the funeral director died instead of me." There's a touch of sadness in her voice. "I'm living his life, not my own."

Oh.

I can't kill someone. I can't... I won't... then it comes to me. It's so obvious. "Take me."

Surprise from all three onlookers.

"Without her, I'm a dead man walking." Clichéd but true.

Even after only twenty-four hours, I know that. How do I explain to them, that, without Lois, there's no sun, just perpetual gray? That I won't see her in Mad Dog mode anymore, terrorizing the newsroom and even scaring Perry? That I can't carry the load without her? "I love her."

Silence. The three look at each other. Then Charlotte gives another little nod to the Pie-Maker.

"It might not be you," he warns.

"What?" I ask.

"It's a random proximity thing," he says defensively, looking embarrassed.

Emerson Cod looks extremely irritated when the Pie-Maker says that. "Yeah, and I don't want to be anywhere in proximity," he mutters.

My investigative brain slowly gets back online. "You raise someone...and someone else has to die."

"Right."

"What radius — how far away do other people have to be, to be at risk?"

"I don't know," the Pie-Maker says. "I've only done it twice. Both times, the other person was not too far away."

Twice? Charlotte Charles was obviously one time.

The Pie-Maker sees me pondering this and takes pity on me. "That's how I found out I had this gift," he says, and the bitterness in his tone reminds me of how I've felt about my own abilities at times. "The first time it was my mother." A sad glance passes between him and Charlotte. "Charlotte's father paid for

her.”

Oh.

I stare into space. I'm sad for her, but I'm still going to do this. “We'll go into the New Troy National Forest,” I say. “If we get deep into the woods, at this time of year, there won't be anyone within miles.” I swallow. “If it's a random proximity thing — wait, you aren't at risk, are you?”

The Pie-Maker winces. “I don't think so.”

“OK, if we're out in the NTNF, then if I'm the only one in proximity, I should be the one.”

The Pie-Maker looks unhappy but nods.

I take a bite of pie. I suddenly realize how good it tastes. It's the right decision. Contentment spreads through me. Everything is clear now. I start to make plans.

“OK, this is how it's going to go...”

It's close to midnight, and Ned and I are in Lois' Jeep, heading to the deepest part of the New Troy National Forest. Lois's body sits in the back seat, belted in. Her presence (or, more accurately, her lack of presence) puts a real damper on the conversation.

The Pie-Maker is lucky that I changed her out of her blood-stained clothes. The bullet fell out when I did. I wonder idly if that would have made a difference, if the bullet had stayed in. There's no telling now. Probably it's good that it's out.

I think about all I've done in the last two hours. Writing a last letter to Perry and Jimmy. Retrieving the hard drive and leaving a note for Jimmy asking him to get whatever data he can or give the hard drive to Henderson. Maybe he can find out more about the drug dealers from the information on the disk. Making sure my papers are all up to date. I never thought the Planet's life insurance benefit would ever actually pay off. Silly me. I should know that nothing in life is certain. Fortunately, a few months ago Perry was on an estate-planning kick, and Lois and I got involved. All my serious assets (what little they are) are in a living trust, and will pass to my parents without probate.

My parents. That was tough. I flew to Smallville. I was going to tell them everything, but in the end, I couldn't. After trying and failing, I just hugged them and told them I loved them. Then I said goodbye. I know my mother is worried — she called after me when I left. I didn't answer.

I wrote a letter explaining everything to them. It's in the pile of papers on my table in my apartment. I'm counting on Lois to get it to my parents. I hope they understand that I have to atone for my carelessness, my mistake that cost Lois her life. I hope they can forgive Lois. I hope they can forgive me, because I can't forgive myself.

I look over at the Pie-Maker. His heart rate and breathing are steadily climbing, and for a minute I take a look from his point of view. He's alone with a maniac and a corpse, headed into trackless forest, in the dead of night. It's the stuff horror movies are made from.

I don't know if he has to be happy, or meditate, or whatever, for this to work, so I essay some conversation to smooth the waters.

“You'll be fine, you know,” I offer.

He stares at me, surprised that I'd speak now. We've been traveling in silence for an hour now.

“I'll leave the keys in the Jeep. Lois can drive home.” A thought. “Please, let Lois take care of my body. She'll figure out something.” Another thought. “I'll leave a note for her telling her how important it is that you're not officially involved.”

The Pie-Maker shrugs. I get the impression that he thinks, since I'm from the Daily Planet, that his secret will be published on the front page tomorrow. How can I tell him that I'm used to keeping secrets?

“Um, there's one thing I should tell you,” he says.

“What?”

“About this...” He seems reluctant.

“Yes?” I say encouragingly, or as encouragingly as I can, given the circumstances. I'm a little annoyed by his pussyfooting around. Then again, he did agree to help, and he is here in the Jeep, heading into the trackless forest in the dead of night, etc.

“I won't be able to help your partner — Lois? Is it? — um, afterwards.”

“Why not?” I say with irritation. A fine time to mention this now.

“It's part of the Rules,” he says. I can hear the capitalization. It's like the Rules I learned when I was a kid. Never do anything Special where anyone can see you. That was the biggest Rule.

“Yes?”

“I won't be able to touch her, um, afterwards,” he says.

“That's the Rule. I touch them once, and they come back. I touch them again, and they're dead again. Forever.”

I consider that a moment. Somehow I don't think of disbelieving him. He's the expert in this strange ability. “Oh.” He definitely won't be able to get near Lois, then. If he were to just brush her, or stumble and put a hand on her...

Then it comes to me. “Your girlfriend.”

His voice is flat. “Yes.”

I say nothing, thinking of the torture it must be to see his love every day, to talk with her, laugh with her, be with her — and never be able to touch her. That would hurt me with Lois almost more than anything else. Except her being dead, of course.

I can't help asking desperately, “Will I be able to touch Lois?”

The Pie-Maker nods. “Oh yes, definitely. It's just that I can't.”

Further conversation is cut short by arrival at our destination. It's a parking area with a trail that leads off to the rustic camping grounds. I get out, and rather than leave the keys in the Jeep, hand them to the Pie-Maker. I unbuckle Lois, and lift her limp form into my arms. I resolutely don't think of the times I flew with her as Superman, holding her in my arms the same way, only then she was warm and sprightly and vivacious and excited and intense and... No. I won't think of that.

I head down the trail. The Pie-Maker follows me. The moon is full and we hardly need the flashlight he carries. We go about a mile. The Pie-Maker is breathing a little heavily before we come to a clearing. I'm still carrying Lois and haven't even worked up a sweat. He mutters something about me being in good shape.

I have the Pie-Maker unroll the blanket that Lois is wrapped in, and spread it out on the ground. I lay her down gently until it looks as if she's sleeping in the gentle moonlight.

I extend my hearing. There's my own heartbeat, and that of the Pie-Maker. Lois's beat has been silent, as I know to my sorrow — that unique rhythm that soothes my days is absent. I listen harder. I hear a few deer, some smaller animals, the murmur of a stream, the clashing of leaves in the wind. The larger wildlife has all been scared off by the noise that we made in walking to this site. No humans are within two miles.

“There's no one around for at least a couple of miles,” I tell the Pie-Maker. He doesn't question it. He probably just wants to finish the job and go home. It's after midnight now, and it's definitely chilly out here. He's shivering slightly. Lois, of course, remains absolutely still.

“Here's a note for Lois,” I say, and pass it to him. At his look of surprise, I explain. “I wrote it while you were getting ready for the hike.” I didn't tell him that I wrote it at speed. If Lois will settle down and read it, it'll tell her everything.” I fix him with my gaze. “Be sure to get her home safely.”

“All right,” he agrees. He's looking especially sad now. He realizes, though, that it's futile to argue with me. Realizing that, I take his hand and shake it.

"Thank you," I say, sincerely.

He's incredulous for a minute. Who would thank someone for killing them? But he looks over at Lois, and understands.

"You're welcome."

Then he's all business. "Are you ready?" he asks. "When I touch her, you've got sixty seconds."

"That's all you have to do?" I ask. I should have thought about this before. My reporter curiosity is aroused — a fine time for that now. "Just touch? There are no mystical ceremonies or sorcerous preparation?"

He smiles. It's a bitter smile. "No."

"After you touch her, you get away," I say. He nods. I sit on the blanket, and raise Lois so that she's next to me, and I'm holding her in my arms. "I'm ready."

The Pie-Maker leans forward and I realize he's nervous too. He's not totally sure that the random proximity thing might not choose him to be the victim, I realize. My respect for him rises. He's a good man.

"OK?" he asks me one last time.

"OK."

The Pie-Maker goes to set the stopwatch function on his wrist chronometer, then stops his motion with a rueful grin. "No need of that here," he mutters. The he leans forward and touches Lois.

A river of light, a color I've never seen before, rushes through Lois, spreading from where the Pie-Maker touched her. The gray waxy pallor of her skin disappears. I feel the tension returning to her muscles, the absolute stillness giving way to the motion of life. I hear her heart give a stutter and then settle into the cherished beat I know so well. I'm overcome with awe and amazement. And there's joy, and a crazy glee.

Lois inhales a deep choking breath, and then spits out blood. "Clark!" she cries. "Clark!" It's a sob.

I hold her close. I have a minute to tell her everything.

"Lois," I say, "just listen. Don't talk."

Of course she tries to talk anyway, but I ruthlessly override her.

"Don't touch that man. Don't let him touch you." That's first, and most important. "And Lois," I say, almost choking myself, "I love you. I've always loved you." I take a deep breath. "And I'll always love you."

I lean forward and kiss her. She squirms in surprise for a moment. Then she leans into our kiss. Her lips soften, and I press onward for all I'm worth. I'm only sorry that I will never know more. But this kiss is enough to take into eternity with me.

I feel a cold hand grab my heart and squeeze it. The pain is intense. I fall to my knees. As I hear Lois desperately crying, "Claaarrk!" I wonder if good Kryptonians go to Heaven. I already know what the other place is like. Facing a life without Lois in it has been Hell.

I hear Lois calling me. She's breathless, and my name is interspersed with panting. "Clark," she says, "Clark." There's desperation in her voice and it pulls me up and out. It's hard to arise, like I'm in a dream and I have to make myself wake up but I can't. Then Lois calls once again, and the sheer need in her voice gives me that extra power I need.

"I'm here, Lois," I croak out weakly. I can't remember feeling this ill for a long time. My chest hurts. My tongue is dry. As my eyelids slowly unfold I realize that Lois has been pounding on me, leaning into my chest with all her might, twelve times a minute, to perform CPR.

"Clark!" she says, and now there's happiness and tremendous relief in her voice. It's so very different from the desperate way she called me earlier. She falls forward, exhausted, onto me as I lie flat on the blanket. Her hair tickles my face and she's hugging me. I slowly raise my arms and try to hug her back. It's so hard. I'm weak. For a minute we stay like that, and her beating heart

gives me a jolt of electricity too. *She's alive, Lois is alive, she's here, she's alive*, her heart beating steadily, each beat bringing me a little shock of elation.

Then the nausea hits and I motion for her to move off. She doesn't understand right away but she gets it when I start to retch. She helps me roll over and get on hands and knees, and watches with concern as I empty my guts onto the ground. I'm covered with cold sweat.

As I roll back over onto my back I catch a glimpse of the Pie-Maker. He's staring at me in absolute incredulity. Lois follows my gaze and gets herself up. Apparently having to perform CPR on me has made her cranky because she starts to lambaste him.

"You could have helped, you know!" she says, advancing toward him. The Pie-Maker shuts his gaping mouth with a click and looks worried. He starts to edge back and this only encourages Lois. She moves closer to him. "I needed help! You could have done the rescue breathing...but no! You just stood there!"

The Pie-Maker scrambles away from her, because now Lois is advancing on him at full throttle. I look at her, smiling weakly at the thought of Lois, Mad Dog Lane, back again, doing what she does best.

Then terror rushes through me when I remember what the Pie-Maker said: *If I touch them a second time, they're dead again — forever.*

I don't remember getting up and standing between Lois and the Pie-Maker. All I know is that, suddenly, I'm there, holding Lois back, keeping us well away from Ned. "Don't touch her!" I snap at the Pie-Maker.

"Believe me, I don't want to," he says defensively. Then he stares at me more closely and gets that incredulous look on his face again. I look down and see that my shirt is open — Lois must have unbuttoned it when she was doing the CPR. But unfortunately I've forgotten to take off the Suit.

"You really are...*Superman!*" the Pie-Maker blurts out. In a wondering tone, he adds, "Who else could..."

He doesn't finish but I know what he's thinking. *I thought you'd be dead. Who else could have come back from the dead?* The thought is profoundly disturbing and I push it away, glad to hear Lois again.

"Don't be silly," she tells the Pie-Maker. "Clark isn't..." She's turned to face me and sees the "S" emblem between the flapping edges of my white dress shirt. My glasses fell off when I was throwing up, and I've unconsciously slicked back my hair with my sweat-soaked hand. "...Superman," she finishes lamely.

But she knows that I am, now. I can see it in her eyes. She swallows hard, and I see an undecipherable expression cross her face. "Superman?" she asks, very quietly.

I nod, slowly, and suddenly everything catches up with me and I stumble. I manage to control my fall and end up sitting on a log, holding my head in my hands. My head feels like it's about to fall off, and I know if I move, I'll be retching again.

Lois stands before me. "Clark?" she asks in that same hesitant, small voice. It hurts me to see her like this — such a change from Mad Dog Lane.

"Give me a minute," I choke out, managing to quell my unruly gut. I sit there, helped by the cold night air that dries my perspiration. In the background I hear Lois quizzing the Pie-Maker about the whole situation, and, as if in a dream, I hear him telling Lois the Rules.

Then there's an argument — actually, it's Lois trying to convince herself that what the Pie-Maker said really happened, and the Pie-Maker just reiterating what he did — and I hear bits and pieces of that. I'm not really listening, instead focusing on regaining my strength. The moonlight helps with that. It's like drinking diluted sugar water instead of Red Bull, but it is reflected sunlight and it does help me. In the background, I hear

Lois winding down. I chance a look up and I'm rewarded by the ability to move my head without pain. Lois is still asking questions of the Pie-Maker, but she's a safe distance away and her queries aren't so frenzied.

Then I'm over the hump, because I can feel myself coming back to normal faster and faster. My headache disappears, and I can feel the bruises on my chest fading. I stand up. Lois and the Pie-Maker stop talking and turn to look at me.

I put on the Superman posture. It doesn't really go with the Clark Kent clothing, so I spin out of the regular suit, into the Suit. I hear double gasps.

"Yes, I am Superman," I announce, unnecessarily. Strange how saying that makes my gut hurt almost as much as what I just went through. I step to the Pie-Maker. "Please. I'll take you home now. If that's OK."

He looks around at the deserted clearing, at us, and Lois, and nods jerkily.

I go and pick up my glasses from the blanket, where they fell off. I hand them to Lois. She takes them uncertainly.

"Please keep these safe for me, Lois," I ask quietly. For a long moment, she does nothing. Then, slowly, she nods.

I turn back to the Pie-Maker. I stand beside him and put my arm around his waist. It's not till after I've touched him that I wonder if he's brought me back. Obviously not — because I've touched him a second time and I'm still alive. That disturbs me even more. If he didn't bring me back — yes, I know it's crazy, but he's shown he can do it — then who, or what, did?

I lift off. He gives a little moan but says nothing all the flight back to Metropolis. I set him down by his restaurant. He's looking a little shell-shocked.

"Thank you," I say. He lifts his head, swallows nervously, and looks again at his restaurant. We're in the back alley behind the Pie Hole. Then he reaches in his pocket and hands me the Jeep keys. I mentally kick myself — it's a good thing he remembered. He stares at me for a long moment.

"You're welcome," he finally says. He turns and goes in the back door. I've already lifted off.

When I get back to the forest, Lois is sitting on the blanket. She's set my glasses carefully next to her. She scrambles to her feet when she hears me land. Her eyes are suspiciously bright and I wonder if she's been crying. She confirms it by wiping away a tear track.

"Lois?" I ask. "Are you all right?"

I move toward her and she flinches away. It's subtle but I see it. I stop immediately, heartsick. *She may be alive now but you've lost her anyway* says the nagging voice inside, the one I hear in my nightmares.

She wordlessly holds out my glasses and I take them. I wonder if she's trying to give me a hint so I spin into my Clark Kent clothing. A tiny sigh of relief tells me I've done the right thing. We stand there, looking at each other. Finally, I blurt out, "The car is this way..."

She nods. I think about offering to fly her and remember her withdrawal. She doesn't want me near her. I go to gather up the blanket and watch her move away, my heart breaking. She doesn't want to be within three feet of me.

"Lois..." Her stony gaze cuts me off. I sigh. "This way." I start marching down the path and she follows me. The path isn't wide enough for two, and all through the mile walk back to the Jeep I feel her gaze focused on me. And I thought I was the only one who had heat vision.

We tromp onwards. She's flagging for the last quarter mile, but every time I stop and turn, she indicates without speech that she wants to go on, and move it, Clark. As we approach the Jeep, I see with concern how pale she is and how ill she looks. I go to open the door for her but once again, she stands well away from me. She hoists herself up into the seat, not even protesting about

me doing the driving.

It takes longer than an hour to get back to Metropolis. All the way, Lois is looking at me. I can't tell what she's thinking. At first, I see anger on her face. When I ask, "What?" she smoothes her expression into bland stillness, the poker face she's so good at. "What?" I ask again, but she won't answer me.

I'm getting the silent treatment. I'd almost laugh if it weren't so painful. What hurts, too, is that Lois has touched Clark Kent and she's touched Superman, but now that she knows they're the same guy she won't touch either one.

As we travel through the moonlit night, I wonder. Is it the alien in me that she doesn't like? I don't like him either sometimes. The alien frightens people, starting with me. I still remember the first time I burned something inadvertently with my heat vision. I was young. I didn't know how to control it. I still shudder at the thought — what if, instead of a bale of hay, it had been one of my parents?

I think about that more and more as we drive. Always alone, always putting on the happy Clark Kent face, but always knowing underneath that I'm not like the others, I'm different, and you would run away screaming if you knew who I really was.

That's one of the reasons I love Lois so much. She made Superman. She was the one who made it possible for me to out myself, to let the world know about me, and still keep an ace in the hole — the secret identity. She gave me the idea of bringing a change of clothes to work. I often thought she'd laugh if she knew what use I made of that idea.

But now, she *does* know what use I made of that idea, and she's not laughing.

We get to her apartment. I park the Jeep, wondering what to do next. Should I offer to show her up? Should I escort her up without asking? She seems a little stronger now, not like she's going to faint. Darn. If she did faint then I'd have an ironclad excuse for carrying her. If I do go up with her, what do I do then?

My progressively more frantic ruminations are interrupted. "Aren't you going to come in?" Lois asks.

"If you want me to," I say quietly. This is the first she's spoken to me since the woods. I pass her the key ring. We get out of the Jeep and enter her building. I carefully follow her up the stairs, and wait patiently as she unlocks all five locks on her door.

She ushers me in ahead of her, and automatically I scan her apartment for intruders, bombs, surveillance devices, and general sources of mayhem. That sort of thing is present all too often. But nothing tonight, we're alone together, no distractions. I stand awkwardly, not knowing what to do or say.

"Sit," Lois says, flicking a finger at the direction of her kitchen table. I obediently take a chair as she heads into the bathroom and freshens up. She calls to me. "Can you make some tea?"

I feel a little surge at her words, words that might be spoken to me normally. Her tone is more normal, too, and I wonder if it's because she doesn't have to look me in the face. I get up and put the kettle on. I don't have to fumble in her cupboards — Lois has bought the oolong tea (just because I like it! — maybe she really does have feelings for me) and I know where she keeps it. It's like I've bought the cream soda for her (because I know she likes it) and she knows where I keep it, when we're together in my apartment.

She comes out. She's combed and straightened her hair. Her eyes have big dark circles under them. If it were anyone else, I would say they look haggard. But it's Lois, so she's just beautiful in a different way.

She catches sight of the kettle and says awkwardly, "I thought you'd do, you know, the bzz-bzz." She gestures toward her eyes. I realize she means the heat vision.

"I can if you want," I say, carefully. "Lois —"

"Don't say anything!" she cries. She sits herself down slowly at the table. I gaze stupidly at the kettle for a minute, then follow her lead and sit across from her.

"I want to slap you silly," she starts.

Well, at least she's talking to me now.

"But I won't — right now — for three reasons." She stops.

"Why?" I ask. I won't debate the slapping-me-silly part. I deserve it for, heck, everything in this whole episode.

"First," she says, "I'm just too darn tired right now."

Punctuating her remark is a giant yawn. I'm tired too, and I involuntarily mirror her yawn with one of my own. It's unusual for me to be this fatigued unless I've been up for several days and using my abilities heavily. But right now — I'm tired.

"Me, too," I tell her. She gets a polite look of disbelief and segues into her second reason.

"And second, because you wouldn't feel it at all, would you?" Lois now has the tiniest smile on her face.

I match her smile with a rueful one of my own. "No."

The smile leaves Lois' face and she whispers, "You really are Superman, aren't you?"

I think about levitating in the chair, or opening my shirt to show off the Suit again, or lighting the candle on her counter on fire. I decide not to do any of that. She saw me in the forest.

"Yes," I tell her gravely. "I am."

I hold her eyes steady as I tell her. I see her eyes widen as she recognizes the truth in my voice. Then I avert my eyes. What will she do next? I will do what she wants me to do. But what if she wants me to go away and never bother her again?

"I was thinking about that all the way home," she says. She's fumbling with the hem of her blouse, threading the tail of the shirt nervously back and forth through her fingers.

"Clark?" she says, not looking at me.

"Yes?"

"Can we get all the apologizing done tonight?"

"What?" I'm flummoxed. What does she mean by that?

"I was so mean to you... the things I said..."

It comes to me that Lois is apologizing to me. "I think I owe you the apologies," I say disbelievingly. I don't want to list all my offenses in detail, but who got Lois shot, for one?

"Can we just do a blanket apology to each other, and maybe go over it more specifically later on, when we want to talk about it, and we're not so tired, and I'm not so... flabbergasted, and maybe there's better tea, and I haven't just learned that my best friend is Superman, and..." Lois trails off.

I can't help smiling at the babbling. God, Lois, I love you. "Sure." The teakettle starts whistling, interrupting the moment. I get up and pour the boiling water into the teapot, letting the teabags steep. I put mugs in front of Lois and myself.

As the tea steeps, Lois reaches across the table. Hesitantly, I extend my hand. She takes it. Her hand is warm in mine. "Clark, I'm sorry."

My throat catches, and it's all I can do to say, "No, Lois, I'm sorry." I want to add, *I'm sorry for not trusting you sooner, and for running away on you all the time, and pretending I was dead when the gangsters shot me, and getting you hurt tonight and....* But there's so much to say. Lois is right. Blanket apologies tonight and let's talk about it later.

Something unfolds within me as it comes to me that there will be a "later." Suddenly, I'm happy. When Lois took my hand, it meant that we're going to be all right.

I hold her small hand for a few minutes more, reveling in its warmth, its slender beauty, the rush of blood through it. Lois is alive. I slowly let it go and she leans back in her chair. I pour us tea. She sits back and takes a deep breath.

"Tell me about it, Clark," she says softly. "Tell me about being Superman."

And I do. For the next two hours, I tell her about growing up

on the farm, normal at first, and then turning into a strange freak. Not knowing who I was, where I came from, or why I had these abilities. Learning to master them, trying not to hurt people with my lack of control. The sheer joy of being able to fly. Realizing the world was open to me, and traveling through foreign countries, meeting the inhabitants, learning how alike people are underneath it all. Helping someone and exposing myself, having to move on. Not being able to have close friends. Going to the Planet and seeing her, and knowing that I wanted to stay, that Metropolis would be my home now. Taking her advice about a change of clothing, and making it into a whole secret identity.

Somewhere in my confessions, my glasses come off and I warm the tea in the pot with my heat vision. It seems so natural to do it in front of Lois. It's not till afterwards I realize what I've done — used the super powers in the Clark clothing — something I've spent two years training myself never to do. I look at Lois and she's smiling just a bit.

I go on. I tell Lois about becoming Superman, and not knowing what to do, how to be a superhero. I tell her how, what she said, how she acted, told me what Superman should be. I became what she expected me to be. And fortunately for the world, and for us, Lois doesn't have small ideals. She set the standards high, and Superman grew to become what she thought he should be.

I tell her how I'm attracted to her, how I've grown to admire her even more as I work with her and see her caring, her passion, her fire, all wrapped up in the concealing outer shell of icy professionalism. I tell her how much I admire her articles, how her ability to make deductions from tiny scattered pieces of evidence is a super-power I don't have and never will. I tell her how much I've wanted to be with her. I tell her how much I've hated running away from her with my lame excuses. She starts to laugh then, finally understanding why my reasons were so ludicrous. I start laughing too, when she says something scornful about the "Cheese of the Month Club" and we both break into hysterical, exhausted laughter.

And, as we wind down, I tell her how much I was afraid to tell her.

She's got tears in her eyes. "Oh, Clark," she says. By now we're on her couch, and she's nestled in my arms. She looks up at me and I see her heavy eyelids. She wants to say more but whatever it is, is interrupted by a huge yawn. I yawn back in sympathy — again.

"Bed?" I say.

She nods. I carry her into her room, pull back the covers, and give the sheets a low-grade heat vision treatment, just enough to warm them. I set her down.

She reaches up and pulls my head down. At the last minute, she kisses me on the cheek. I'm stunned.

"Clark, stay," Lois says.

My eyebrows fly up.

"Nothing like that," Lois hastens to explain. "Please, just hold me. It was so cold... I'm so cold..."

"Are you sure?" I ask her. It's been my dream to sleep with Lois, no pun intended. This isn't quite fulfilling the dream, but it's halfway there.

"Yes," she says. "Hold me. Keep me warm."

I look around the apartment, and find some sweats I've left here from previous post-stakeouts. I turn off the kitchen light. I step into the bathroom to brush my teeth — hey, I've got a toothbrush here too — I guess Lois and I really do spend a lot of time together. Of course, she has a toothbrush at my place, too. I brush, and change into the sweats.

I go back into the bedroom. Lois is already asleep. I stand over her for a minute, gazing at her, thinking of how I lost her and the miracle that gave her back to me. Then I slip into bed with her.

I'm asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow.

8

I wake up and find my body is very happy to be spooning Lois Lane. My upstairs brain gets supremely embarrassed, and as I realize what's going on I almost levitate out of bed without the use of superpowers. Not that it hasn't happened a hundred times before in my fantasies — but it's real today.

Lois wakes up at my awkward scrambling, and I have the sinking feeling that she knows exactly why I'm getting out of bed right now. She gives me a look... is that a sultry look? I swallow nervously. I'm getting the feeling that if I asked right now, she'd say yes. And I don't know what to do. Fortunately, the sweatpants are baggy.

We look at each other. What's the proper etiquette for that dicey situation, "Your Partner Is A Superhero and You Just Slept Together If Only In A Platonic Sense But He's Got The Hots For You?" What should I say? Should I apologize? Should I try to pass it off with a wink and a nod? Should I say nothing? Should I tell her how interested I am? I give up and shrug. Lois's eyes meet mine and suddenly we're both laughing. God, I love her. Again.

"So, you're up now, Kent?" she asks. Is it my imagination that there's a slight emphasis on the word "up"? I decide to take refuge in the nerd persona — still there after all these years.

"Um, yes," I say, ignoring the double entendre. "Did you sleep well?" I groan mentally as soon as that comes out of my mouth. Like that line couldn't be used a million ways.

Lois stretches, under the covers, and I can't help gazing at her lithe body. I almost trigger the x-ray vision but force my eyes to close in time. "It was... super." She gives me that sultry smile again.

My resolve weakens. I think about all the fantasies I've had... Lois in bed... I swallow again.

Lois seems to recognize that I'm on the edge of going past flirting, because she suddenly turns serious. "Thank you for holding me, Clark. You kept me warm." Left unsaid is, *I was so cold last night. Cold as the grave.*

I pull myself back from the edge and say, "You're welcome." Now we're awkward with each other again. I think Lois is a little embarrassed about getting up in her nightclothes. Now that the sun is shining, it's different.

I take refuge in business. "I've got to get back to my place... do you want to come over for breakfast at my apartment after you get, um, dressed here?"

Relief in Lois' eyes. She is aware, too, that there's something between us, but it's too soon for anything big. And the whole Superman thing is the big elephant in the room. Today we can spend working. And maybe flirting, just a little bit. That would be about right. "Yes, that would be good."

"OK, then," I say. I gather up my Clark Kent clothes and spin into the Suit. She doesn't gasp in surprise this time and I feel obscurely disappointed. I leave the sweats folded up on the corner of Lois's bureau. "See you in thirty minutes," I tell Lois. After the usual automatic scan for witnesses and surveillance devices, I launch myself from her window and head to my apartment.

I see the letters and notes I've left on my table. It doesn't take me long to get cleaned up and dressed, and I go back to the pile. I destroy the notes for Perry and Jimmy, and re-file my important papers. The hard drive I took from the drug lab is still sitting there, so I hook it up and scan it for incriminating material.

It's a good thing I've paid attention to what Jimmy's done over the years, because I find out two things. One, I've learned more than I thought about making a computer sit up and beg. And two, it's a good thing that I have, because those webcams *did* capture the arrival of Lois and Clark, and the vanishing of Clark

Kent and the appearance of Superman.

I carefully erase the offending portions and just to be sure, rewrite random bits over those areas of the drive. The rest of the hard drive contains a considerable amount of pornography and some extremely interesting files pertaining to the meth lab, their suppliers, their customers, and their financial records.

Lois comes in while I'm perusing the contents and, as I show her the information, suddenly I remember that I promised her breakfast. She's engrossed at the first glance, and hardly pays attention as I wish her goodbye and whoosh out to a little patisserie I know right here in Metropolis. I get a bunch of pastries (making sure to get the pain au chocolat) and bring them back. I know some good patisseries in France, but right now it's mid-afternoon there and the best stuff probably has been bought already.

We munch on pastries and coffee, looking at the hard drive info, planning our story, working out our plans to get printable evidence and discussing the best way to turn this over to the police. We're all charged up and we head to the Planet still discussing the story.

The day flies by, as all the threads come together. Sometime during the day, Lois takes the hard drive down to Henderson. I let her do all the talking, and listen to the story she spins for him with admiration. Somehow she skates out of all charges about tampering with crime scenes and removing evidence — again. Of course, Henderson probably wouldn't be so forgiving if we hadn't lined up everything for him. Even though he's Homicide, it'll be a feather in his cap to roll up a huge drug distribution operation like this one. And he can tie it in with the Jordan Major investigation, so he's got an excuse.

Even the Fates cooperate. I only have a few Superman calls, and they're not very serious. I spend the day with Lois, bouncing ideas off her, developing the story, confirming facts — it's as exhilarating in its own way as a Superman rescue. We turn it over to Perry and he's ecstatic — not just for the story (which might be Kerth-worthy, he says) but for the bust-up of the drug ring.

It's been a great day. As we wind down, it comes to me that we haven't really talked any more about me being Superman or about what's happened. We always get caught up in the day-to-day, and it's hard to step back and think about the larger things in life. Not that today with Lois was wasted, no, not in any way; it's just that Lois and I were very focused on today and now.

I sigh, and Lois asks, "What?"

"Do you want to get some carryout?" I ask. "Come over to my apartment for dinner?"

"Sure," she says. She giggles just a bit and gestures for me to bend down to her at her desk. "Can we fly?" she whispers.

I can't help grinning. A little elf is dancing up and down in my head, saying, *She likes me! She likes all of me!*

"Your wish is my command," I tell her.

So we fly home. If Lois notices that I linger just a bit more than I ever have with her before, she doesn't say anything.

We get pizza instead of carryout, and polish off the whole thing between us.

Lois sits on the couch, propped up, her back against my chest. I have a mildly possessive arm around here as I revel in her nearness and in the fact that I never have to lie to her, never have to give her a preposterous excuse again. We're both almost drifting off in a warm postprandial daze.

"Lois?" I ask.

"Yes?" she says sleepily.

"I'm just curious about this... last night you said you wanted to slap me silly, but you wouldn't for three reasons. And you only gave me two of them."

Lois becomes more alert. "That's right."

I guess I have to draw it out of her. "Can you tell me the third reason?"

She squirms out of my reach and sits farther away, so that now we face each other. I mourn the loss of the warmth in my arms.

“Clark,” she starts, “Clark...”

“Yes?” I say encouragingly.

“You *died* for me,” she blurts out. “It would have been pretty small of me to slap you silly after that. She’s torn between laughter and seriousness.

I sit back. “Oh.” I think about what I should say. “It was nothing” isn’t true. “Only for you” might put a little too much pressure on her. I settle for a somber, “You got killed because of me.”

She nods very slightly. Then, she gets that look in her eye. “Clark,” she begins.

“Yes?” I say again.

“Do you remember being dead?”

I turn it around. “Do you?”

She gets an inward look. “Not really. It’s like there’s a wall, or a locked door, or something...”

“...and behind that door is something that’s totally terrifying, but at the same time it’s exciting beyond all measure,” I finish.

“That’s it, exactly,” Lois agrees. “You know.”

I do. I don’t remember being dead other than that. Maybe there are some things man was not meant to know. I’ll respect that.

“Clark?” Now her voice is even softer and more hesitant, but since she’s Lois, she won’t let it go.

“Uh-huh?”

“How did you come back?”

That’s what I’ve been wondering and trying not to think about, myself.

“I mean, Ned told me the Rules,” Lois goes on. “And that’s how I knew that you really were Superman and not just wearing a Superman undershirt. I knew it because Ned looked so surprised. He was flabbergasted. He thought you were dead for sure. When you got up...the way he looked, that’s when it really hit me, that you were someone out of the ordinary.” She works her way back over to me and lets me cradle her again. “I mean, I get that I was dead, and that you traded your life for mine...but why didn’t you stay dead?”

I sigh. “I wish I knew, Lois.”

“You’re not...immortal, or anything, are you?” Her voice is very tiny now.

I sigh even more deeply. “I’ve been thinking about that a lot, Lois. All I can say is that I really hope I’m not.” And I do hope that, fervently.

She’s silent a minute too, contemplating it. “Well, I’d like to propose another theory,” she says.

“What?” Anything that gets “me” and “immortal” out of the same sentence is good.

“This all started on Halloween, right?” Lois demands.

That’s right. It did.

“The fall equinox, the old Celtic feast of Samhain, a time when the doors to the other worlds are open...”

“At least in folklore,” I say, interested in where she’s going.

“And just to switch cultures, isn’t there a Chinese saying or something that when you save somebody’s life, you get a piece of their soul?”

“I don’t think it’s Chinese,” I say musingly. “Can’t remember where, exactly.”

Lois turns to look at me. “Clark, how many lives have you saved? Not just as Superman, but when you were using your powers in secret, too.”

I shrug. “I never counted. It’s probably hundreds.”

Lois snorts. “It’s probably thousands. Heck, you saved three hundred and fifty on that trans-Atlantic plane that you landed safely the other day.” She gives me a proud smile, like she had

something to do with it.

“Well, maybe.”

Lois sits up straight now, on the trail of a Mad Dog Lane intuition. “So, the day after Halloween is All Saints Day, in the Christian tradition. I was shot on Halloween and was dead all day November first,” she points out. “And November second is All Souls Day, the Day of the Dead.”

“Yeah! The year I was in Mexico, I saw it. They had the feasts and passed out the skull cookies,” I say. “It was kind of a festival, remembering and praying for friends and relatives who’ve died.”

“So,” Lois winds up to her grand conclusion, “you’ve saved thousands of people, they’ve all given you a piece of their soul, and it’s All Souls Day, right after the sorcerously significant date where the gates to the other world are open.”

“And?” I ask when Lois comes to a stop, like she’s made her point.

“Don’t you get it, Clark? It’s all those other souls that brought you back. You had a piece of all those souls from saving their lives and it wasn’t their time to die, because you’d rescued them. So, one soul — yours — dies, but all the thousands of others don’t. So, the balance is on the side of living!” She smiles mischievously. And you got good karma by saving their lives. So they saved yours.”

I consider it. Again, it’s Lois Lane’s specialty — reaching — but it still sounds better — a lot better — than my being condemned to earth, unendingly. I decide I’ll believe it, because it’s better than the alternative.

I nod. Then I start to tickle Lois, with a big smile on my face, letting her know that the serious talk is over now.

“My karma ran over my dogma,” I say pretentiously, just to make Lois giggle. She does, and life is good. She settles back down in my arms and I hold her tightly.

Her scent fills my nostrils, and I realize that she now has that same underlying differentness that I’d first smelled on Charlotte Charles. Now I know what it is. I smell it on myself. It’s the scent of those who have crossed over. It’s the odor of the grave, of the dead that live. Funny, how we end up with the same scent here, the alien and the human. I’ve always wanted to belong to Earth, and now in this one way, I do.

I hold Lois tighter, and think about the errand I ran this afternoon between Superman rescues.

The Pie Hole isn’t very busy — again. I hover above the cloud layer, and use my special vision to check on the employees. I’m in luck, because the blonde waitress, Olive, is busy in the table area, waiting on the few customers, and the brunette waitress (who I now know is Charlotte Charles, ex-Dead Girl) isn’t in the building.

Ned, the Pie-Maker, is secluded in the back room with the rotten fruit. He’s wearing a glove on one hand. My eyes widen as I see what he does. He picks up a piece of fruit with his bare hand. That strange, otherworldly light passes over it, and the fruit is fresh again. He tosses the fruit to his gloved hand and puts it in a basket, presumably for later inclusion into a pie.

I chuckle. The Pie-Maker is using his talent well. If he touches the fruit again, it’ll be rotten, but presumably he’ll wear gloves to finish making the pies. I have to give him credit — I thought he was being gulled, buying bad fruit, but now I know he buys it deliberately. He must be saving a lot of money. Now I understand why there are shelves of cabbage and Brussels sprouts — as the fruit revives, a minute later, the Brassicaceae die.

Olive goes into the kitchen and gets her tray loaded with coffee and pie slices. She heads back out to the customers, leaving the Pie-Maker alone in the cooler room, where no one can see him without coming well into the kitchen and making a right turn. His Golden Retriever waits in the kitchen, sitting

patiently on his haunches, watching the Pie-Maker work.

I zoom down, spinning into my Clark Kent clothes as I enter the Pie Hole at a speed faster than the human eye can see. I knock politely at the opened door of the cooler room, and say, "Hello."

The Pie-Maker flinches, jumping at least two inches. "Don't do that," he almost hisses. Then he remembers who he's speaking to, and says, "Please." He gets a wry smile on his face at that last.

"Sorry," I say, non-repentantly. Then, more seriously, "I just wanted to say thank you. Again." I extend my hand. He looks at me and understands how much is not said, how much is implied in that one sentence. He shakes my hand carefully.

"You're welcome," the Pie-Maker says.

I pull out my card case. "I owe you a favor," I say. And I do. It's rare that Superman owes anyone a favor — I try to keep him out of the frays of the world, have him pay nothing and owe nothing, no favors, no influence. But this is different. I hand the Pie-Maker my business card. "You can contact me here."

He looks down at the card, which proclaims that I'm Clark Kent, Daily Planet Staff Reporter, giving address, phone, fax, email, and all sorts of other contact information. I pass out these cards by the dozen every day — everyone I interview gets one, every source I'm cultivating gets one, everyone that might possibly call me with some information someday gets one. So it's pretty normal for me to give someone my business card.

But no one else (aside from my parents and Lois, of course) knows that Superman works at the Daily Planet as a staff reporter. Now the Pie-Maker does.

"I won't tell," he blurts out.

"I won't either," I reply. There's a quiet moment. Two guys, each with a strange ability. Neither wants the world to know. We exchange a silent vow of mutual zip-the-lip. Nothing is said; it's understood.

"You don't mind," he says awkwardly, "that Emerson Cod got the reward for solving the murder of Jordan Major? I mean, you obviously had something to do with it. Do you want to share the money with us?"

I smile. Money is the least of my concerns, and, besides proving that he's an honest and upright guy, he's just answered my last question. He's confirming my surmise that he's in league with Emerson Cod, the private investigator who's got a 100% clearance rate on his recent cases. It makes perfect sense. Murders are much easier to solve when you can ask the victims who killed them. They must have woken up Jordan Major and asked him — that's why Jimmy heard his voice and why Jordan's arms moved, despite rigor mortis, in between Jimmy's first and second photos. I take a minute to think about Jimmy — we can't tell him the truth here, we'll have to work up some plausible story. I'll leave that up to Lois. She'll come up with something, I know.

"No, thank you," I say. "We don't want to be involved in that at all. We want to stay far away from it." I take a minute to look around the cooler room and the kitchen. They're adequate, but spartan. They could use some upgrading. "You keep the money. You earned it."

He doesn't protest.

"You won't see Clark Kent or Lois Lane around here anymore," I tell the Pie-Maker. "People might wonder." *People* being his girlfriend, and Emerson Cod, who know that I was supposed to die, and here I am, walking around alive.

Unspoken but understood is the real reason — I don't want the Pie-Maker anywhere near Lois, anywhere he might touch her and make her dead again, forever.

"OK," he says. I get the feeling he's just as happy about that. I know that being around Superman makes people nervous. Even at rescues. What Superman does is so alien, so otherworldly...

I point to an apple pie, just boxed. "Can I buy that?"

The Pie-Maker looks startled, but says, "Sure." He quotes me

a price and I pull out my wallet and pay him in cash.

"You won't see me or my girlfriend again," I say again, "but after I take this pie to the Planet newsroom, I'm sure you'll be getting a visit from the restaurant critic."

He looks a little nervous about that, too.

"Don't worry," I tell him. "Just keep on baking like you do and the critic will tell Metropolis all about it. They'll be beating down the doors." And I know they will. The Pie Hole just needs a little publicity (of the right kind, of course). Once people know about this place, the quality of the pies will keep them coming back.

The Pie-Maker seems a little happier at that. The Golden Retriever belatedly wakes up. It sees me and trots over to sniff me. There's the usual canine hesitation and wariness at my alien scent.

"Digby, sit," the Pie-Maker orders. The dog obeys promptly, and the Pie-Maker pulls out what looks like a backscratcher, a carved wooden hand on a long stick. He pets the dog using the stick.

I get a sudden flash to all the class pictures of the Pie-Maker at the Longborough School for Boys, where a Golden Retriever accompanied him in every picture. The retriever who looked the same as this dog. The retriever who is young and vibrant and has no gray in his muzzle. And the Pie-Maker doesn't touch the dog...

"How old is that dog?" I blurt out.

The Pie-Maker gets a secret smile. "Twenty-three."

So, as I sit there, holding Lois, I wonder too. I wonder if her name was written in Death's big book, and Death came to collect her. And then, the Pie-Maker pulled her back. His dog is still alive, way past its time. Will that happen to Lois? Will Death forget to come back for her, the way it seems to have forgotten to claim the Pie-Maker's dog?

After all, deaths come one to a customer. And if Lois has already had hers... what then? With a jolt, I realize I'm not the only one who might have to start musing on the nature of immortality.

Then, my spirits rise as I think about it. Maybe I am blessed, or cursed, whatever you want to call it, with a very long life. But maybe — hopefully — Lois will be there with me.

I hug her tighter, holding her warm body with its beating heart, smelling her unique scent that now holds a tinge of the Other Side, listening to the breath moving in and out of her lungs. We still have to talk about so much — there's still a lot to say about my being Superman and everything that's meant to us over the past few years — but we're together now, with no secrets between us. And we have time.

Every day is a gift, for however long we have together. Tomorrow is not guaranteed — I know that now, deep down.

My mother always said, "Live each day as if it was your last." And I will. Each day is a new start, a new chance. I'll love Lois forever. Starting today.

THE END

This story was for Kermtzu for the 2008 Holiday Ficathon.

Three things requested in the fic:

1. The revelation
2. Angry Clark
3. Jimmy doing something besides research that helps our duo.

Preferred season(s)/holiday: Halloween, Christmas, Mother's Day

Three things Kermtzu did not want in the fic:

1. New Kryptonians
2. Mayson or Scardino

3. Lex Luthor