

Written in the Stars

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Rated PG

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Summary: This Alternate Universe story explores what would happen if Krypton exploded when Kal-El was an adult. Are Lois and Clark fated to be together, no matter the circumstances?

This story investigates what would have happened if Krypton had exploded when Kal-El was an adult instead of a baby. In the show, it seemed like the official story was that Superman came to Earth just in time to save the shuttle launch, although of course we knew better. I decided that it would be interesting to write a story where Superman really did come to Earth at that time.

Thanks to CarolM and Nancy for the great BR help. And thanks to everyone on the lcfanfic boards. This story was slow in coming together, so thanks to everyone who stuck it out.

I hope you enjoy the story. I welcome all kinds of feedback, both positive and negative, in public or private forms.

No matter what, she wasn't going to cry.

... Even though she could feel the tightening in her throat as she ran down the hall, trying to get as far away from the campus newspaper office as she could. Even though her vision blurred and her eyes prickled hotly despite her best efforts. Even though a choking sob worked its way past her tightly clenched jaw. She *was not* going to cry, even though her heart thumped the same rhythm over and over again.

Paul and Linda.

Linda and Paul.

The picture would not go away, no matter how hard she tried.

Nor would the crumpled newspaper in her hand. That was *her* story on the front page. Her headline, her ideas, her sentences, her investigation ...

Linda's name.

People were staring as she shoved past them. Someone dropped their books because of her, but she didn't have the courage to turn around and apologize. She needed to get away from the crowds.

Hardly paying attention, Lois ducked into the next room she saw, quickly slamming the door behind her. Thankfully, it was empty.

She sank into a chair and dumped her backpack on the ground.

Then she let the tears come.

How could Linda do something like that to her? She had trusted Linda, told her that she had a crush on Paul, and Linda had listened the whole time. She had even given Lois tips to get Paul's attention. Of course, none of those had worked, and now Lois wondered if maybe Linda was secretly sabotaging her the whole time.

And Paul ... Obviously, he didn't like her and never would. She probably wasn't pretty enough or smart enough or —

"Are you all right, dear?"

Lois jolted in shock and snapped her head up to see who had spoken to her. Apparently, she wasn't alone after all.

The woman who had spoken to her was petite, with fading blonde hair. She was dressed in a sloppy shirt, and her eyes seemed large yet kind behind the glasses. She looked a little familiar, but Lois couldn't quite place her.

"You seem upset," the woman spoke again.

"I'm sorry," Lois finally spoke. "I didn't mean to barge in on you." She moved to pick up her things, but the woman stopped her.

"Now, don't you go yet, honey. I can tell that something's upsetting you, and I'm not about to let you leave until you tell me what it is. Is it boy troubles?"

"How did you know?" Lois croaked.

"When I was your age, that's what it always was for me," she said pragmatically. "Would you like some tea?"

"Well ... okay," Lois found herself saying.

The woman walked to the small sink at the back of the room. Water gushed out of the tap, and she filled a beat-up electric kettle, plugging it into the wall.

Lois began to look around the room more closely. There were several long tables with sanded wood tops. Flecks of paint in all different colors decorated their surfaces. The air was thick with the smell of paint, and Lois could also see several easels set up by the large windows along the east wall. It was an art studio.

"Hey, I remember where I've seen you before," Lois realized. "Your picture is on those posters around campus."

"Those silly things," the famous painter waved aside, getting two mugs out from the cupboard. "I was never very fond of them, you know. The university has spent far too much money to get me out here in the first place, and then they don't even bother to put a picture of my work on the promotions. My face isn't the reason why I was invited. And it certainly isn't the reason why people will come to my show or attend my seminar."

"Oh, I don't know about that, Mrs. Kent," Lois spoke politely. "I came to see you without even knowing that you were here."

"Well, that's true," she laughed. "But please call me 'Martha,' dear. I'm not one for formalities." She had placed a tea bag into each mug and filled them both with boiling water.

"All right, Martha," Lois agreed shyly. "I'm Lois."

"Well, Lois, how about you start telling me what happened between you and this boy." Martha placed a steaming mug in front of Lois, and Lois automatically hugged it with her hands.

"It's stupid," she spoke glumly, her temporary good mood deflated.

"Come on, now — it can't be all that bad. Why don't you start by telling me who he is?"

"He's editor of the school paper," she finally began.

"Sounds prestigious," Martha commented neutrally.

"It is," Lois agreed. "He's a really great reporter."

"Are you a reporter as well, Lois?"

"Yes," Lois nodded. "Or I will be, anyway. Someday, I'm going to win the Pulitzer." She lifted her chin at that last statement, waiting for Martha to tell her that she shouldn't count on something like that happening.

"That's wonderful, Lois," Martha said instead. "You certainly seem to have the determination to do it."

"Thanks," Lois flushed. She took a sip of her tea and then paused as the flavors mingled on her tongue. "What kind of tea is this?" she asked curiously.

"Oolong," Martha replied, taking a sip from her own mug. "It can be difficult to come by when I'm home in

Smallville, Kansas, but is worth the extra effort.”

“I can’t imagine living in a small place like that,” Lois said without thinking. Realizing what she had done, she hastily tried to backtrack. “I mean, I’m sure it’s a nice place. Just that some people might like ... I mean, it’s just not ...”

“I know what you mean,” Martha reassured her with a smile. “I know that Smallville might not be the ideal home for many people, but it’s home to me. And as much as I like traveling to different parts of the world, I always miss being home.”

Lois nodded, although she couldn’t really understand. To her, home was a place she wanted to get away from as quickly as possible and never return to again.

“So, what is it about this editor?” Martha reminded Lois.

“Oh, well, I wanted to find a story to put in the school paper,” Lois told her. “I thought that if I could come up with a really good story, then Paul would realize how good I would be for the paper. Freshmen don’t normally have regular positions there, but I know I’m good enough to be a part of it. And, well, I guess that was only half of it. Paul’s really ... Not that I’m shallow or anything, but it was still something that ...” She blushed and fiddled with her mug, feeling too embarrassed to go any further.

“I know what you mean, dear,” Martha reassured her. “Why don’t you just go on?”

“Okay,” Lois nodded. “Well, I found a really great story. Did you know that one of the assistant coaches for the football team is stealing exams for his team members?”

Martha’s eyes widened. “I didn’t know that.”

“Well, he is. I found out *everything* and wrote a really great story about it.”

“And did you show it to Paul?”

“No,” Lois whispered, feeling the tears prickle again. “I was just heading to the office to give it to him when I saw this.” She picked the newspaper that had her story with Linda’s name written on it and placed it on the table between herself and Martha.

“Oh, honey,” Martha spoke sympathetically.

“Linda and I were best friends,” Lois said quietly. “And when I opened the door of the office today, I saw her and Paul ... They were ...” She couldn’t bring herself to say it. Reliving that kiss was beyond her capability right now.

“Oh, Lois, come here.”

And before she even realized it, Lois found herself hugging Martha desperately as the sobs shook her body. Martha stroked her hair and hummed softly a fragment of a song that she didn’t recognize but was still comforted by.

“I’m so sorry you had to see that,” Martha said to her.

“Now that I think of it, I’m not too surprised that Linda did it,” Lois choked out. “But I just really wanted to impress Paul”

“Honey, any guy that can be won over by something as trivial as a news article isn’t worth fighting for,” Martha told her. “If he doesn’t love you for who you are rather than what you can do, then there’s no point. My husband Jonathan doesn’t love me for my paintings or even for my apple pie. He loves me for who I am.”

“Really?”

“Well, sometimes I wonder about the pie,” Martha joked.

Lois giggled. “I don’t know if I’ll ever find someone like that,” she confessed honestly.

“You will,” Martha assured her. “Trust me on that. And

in the meantime, it’s not worthwhile to waste your energy chasing after men who aren’t good enough for you.”

“You know, you’re really good at this kind of stuff,” Lois told Martha. “I bet your kids are always coming to you with their problems.”

A sad look passed over Martha’s face, and Lois knew instantly that she had said something wrong.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, although she wasn’t quite sure why.

“Don’t be,” Martha smiled sadly. “It’s just that Jonathan and I had always wanted children, but ... Well, I guess it just wasn’t in our stars.”

“Oh,” She didn’t know why she had just assumed that Martha had children. Maybe because she had shown herself to be a better mom than Lois’ own mother had been, even in the few short minutes they had known each other.

“For a while, we thought we might be able to adopt, but then that didn’t work out either,” Martha shared.

“I’m sorry,” she told Martha. “That must’ve been really hard for you.”

“Well, there are some good things that came out of it,” Martha shared. “The opportunity to work on my paintings, for example. But sometimes I do wonder how my life would’ve been if things had worked out differently.” She got a far-off look in her eyes for a moment but quickly snapped out of it. “But that’s enough about me,” she spoke. “How about you tell me more of what kinds of things you’re going to do as a reporter?”

Eight Years Later

Lois wondered what the Kents would say if they saw her right now. Jonathan would probably be shocked at first but would soon realize that it was just one more crazy situation that Lois had gotten herself into. Martha would probably take her aside gently and ask her how she might do this differently in the future in order to avoid getting into this mess.

How *could* she have done this differently?

Well, for starters, she probably could’ve not snuck onto the shuttle. But that would’ve meant she wouldn’t have gotten the story, and that was no good.

Well, maybe she could’ve brought someone along with her. Like Jimmy.

Yeah, that was just a *great* idea. Then there would be two people stuck inside the room with a bomb. But maybe Jimmy would have a way to get someone’s attention rather than yelling and banging. That would be great right now.

“Can anyone hear me?” Lois yelled again, hitting the wall as she spoke. “There’s a *bomb*!”

The Kents had given her quite a bit of wisdom over the years, Lois reflected. It was truly tragic that they were never able to have kids. The world was a pretty unfair place when people like her parents had two daughters while the Kents weren’t even able to adopt. Ever since she had burst in on Martha unexpectedly all those years ago, they had been sort of an adopted family for her, so maybe the cosmic scales were balanced in some way.

Lois had kept in touch with Martha when the artist had gone back to Smallville, sharing letters and phone calls. Then, at Christmas, Lois’ mother had announced that she and Lucy were going on a trip to Thailand so she could “find herself.” Since Lois was technically an adult, Ellen wouldn’t be paying for her to come. With her father as absent as always, Lois was resigning herself to a Christmas alone until Martha and Jonathan stepped forward and

offered for her to come out to Smallville.

And that's when she had first met Jonathan. He was in the barn underneath the tractor when she had come in. Some of the wires on that tractor had needed to be replaced, and —

The wires! The idea came to Lois suddenly.

She pried off the covering from the wall that hid the bomb and slashed at the cluster of wires she found there with her Swiss Army knife. She couldn't tell if there was an effect, but maybe it would get someone's attention.

At first, Lois was reluctant to accept the Kents' generosity, she remembered. But she soon realized that the Kents were lonely, and their simple lifestyle combined with two separate incomes meant they had more than enough money to pay for the occasional plane ticket. After that first Christmas, their relationship was even more cemented, and it had been strong ever since.

But come to think of it, it had been a while since she had talked to them. She had called maybe a week ago, but Martha had seemed very distracted about something and had finally asked Lois to call her back later.

Of course, the chances of there being a later for Lois didn't look very good right now. Actually, it didn't look good for anyone on board the ship. What if no one came in time?

Before Lois could dwell on that, the door burst open, and a strange man suddenly came through.

"Help! There's a bomb!" Lois shrieked, pointing at the digital countdown.

The man strode over to the wall, ripped the device off, and pulled it apart, revealing the explosive. Lois watched attentively. She should pay attention to what he was doing so she could repeat it if she ever found herself in a similar situation.

But the man defied all expectation when he opened his mouth wide and swallowed the explosive in one big gulp.

"Are you insane?" she demanded hysterically.

The man simply smiled as the sound of a muffled explosion erupted from within his stomach.

For the first time, Lois really looked at the man. Although he appeared focused, his face did look like it could be kind, with warm brown eyes and a concerned expression. But what on earth was he wearing?! Skin-tight blue tights, with a red cape and a strange symbol on his chest. And red boots and was that ... red underwear? With a yellow belt?

"What the hell are you?" she demanded, feeling too shocked to be polite.

"Are you all right?" he asked, ignoring her question. There was something about his voice It wasn't really an accent that Lois could recognize, but it did seem as if this man was unused to speaking English.

"I'm fine," she replied.

The man nodded, but before he could say anything else, a group of colonists appeared in the empty doorway.

"There was a bomb," Lois rushed to explain. "He ... ate it." The magnitude of what he had done hadn't even settled in yet.

Young Amy Platt rolled forward from the group. Lois couldn't help but smile when she saw Amy. That girl had an incredible amount of courage.

"Hi," Amy greeted the strange man.

"Hello," the man replied. He looked curiously at her wheelchair but didn't say anything.

That caught Lois' attention. Didn't he know what a

wheelchair was for?

"I like your costume," Amy continued.

The man looked down at his strange garb. "Thank you," he replied with a faint smile.

"Can you really fly?" she asked.

Lois' eyes bugged. This man could also fly?!

"Yes," the man nodded. "I can."

The way he said it was almost as if he wasn't used to the idea himself.

"Can you teach me?" Amy asked.

The man looked surprised and at a loss for words.

"No, he can't, Amy," Lois jumped in. "Not to fly. But once this lab is operational, walking is very possible."

Then, fate slapped her in the face as the speaker cracked to life.

"Attention, colonists. The mission has been scrubbed. Prepare to disembark."

The disappointment felt by all the colonists sank the room into despair, and even Lois felt her spirits dip, despite her recent brush with near-death.

"That's it, then," one of the men said. "It's over."

"Why?" Lois asked.

"Once the thrusters have been fired, they have to be replaced," Mrs. Platt explained.

"We'll lose our launch window," the same man spoke again. "We'll just have to forget about Space Station Prometheus."

Lois looked sadly down at Amy. How much longer would it be before she would have this opportunity again?

"Is there anything wrong with the transport vehicle or the station itself?" the strange man in tights spoke up.

"No," the colonist replied.

"Then all you need is a way to get there," he said.

"And how are they supposed to do that?" Lois asked despondently.

"Well," the man spoke carefully. "I can take them there. I'll give them a ... a 'boost.'"

He spoke the colloquial term with hesitation, and he didn't look too convinced about his own abilities either.

"You can do that?" Lois asked sharply.

"Yes," he replied, this time sounding more firm. "I can."

Lois spun around in her chair, taking in the empty newsroom. Although it was a monumental day, it wasn't without disappointment.

For one thing, she did not appreciate being escorted out to the parking lot by security before the shuttle was lifted into space. Yes, she had snuck on board illegally, but that was no reason to cut her out of the eyewitness account, was it?

And although she stayed around in the parking lot after the launch, the flying man didn't return, which cut out her chances of an exclusive. Perry had not been happy about that.

But she did manage to write up a pretty decent article, being the person with the most knowledge about this strange man, even though it was hardly anything.

She broke off another piece of her Double Fudge Crunch bar and savored the taste of the chocolate melting on her tongue. And she had come up with a pretty good name for him, all things considered. And she knew that tomorrow was another day, and she would have another chance at tracking down Superman and finding out exactly where he came from and what he was doing here.

Part 2

"I don't want to hear any more excuses!" Perry White snapped at his news team. "Think! What would draw him out? Use your instincts. Beat the bushes, turn the stones. Get me Superman!"

Lois scurried out of the conference room with the rest of the pack. She couldn't really blame Perry for his foul mood. It had been three days since Superman's appearance at the launch, and there had been no sign of him since. Lois was sure she had exhausted every contact on her rolodex, and she was running out of ideas.

Starting to run out of ideas, anyway. Lois Lane was never completely defeated.

Her phone rang as she approached her desk, and she snatched it up eagerly. "Lois Lane," she answered crisply. "Hi, Lois."

"Martha! Hi!" Lois slouched over in her desk and picked up a notepad to make it look like she was talking to a source, just in case Perry was watching her.

"How are you, dear?"

"Busy," Lois replied, hurriedly scribbling nonsense into her notebook. "You've heard of the whole Superman thing, right?"

There was an unnatural pause on the line before Martha continued. "Yes, I have heard about him. Lois, the reason why I called is because I was wondering if you would have a chance to come out to Smallville this week."

"Oh, Martha, I don't think I can," Lois replied, scanning the newsroom to make sure no one was paying attention to her call. "Perry's riding everyone hard about the Superman story. There's no way he would let me take time off unless there was some sort of emergency."

"Lois ... " Martha paused again. "I don't really want to say much over the phone," she spoke carefully. "But let me assure you that it will be worth your while to come out to Smallville as soon as you can."

Lois' pen stilled on the paper. Was Martha saying what it sounded like she was saying?

"Martha, what exactly are you saying?" Lois asked.

"I can't tell you any more like this, dear," Martha replied. "Just promise me you'll come out to Smallville. We could really use your help."

"I can be out there by tomorrow morning," Lois told her.

"Thank you. Oh, and another thing, Lois."

"Yeah?"

"Don't bother buying a return ticket."

Lois drummed her fingers on the steering wheel of her rental car as she inched her speed up a couple more miles per hour. She was literally putting her job on the line for this. She hadn't even had the courage to tell Perry exactly where it was she was going; she just told him that she was following up on a lead.

Of course, she trusted the Kents and knew that they wouldn't mislead her. But she still wondered how such simple people got so mixed up in men who could fly and lift rockets into space.

What made her the most anxious, of course, was that she had no idea what to expect. Who — or *what* — exactly was Superman?

But the Kents were kind people, and she didn't believe that they would harbor anyone sinister. And they were good judges of character.

They hadn't even met Claude, and they still knew that he was bad news. Lois shuddered to think about what would've happened if she didn't have the good advice of Jonathan and Martha to guide her when she was working with Claude.

She had been slavishly devoted to him early on in their working relationship, he being the more experienced reporter. And it hadn't taken long before Lois had developed an embarrassing crush on him. But by talking it through with Martha and Jonathan, she had realized she was repeating the exact same mistake she had made with Paul, trying to impress him by bending to his will rather than by showing her true spirit. As it turned out, Claude started getting nasty the minute Lois started asserting herself and was thankfully transferred to Paris soon after Lois broke her first big story for the Planet. She had won her first Kerth for that story.

As she turned down the gravel path leading to the Kent farm, she smiled to herself, remembering that night. Perry had pulled some strings, and Lois was able to bring both Jonathan and Martha to the awards night, and it had been one of her proudest moments.

Lois knew for a fact that this family could be trusted. But instead of lessening her nerves, the knowledge only served to feed her curiosity. She was desperate to find out exactly what was going on.

As she pulled up in front of the house, Martha came out to greet her.

"I'm so glad you're here, Lois," Martha told her as they shared a hug.

"I am, too," Lois replied. "I think I might be more glad, though, if I knew exactly why I was here."

"We're sorry about that," Martha replied. "But we had no idea how to approach it on the phone, and so we just thought it would be best if we told you in person."

Lois followed Martha into the house, scanning her surroundings closely. Was Superman here?

"Please sit down, Lois," Martha beckoned. "Jonathan is out in the barn, but we both agreed we wanted to tell you as soon as possible."

"Martha, you're driving me crazy!" Lois exclaimed. "Just tell me what it is, won't you?"

"All right," Martha clasped her hands together, focusing herself. Finally, she spoke. "The Tuesday before last, Jonathan and I were sitting out on the porch after dinner when we saw a streak run through the sky and land somewhere near Shuster's field."

Lois felt a tingle run up her spine. Something told her it wasn't just a shooting star.

"We drove the truck out to investigate," Martha continued. "And in the field we found a ... spacecraft of sorts. It had opened up, and inside it was a man."

"Superman," Lois breathed.

"Well, that's not actually his name, honey," Martha chuckled. "But yes, that's who we found. He's from a planet called Krypton."

"He's an alien?" Lois asked with curiosity. So some of the wild speculation was right after all.

"Yes, he is, dear," Martha replied. "There was some big disaster on Krypton, and he's the only survivor of the planet."

"Oh." Lois couldn't even imagine what that would be like. To be the only person to survive out of a whole planet? It was unimaginable. "So, where is he now?" she finally asked.

“Upstairs,” Martha replied. “He thought it might be best for me to explain before you met him.”

“You mean I can meet him?” Lois spoke, almost squealing with excitement.

“Yes, dear,” Martha laughed. Then she tilted her head towards the direction of the stairs. “Kal?” she called. “Lois would like to meet you now.”

Lois stood as she turned around to face the stairs. She saw the powerful legs first, encased in deep blue jeans. A black t-shirt covered his chest, but the tight fit didn’t leave much to the imagination. Her jaw hung as she took in the large, powerful arms that stretched out to touch the banister on either side of him. The bright suit had been distracting before, but now Lois could really take in all of his physical attributes.

It was a long time before she finally made it to his face. That was certainly recognizable, although his expression looked less lost, but a little more nervous. He reached the bottom of the stairs and took a few steps towards Lois.

“Hello,” he greeted her with a small bow. Then, catching Martha’s eye, he corrected himself and stuck out a hand awkwardly. “I am Kal-El.”

“Hello, Kal-El,” Lois replied faintly. “I’m Lois Lane.”

Kal stood in the upstairs hallway, trying to find a balance between eavesdropping and keeping tabs with the conversation downstairs, for when Martha called to tell him it was okay to come down. He was still unused to the amazing abilities his body now possessed, and this exercise would probably do him some good.

Martha finally called him, and he cautiously walked down the stairs, keeping both hands on the railings at either side. Stairs were not something you found on Krypton, and like everything else, he was still getting used to them. Sure, Earth wasn’t a very advanced civilization, but why didn’t humans realize that motorized lifts or ramps were much better methods of getting up and down?

The woman standing in the kitchen was the same he remembered from the Prometheus launch, although her hair was styled differently, and she wore different clothes, too. They looked more like the kinds of clothes Martha wore, although not quite.

Her expression was also different, her mouth hanging open in shock.

“Hello,” he greeted her, beginning to bow. But he caught himself before he did and snuck a glance at Martha’s encouraging face before reaching out his hand towards her. Yet another thing he needed to get used to. “I am Kal-El,” he introduced himself.

“Hello, Kal-El,” she replied. “I’m Lois Lane.”

She still looked like she was in a state of shock. She hadn’t let go of Kal’s hand yet, and her eyes roamed over his face.

“Please, sit down, Ms. Lane,” Kal asked her, hoping he got her title right.

She plopped obediently into her chair, gripping the wood of the table in her fingers.

Kal took a seat along with Martha. “I realize this might be quite a shock to you, Ms. Lane,” Kal told her. “I understand that Earth does not have any contact with other planets.”

“Uh, no,” Lois replied. “You would be our first one. Contact, that is. As far as I know, anyway. But who knows? Maybe the government is hiding the existence of people like you from the general population. Of course, if that

were the case, then I should know about something like that so I could expose it to the world. That’s what I do. I’m an investigative reporter. I expose things. And call me Lois, please.”

Kal blinked, trying to keep up with her thought process. He had thought his English was progressing, but she spoke with phenomenal speed. He did catch that she had mentioned being a reporter, though, so he jumped on that.

“Martha said you were a reporter,” he told Lois. “And that is why I wanted to ask for your help.”

“My help?”

“Yes. I’ve seen the news reports on the TV, and I know that everyone is curious about me. And I understand that. But I am not sure what the best way to approach this situation is. With the things I can do, I can understand these people being frightened. I am not familiar with the customs and the culture here. I do not know how to explain my circumstances.”

“We figured you’d be able to help, Lois,” Martha spoke up. “You know how to get the message across to the public.”

“Right,” Lois spoke slowly.

Kal could see that she was overwhelmed by the whole situation. And he thought he understood where she was coming from. It would be a lot for her to take in all at once.

“If you need more time to think about this, I understand,” Kal spoke.

“I need to go for a walk,” Lois announced. “And figure this out.”

“We understand, dear,” Martha told her.

“But I want you to come with me,” Lois said, turning to face Kal. “We have a lot to talk about.”

“Yes, that would be fine,” Kal agreed in surprise. Judging by the look on Lois’ face, he didn’t have much choice in the matter.

They made the first part of their walk in silence, as Lois’ mind whirled with everything she had been hit with upon her arrival. Imagine having an actual *alien* standing beside her.

Kal made an interesting companion to walk with. He looked at *everything* with such intense interest. His eyes were constantly roaming over the landscape. Occasionally, he would veer off of their chosen path to get a closer look at a tree or something. Lois always followed him, interested to see what he was interested in.

Once, he actually crouched down low to the ground and poked at a cluster of mushrooms.

“Are these mushrooms?” he asked Lois.

“Yes,” she replied, bemused.

“They are different from what I thought they would be,” Kal said enigmatically, adding nothing more to the subject.

The clouds provided endless fascination for him as well. They were thick and grey that morning, and he was constantly gazing up at them, watching their lazy trek across the horizon.

Lois had set a rough course out to the slough on the west end of the Kent farm, and it wasn’t until they were about halfway there that she had the courage to actually speak to Kal.

“I never got the chance to thank you for saving my life last week,” Lois spoke haltingly.

Kal’s head snapped up at her words, and a faint smile touched his lips. “The colonists should thank you. If you did not cut those wires, then there is no way anyone would

have found out about the bomb in time. I was not even sure if I would be able to make it in time.”

“Where were you when you found out the launch was in trouble?” Lois asked.

“In the Kents’ living room,” Kal replied.

“And you made it all the way to Metropolis in that time?”

“It is hard to believe, isn’t it?” Kal wondered. “I am not even used to it myself.”

“You just got these abilities?” Lois questioned.

“When I came to Earth,” Kal nodded. “On Krypton, I had the same abilities you do right now.”

Lois’ head felt like a crowded bus terminal, full of questions that seemed to all be going in completely different directions. But she knew that asking them now wouldn’t be the way to go. She needed to organize them in her head and present them in a logical order. Otherwise, she wouldn’t end up getting a clear story from Kal. This was an amazing opportunity that just dropped onto her lap, and she wanted to do it right.

“We need to decide what to do about telling the public,” Lois said instead. “How much we’re going to share about you, and how we’re going to do it. Can I interview you? Then decide what to keep and how to present it?”

“That seems like a good idea,” Kal agreed.

“Not right now, but later this afternoon, maybe. I need to get my head wrapped around this.”

Kal blinked and stared at her in shock, halting in his stride. “Excuse me?” he choked.

“I said I need to get my head wrapped around it. It’s just a lot of information to process, and I need some time to think about it before I can do a good job,” Lois clarified.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, the light switching on. “That was a figure of speech.”

“Oh, yeah,” Lois replied. “Sorry if I confused you.”

“No, that is fine. I have a good understanding of formal English, but I am still developing my slang repertoire.”

A question rose once again in Lois’ head, but she forced it down. She would ask later today. For now, she shivered a little and rubbed her arms in an attempt to warm herself up.

“Do you mind if we head back?” she asked. “It’s chillier than I thought it would be, and I didn’t bring a warm enough jacket.”

“Oh, I am sorry, Lois,” Kal apologized suddenly. “Yes, we can head back.” They turned around as Kal stripped off his jacket and placed it around her shoulders.

“But now you’ll be cold,” Lois pointed out, snuggling into the new warmth regardless.

“I do not actually feel the cold anymore,” Kal shrugged. “I told Martha and Jonathan that they did not have to purchase the jacket for me, but they insisted I would need it to keep up appearances.”

“Oh,” Lois replied with surprise. Imagine not ever feeling cold again!

They had gone a couple more steps before warning drops of rain fell from the sky and hit Lois’ nose.

Kal jerked his head up in surprise to look into the clouds. He stretched his arms out, trying to take as much of it in as possible.

“Is this *rain*?” he asked with excitement as the frequency of the drops increased.

“Uh, yes,” Lois replied.

Kal blinked as drops of rain hit his face. He laughed up at the sky in delight.

“I take it they don’t have rain on Krypton?” Lois asked.

“Nothing like this,” Kal replied. “Come on.”

Before she knew what was happening, Kal had grabbed Lois’ hand and was pulling her along as he ran across the field. Their feet squished into the ground as they ran, and Kal let out a whoop as the rain began pelting even harder.

Finally getting to the farmhouse, Lois took shelter under the covered porch, panting for breath but grinning ear to ear. It had been ages since she had had that much fun being caught in a rainstorm. Most people in Metropolis just grumbled as they lifted their umbrellas.

Kal, she noticed, wasn’t short of breath at all but was looking at her with concern.

“Your hair is all wet now,” he told her.

“I know,” she replied, running her fingers through the tangled strands.

“Can I try something?” he asked hesitantly.

“Sure.” She dropped her hand.

Kal focused his gaze on her hair, and she gradually felt a gentle warmth landing on her hair, drying it to the roots.

“Whoa.” She ran her fingers through her hair again, this time feeling how soft and warm it was. “How did you do that?” she couldn’t resist asking.

“It’s a kind of ... heat vision, I guess you could call it,” Kal replied. “Interesting trick, don’t you think?”

“Very interesting,” Lois agreed.

Jonathan popped his head out onto the porch. “Hi, Lois,” he greeted. “It’s nice to see you.”

“You, too, Jonathan,” Lois replied, walking over to give him a hug. He didn’t seem to mind hugging her despite her damp jacket.

“If you two are done talking, lunch is ready inside,” he told the pair.

Keeping Jonathan from his meal was never a good idea, so Lois and Kal went in.

Lois was surprised when Kal sat down at an empty place at the table.

“Aren’t you eating, Kal?” she asked.

“Kal doesn’t need to eat,” Martha replied. Although the words themselves didn’t seem judgmental, Lois could tell that Martha didn’t approve.

“I get all the energy I need from the yellow sun here,” Kal explained. “There is no need for me to consume something I have no use for.”

Lois could see Martha biting her tongue at this, so she didn’t push the issue any further. Feeding people was as natural as breathing for Martha, and having a houseguest like Kal would be a different experience for her.

“So, you two got a chance to meet?” Jonathan asked, digging into his stew with gusto.

“Yes, we did,” Lois replied.

“Lois has agreed to help me with talking to the public,” Kal shared.

“To be fair, it ends up being a good deal for me, too,” Lois confessed. “My boss will be over the moon when he finds out that you’ve trusted me with this.” She caught sight of Kal’s confused expression. “I mean he’s going to be very excited,” she clarified.

“Oh,” Kal replied. “Well, I guess that means we both get to help each other out. Nothing wrong with that.”

“No,” Lois agreed. “Nothing wrong at all.”

Part 3

Kal settled into the soft armchair uneasily, not enjoying how deeply he sank into the cushion. Furnishings were so soft here on Earth.

He watched as Lois flipped through the small notepad she held in her hand. Her glossy brown hair fell across her face, and she tucked it behind her ear with impatience. The pencil placed there fell down, and she caught it clumsily between her fingers. She inserted the eraser end between her teeth and pondered the writing in her book.

Unconsciously, his vision slipped, and he found himself staring at her finger bones rather than at the skin covering them. He shut his eyes and opened them, happy to see everything back to normal. Clearly, he still needed to do some work on controlling his new powers.

Kal still wasn't sure what to expect from this interview. What was Lois' plan? He had no idea how something like this was conducted here.

"So, what will you do with this interview?" Kal asked her.

"Well, I'll write up an article to put in the Daily Planet, the newspaper I work for," Lois explained. "You might want to call a press conference later, but I'm hoping you'll let me have the exclusive." She grinned cheekily, but Kal didn't really understand.

"So, do you work for the government?" he tried.

"Uh, no. I work for a newspaper."

"But it is owned by the government, correct?"

"No, it's independent," Lois spoke slowly and clearly, looking at him with concern.

"Oh." He still didn't really understand.

"Kal, how do people on Krypton find out what's going on in the world?" Lois asked, laying her notebook aside.

"The Council of Elders will tell them," Kal replied.

"They will address anything that needs to be passed on to the people in a formal announcement."

"Everything?" she asked in shock. "All the crime and natural disasters and political issues and ... and even celebrity scandals?"

"Well, many of those things you mention did not happen on Krypton," he informed her. "It is ... *was* much more advanced than what is here on Earth. There was virtually no crime, and even the weather was mostly under our control. As for celebrities ... Martha has shown me a few pictures of them, and I can tell you that such people did not exist on Krypton. And I cannot understand the desire humans have to know about their lives."

"But what happens if the elders or whoever keep something from the people?" Lois asked. "Who is going to tell it to them?"

"Trust in our Elders is what Kryptonian society hinged on," Kal told Lois sternly. "If we cannot depend on them, then we can depend on nothing."

But he wasn't sure if he believed his words. There was one very important thing that the Elders had neglected to pass on to the people. The situation he was in right now was testament to that.

"Well, in some countries the government controls all the information the people get," Lois was telling Kal. He forced himself to focus on her. "But things work differently here in America and in most other countries. While the government does make some official statements, the majority of information is passed to the public by journalists, like myself, who work for independently owned companies. So while the Daily Planet will get your first exclusive interview, other news agencies will want to hear from you as well."

"I would be willing to talk to them," Kal decided. "If you will help me prepare what to say. I do not want to

frighten anyone or give the wrong impression."

"Well, then I guess we should start." Lois picked up her notepad again. Her eyes landed on the first question, and when she looked up at Kal, she had a very different expression on her face. "I want to take this in order," she spoke softly. "And that means I'm going to have to start with some difficult questions."

He had guessed he would be asked about this, but he still wasn't prepared for it. Not wanting to speak yet, he just nodded wordlessly.

"What happened on Krypton?" Lois asked gently.

He drew in a deep breath, willing himself to stay calm. "There was instability in the planet's core. My father was a scientist — Krypton's best. He discovered it, but no one would listen to him. Or none of the few he chose to tell," Kal corrected. "There were many he did not even approach, for fear of sending the planet into panic." Kal had been one of those people who hadn't been approached.

"So the instability ..."

"The planet exploded," Kal cut her off shortly. "My father and my mother had been working on an escape pod that would travel to Earth, but ... they only had enough time to make one."

His.

"Kal, I'm so sorry," Lois spoke.

He nodded blankly.

"They must've loved you very much," she said.

Her words brought images into his head. Ones that he didn't ... simply *couldn't* handle right now. He tried to restrain his emotions, just like he had been taught.

Distant. Cold.

He had never been very good at that. What he was good at ... was distraction.

"Lois, may I ask you a question?" he spoke up.

"Okay," she agreed.

"Are Jonathan and Martha your parents?"

"Oh, no," she replied, taken aback.

"You call them by their names, so that is what I guessed, even though the bond between you seems very strong. But I imagine the bond between you and your parents is even stronger."

A strange look passed over her face. "I don't talk to my parents anymore," she said abruptly.

"Not at all?" Kal asked in shock. This was not what he expected. "But what about the family unit? The basic institution that America is built on?"

"Yeah, well, it doesn't always work like that," Lois snapped. "Sometimes life ends up a little differently than you've planned."

"Yes, but they are your *parents*."

"So? Just because your parents loved you enough to give you their only chance for life doesn't mean that everyone has the same luck," she replied bitterly.

"That is not what I am —"

"Just drop it, okay, Kal?"

Kal fell silent.

Lois tapped her pencil on the paper, silently fuming. Why did he have to bring her family life into this? And to be critical of it on top of it all? Just because things on Krypton were perfect didn't mean that he needed to draw attention to it here.

"Lois?" Kal asked tentatively.

"What?" she replied moodily.

"What is it I am supposed to drop?"

Despite herself, Lois felt the corner of her mouth crawl upwards.

"The topic," she told him. "I wanted you to drop the topic."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"I am sorry, Lois," he spoke again. "I did not mean to say anything that would upset you."

"It's fine," Lois spoke, softening even more. "I realize that a lot of this is new to you, and you may not know how things are here on Earth. You just hit a sensitive spot, that's all." She probably wouldn't have been so angry at him if she wasn't so sensitive.

"I am sorry," he repeated. "I do have some factual knowledge of Earth culture, but I am learning that things are very different in real life."

"How did you get that factual knowledge?" Lois asked, remembering one of her many questions. "For that matter, how did you learn to speak English? I don't think a week is enough time to gain the proficiency that you have."

"There was a learning device on board the ship," Kal replied. "My father had placed me in a type of conscious sleep, and I was instructed on many things as I traveled here."

"He knew all those things about Earth?"

"Studying other cultures was a hobby of my father's," Kal reminisced with a smile. "He observed as much as he could from afar."

"He could see that much of life here?" Lois was amazed to think that Kryptonians had been observing Earth from afar for what was probably years.

"Krypton was much further ahead in technology than you are here," Kal informed Lois. "My father was even able to see some of the films you've created about people from other planets. He cautioned me that the people here might not be very accepting at first." He looked so wary that Lois had to jump in to reassure him.

"But in those movies, aliens are always these hideous, slimy things," she told Kal. "And you're not like that at all. In comparison to humans, you're actually pretty ho — I mean ..." She flushed. "You know, attractive. In a way. Not that I'm trying to flirt with you or anything," she rushed to clarify. "That would be uncalled for. In this interview situation. And you probably don't want to hear it from me, anyway. We're ... from different planets. The girls on Krypton are probably so different from me that you have no interest in ... me. I just meant that you're above average, I guess. Whatever that means. Who decides on average anyway? What's important is that you're not slimy. Or hideous."

Kal was staring at her, slack-jawed with eyebrows raised. Lois winced. This was probably her most unprofessional interview ever.

"Let's just go back to my list," Lois suggested meekly.

"Okay," Kal agreed, still appearing a little confused.

"What exactly are your abilities? We already saw that you're very strong, that you can fly, and that you can swallow bombs. But what was that heat thing you did earlier with my hair? And is there anything else you can do?"

"Ever since Jonathan and Martha pulled me out of the ship and brought me here, I have not found anything that could hurt me," Kal began. "So that explains how I could swallow the bomb. I can fly, as you know, and I can also operate at very high speeds that were unimaginable to me

on Krypton. You witnessed the heat vision, and in addition to that, I also have very powerful breath."

"Huh?"

"I can blow things over at great distances, and my lung capacity has seemed to expand," Kal explained.

"Oh! Okay. Continue, please."

"My senses, too, are very keen. I am capable of focusing them to experience an incredible amount of things. I can see almost to the microscopic level and hear the heartbeats of anyone I want to. And lastly, I can, uh ... see through solid objects."

"Really?" Lois unconsciously brought her notepad up in front of her chest. As if it would provide any protection.

"Please do not feel uncomfortable," Kal begged. "I would not intentionally violate your privacy in any way."

"I know you wouldn't," Lois told him. "Wait, intentionally?"

"I am still working on controlling all of them," he shared. "The vision is one I am having particular problems with."

"Oh," Lois replied. "I never thought about it that way. I mean, about how difficult it would be to learn to control all of those powers."

"I am getting better," Kal replied. "I am quite good at the strength and the speed. It is just some of the finer skills that I still need practice with. The Kents have purchased me a pair of glasses to act as trainers for the time being —"

"I haven't seen them," Lois remarked.

"I took them off for your visit," Kal replied, looking a little embarrassed. "They do not fit anyone's idea of an all-powerful hero, and I suppose I wanted to make a good impression."

"Well, I would say that your impression has been made and that you should get out the glasses if they'll help you," Lois told him.

Kal hesitated for a second and then made up his mind. "All right," he agreed.

Then he disappeared from the room in a flash, reappearing hardly a second later.

"Wow!" Lois remarked. "That was fast!"

"I am trying to practice," Kal replied. "I need to get as good at this as possible." He slipped the glasses on and pushed them up the bridge of his nose.

The glasses softened Kal, Lois decided. And they made him look less like a stranger to this world and more like he belonged.

"Very nice," she complimented.

"I am still not used to them," he spoke insecurely. "I do not look through objects or accidentally focus in on something anymore, but we did not have anything like this on Krypton."

"Well, they look good. So, now that you're here on Earth, what are your plans?" Lois asked, continuing with the interview. "How do you hope to live your life?"

"I have been given such incredible abilities," Kal told her. "And I want to be able to help in whatever way I can. Just like I did at the Prometheus launch."

"We haven't seen you in Metropolis since then," Lois pointed out.

"I did not plan on such an early debut," Kal explained. "I had hoped to acclimatize myself further before I would help out. But it was such a major emergency, I could not stand back. I just wanted to wait for someone to help me explain my story before I made any more appearances."

"That's understandable," Lois agreed. "So, are you

thinking of doing any more helping out in Metropolis?”

“Well, that is a definite possibility,” Kal spoke hesitantly. “Metropolis would also be a good place for me to learn more about Earth culture.”

“We would like having you around, too,” Lois added.

“I am glad to hear that,” Kal replied. “As a stranger to this planet, the last thing I want to do is make people uncomfortable with my presence.”

“Of course you wouldn’t, Kal!” Lois exclaimed. “I’ve only known you for a few hours, and I can already tell that you’re warm and compassionate and generous and ...” She stopped, flushing. She didn’t want to go overboard and scare him off, even though she was surprisingly passionate about defending him. “Anyway, people would have to be crazy to not want you around,” she finished.

“Thank you,” Kal smiled gratefully. “Although I feel that there must be at least some people who would ... fear me. What I know about Earth history has shown me that humans can be afraid of something that is different from what they understand.”

“Well ...” Lois began to defend. Then she gave up. “I guess you could be right,” she finally grumbled. “But I know the majority of people will want you around. We’re not all bad here.”

“Of course you are not,” Kal agreed. “I did not mean it like that, Lois. But that is one of the reasons why I wanted to have this interview. If humans know more about me, they are less likely to be afraid.”

“That’s true,” Lois replied.

“So, do you have anything else you would like to ask me?” Kal asked.

“I think I almost have it,” Lois told him, skimming over her notes. “Just one more thing. I promised one of the ladies at the Planet that I would ask.”

“Yes?”

“The suit. Is that what people normally wear on Krypton or something?”

Kal blushed. “Not exactly,” he replied. “There are some similarities, but Martha convinced me that I would need something more eye-catching to increase my visibility. And the cape was completely her idea.”

“I can see that,” Lois smiled. “I have to admit, I wondered about the costume as well, especially because you’re not wearing it now.”

“Martha and Jonathan have told me it is a good idea not to be too noticeable on the farm,” Kal told her. “Especially before you have a chance to publish your article. I do not want anyone telling my story except someone I can trust.”

Lois looked up in pleasant surprise. He trusted her?

“You trust me?” she asked.

“Of course I do,” Kal replied.

Lois felt her cheeks flush a little at this.

“Jonathan and Martha have recommended you, and I know I can trust them,” he continued.

“Oh. Right,” Lois spoke, trying not to feel disappointed. Of course he was talking about his relationship with Jonathan and Martha. Why should she care how he felt about her anyway?

“So, did you get everything you needed to write the article, Lois?” Martha asked as she came into the kitchen later that afternoon.

Lois was busy typing on her laptop at the table while Kal watched over her shoulder with interest.

“I’m almost done with it now,” she announced. “Then

I’ll just send it from here. Perry’s going to be ecstatic.”

“Is there more than one way to spell ‘satellite’?” Kal asked with confusion.

“No,” Lois replied shortly, hastily backspacing over the offending word. “But you know, I have editors for that.”

“Oh,” Kal replied.

Martha came up and joined Kal in looking over Lois’ shoulder. Lois forced herself to forget their presence and keep writing.

“So, you’ve decided to work from Metropolis?” Martha asked Kal, reading from the article.

“Yes,” Kal replied. “In talking with Lois, I have decided that concentrating the majority of my efforts towards Metropolis would be a good idea.”

“Have you given any thought about how you’re going to make that work?” Martha asked. “You need a place to stay, no matter how super powered you are. You’re welcome to stay here, of course, but making the trip back and forth might be too much.”

“I can fly fast enough that it shouldn’t be a problem,” Kal shook his head.

“That’s not going to work,” Lois spoke up, abandoning her article for the time being.

“Why not?” Kal frowned.

“I doubt you’ll be able to resist helping out as you make the trip to and from,” Lois explained. “And even though you can fly fast, you won’t do it all the time. Sooner or later, some obsessed person could track you down and trace you to the Kents, putting them in danger. If you stay in Metropolis, it would be nearly impossible for you to be tracked.”

Kal’s brow wrinkled in concentration. “All I really need is a place to sleep and wash myself,” he mused. “I am sure I could find a deserted rooftop or somewhere to sleep and then just come back here when I need to.”

“I don’t like the idea of you sleeping on rooftops, Kal,” Martha spoke up. “I know you can’t feel the elements, but still ...”

“You could stay with me,” Lois blurted out, surprising even herself.

Both Kal and Martha turned to look at Lois in surprise.

“Lois, that’s very generous,” Martha spoke up.

“You do not have to do something like that, Lois,” Kal told her.

“I want to,” Lois shook her head, growing more confident with her offer. “Lucy’s gone back to college in California, so I have an extra room.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Lois shrugged. “Living with someone in Metropolis would be a good experience for you, anyway. You’ll learn a lot more about life in the city that way. Besides, I’ve never lived with an alien before. It could be fun.”

“I am not that interesting,” Kal shook his head.

“That’s what you think,” Lois shot back. “And besides, I’m planning to make use of all your powers so I’ll never have to do any housework again.”

Kal blinked, slightly taken aback. Then his face settled in an easy smile. “I guess that is only fair,” he replied. “So, as of this night, I am now an official resident of Metropolis.”

Part 4

“I don’t get a lot of people stopping by, so I don’t think we need to make your presence public, but if someone does

see you over here for some reason, I'll say that you're a friend of Jonathan and Martha's who's visiting from Kansas," Lois told Kal as they landed in her apartment.

"Your place is different from the Kent's," Kal remarked, taking in his surroundings.

"It's an apartment, so the whole building is partitioned off like this so each person has their own space," Lois explained. "Feel free to explore around. This is going to be your home, after all."

Kal wandered into the kitchen and ran a hand over the countertops.

Lois followed him closely. For some reason, she couldn't stop hovering over him, taking in his reaction to everything.

"This is the kitchen," she spoke unnecessarily. "With the ... you know, stove, fridge," she gestured to each one. "And the microwave. And there's food ..." She opened a cupboard to show him and then closed it hastily when she saw the pathetic contents. "In case you get hungry, you know." Belatedly, she realized she was talking to a person who didn't eat.

"Oh, and here's the phone," she spoke, changing the subject abruptly. "If you need to call ... well, the Kents. Or me when I'm at work." How sad to think that he only knew three people on the entire planet. How lonely must that make him feel? "It's probably best if you don't answer the phone while you're here," she told him. "We can make an excuse for why you're here, but if we don't have to, then it makes it easier. But if you need me while I'm at work, then you can call me."

"How does the phone work?" Kal asked.

Lois blinked, shocked again at this reminder of how different Kal was. He looked so human it was hard to remember at times.

"Well, each phone line has a unique combination of digits. You just lift the receiver," she told him, demonstrating as she went. "And then you punch in the number you want. It'll connect you to the person you want to call." At least a phone was a pretty easy device to use.

"It sounds like a complicated way to talk to someone," Kal told her.

Well, maybe it wasn't easy for a Kryptonian.

"It was easier on Krypton?" Lois guessed.

"Telepathy tends to negate the need for technology like this," Kal replied, touching the phone gently, as if afraid to break it.

"Telepathy?" Lois asked with interest.

"Yes." But the tone of Kal's voice made it clear that he didn't want to talk about it.

Lois didn't ask any further. Clearly, his memories of Krypton were still painful, and it was probably best to not push him to share more than he wanted to.

"I'll show you to your room," she said instead, leading him towards it. "It's just beside mine." She stepped back to let Kal enter first.

He walked into the room slowly and stopped by the foot of the bed. He placed the small duffle bag that held all his worldly possessions on the bed and sat down beside it.

"Lucy picked out the bedding and pictures and everything," Lois explained. "And I know some of her tastes are a little ... Well, if you want to change something just let me know."

"You do not need to go through so much trouble, Lois." Kal replied. "You have already given me so much here."

"I was happy to do it," she shook her head. "Please

don't feel like you owe me or anything."

"Thank you," Kal nodded.

Lois glanced down at her watch.

"Oh, drat, I've got to get to work," she told Kal. "And I'm not even close to being ready. Look, I'm going to go get changed, and I'll let you get settled in."

She glanced down at Kal's duffle bag. Even without the aid of super speed, she doubted it would take him long.

"I don't know how, Lois, but you've done it again," Perry congratulated her as he handed her a plastic glass with some of the celebratory champagne. "You've stolen the biggest exclusive in town and brought it home for the Daily Planet."

"Well, a lot of it was luck," Lois replied modestly. "Superman already knew who I was from the launch, and that went a long way towards gaining his trust."

"Well, being at the right place at the right time is part of being a good reporter," Perry told her. "Anyway, I'm proud of you, darlin'."

"Thanks," Lois replied.

"Yeah, I bet this must feel good after everything that happened with Luthor," Jimmy piped up.

An uncomfortable silence settled among the small group.

"Um ... Yeah, it does," Lois replied cautiously, ignoring the burning in her cheeks from the attention.

"Sorry," Jimmy apologized, wincing. "Uh ... good job, Lois." He slunk away back to his desk.

"Are you okay, darlin'?" Perry asked Lois.

"I'm fine," she replied glumly. "I suppose I should just stop living in the past and get over what happened with Luthor, but I still can't let go."

"The Luthor story was solid journalism," Perry reassured her. "You did a good job, and it wasn't your fault that things went the direction that they did. But you're right in saying that you need to stop dwelling on the past."

"I know I've been in a bit of a rut since then," she confessed.

"Well, you definitely pulled yourself out of it," Perry told her. "If it wasn't the Prometheus story, the Superman story has definitely done it for you. This was a great job, Lois."

"Thanks."

"To think that out of all the reporters in Metropolis, you were the only one to get the Superman scoop!" he crowed.

"Well, that's why I'm the best," Lois shrugged. She hadn't told Perry about her trip to Kansas, and she wasn't planning on it. No one needed to know that Superman had been living in Smallville up until earlier today. It drew too much attention to the Kents. She was more than willing to swallow the cost of a plane ticket in order to protect Jonathan and Martha.

"Now, you know I don't let anyone rest on their laurels for long," Perry spoke. "Get out there and grab me another exclusive, okay?"

"Got it, Perry," she grinned.

Although Perry's driving words still rang in her head, she decided to allow herself one moment of happy gloating at her desk before she went off to find another hot story. Of course, that moment was soon interrupted.

The paper with her interview on the front page smacked down on top of her keyboard, and a husky voice broke her silent triumph.

"I can't believe you didn't ask him," Cat complained.

“Some investigative reporter you are.”

“I don’t know if you noticed, Cat,” Lois spoke teasingly, “but I tend to write serious pieces of journalism. Not fluffy bits of dirt disguised as a gossip column.”

“Say what you want, Lois,” Cat replied, settling herself in the chair beside Lois’ desk. “But I could argue that the readership for my column is actually higher than for some of your articles.”

“Well, no one said the general population of Metropolis had good taste,” Lois grumbled.

“Of course, when you’ve got an article like a Superman interview, then I’m sure you’ve snagged the majority,” Cat decided. “And I still can’t believe you didn’t ask him my question.”

“I did, Cat,” Lois said, rolling her eyes.

Cat immediately sat forward on her seat, planting her elbows on Lois’ desk. “And?”

“The suit’s kind of similar to what he wore on Krypton. But the colors are different, as are a few other things, apparently.”

“So, it does come off?”

“Of course it does, Cat,” Lois laughed. “He may be from another planet, but you definitely can’t tell that from looking at him. He’s just like any ordinary guy.”

“Well, I’ve never met him face to face. How am I supposed to know?” she shrugged. “Hey, do you think —”

“No,” Lois answered.

“You didn’t even hear what I wanted to ask,” she pouted.

“One of two things. Either you wanted an interview, or you wanted me to set you up on a date with him. And there’s no way I would have said yes to either of those.”

“I was going to ask for both,” she grinned saucily.

“Goodbye, Cat,” Lois told her, handing back her copy of the Planet.

“See you around, spoilsport.”

Lois shook her head as Cat moved on to prowl another part of the newsroom. The two had clashed dangerously when they first met, but Lois quickly learned to not be fazed by Cat’s behavior, and they had eventually come to respect each other. And perhaps even become close enough to be considered friends, although neither would be willing to say that within earshot of the other.

Lois pulled out her notebook and began flipping through it. Perry had not given her a new assignment yet, and she wanted to see if there was anything in here that could be developed into a pitch for Perry. She was still not happy with how the whole Prometheus affair was tied up. Baines had died before the shuttle was sabotaged, and that pointed to an accomplice or perhaps even a boss who directed Baines.

But although she wanted to focus on a new story, her mind kept wandering back to Kal. He was alone in her apartment today, and she couldn’t help but worry about him. Was he doing okay? She was tempted to call, but she had already instructed him not to answer the phone in order to prevent people from finding out about him. And he did know how to use it now, so he could call if he had any problems.

He would be fine, Lois decided. He was Superman, after all.

Kal stared at the small black device he held in his hand, the “remote control.” His father had done an excellent job in teaching him the basics of English through the learning

device on board the ship, but Kal had discovered over and over again that such study was only good for so much and that there were a lot of things he would need to learn in order to function in this society.

The device fit neatly in his hand, and Lois had explained that it controlled the TV that was placed against the wall. Kal knew the Kents had something similar at their home, but he had never used it before. They rarely turned it on, and even then he did not need to control it. But now that he was facing the day alone, minus whenever anyone needed help, Kal knew he needed some way to pass the time. Lois had mentioned that the TV could help him learn a lot about the culture here, so that sounded like a good idea.

But he could not make sense of the abbreviations on the control device, and there were strange symbols printed there that he was sure weren’t letters. The last thing he wanted to do was guess and damage the TV.

He could call Lois and ask her how to use it, but he did not want to disturb her at work. Although her number was taped beside the phone, and he was pretty sure he knew how to use it, he knew that calling her every time he ran into a small difficulty would quickly become an inconvenience to her, and he did not want to do that.

Going to visit the Kents was also out of the question. Although he was positive he would know how to fly back to Smallville, he did not want to come to them for advice on this. It was for the same reason that he had declined Martha’s offer to stay with him for a few days to help get him acclimatized. They had given him so much, and he wanted to show that he was capable of looking after himself. He did not want to become a burden to anyone.

Returning his attention to the controller, Kal tried to make sense of the strange symbols. They were a bizarre mix of geometric shapes, from triangles to squares to straight lines. And even the letters on the device did not seem to join together to make words of any kind. What did “PWR” mean? It was the largest button, so perhaps it was the most important one.

Cautiously, Kal pointed the device in the direction of the TV and pressed the “PWR” button. Instantly, the black screen jumped to life, and the apartment was filled with the sound of cheers and clapping. Kal watched the people who appeared on the screen with interest. Martha had explained to him that most of the people on TV were “actors” and were actually pretending to be whoever they were on the TV. There was nothing like that on Krypton, so Kal was interested to see what something like that looked like.

There were four “actors” standing in front of a large wheel with numerical values placed around it. Three of the actors were clapping and cheering, while the fourth was much calmer. Occasionally, the screen would switch to a view of another actor standing in front of a large board with letters placed on it.

“I’d like to buy a vowel,” one actor announced.

The calmer one, seeming to be the leader of the group, gave the actor permission.

“I’d like to buy an ‘A,’” the actor said.

The leader gave some calculations, and soon the letter board lit up. The female actor by the board turned over the lights to reveal three A’s.

There was more clapping and cheering.

Kal shook his head in confusion. What was the point of pretending something like this? He knew that some humans took pleasure in gambling, but watching people pretend to

gamble seemed like a poor use of time to him.

But how was he to change the show?

He looked again at the device. Perhaps some of the other bigger buttons would be able to help him. What did “vol” or “ch” mean? Guessing, he pushed the down arrow with the “vol” label.

The sound on the TV got quieter.

He pushed the up arrow, and the sound got louder. That mystery solved, Kal pushed the down arrow under “ch.”

The show changed.

A woman stood in front of a gathered audience, smiling at them all.

“Does everybody know what time it is?” she asked.

“Tool Time!” the audience replied in unison.

“That’s right!” the woman confirmed. “Binford Tools is proud to present Tim ‘The Tool Man’ Taylor!”

Two men entered to the applause of the audience. Kal looked at them curiously. Which one was the Tool Man? He assumed it was a nickname, but he wasn’t sure where that would have come from. He couldn’t be made of tools, could he? Both men looked to be like normal humans. And why were the audience members included in the screen? Didn’t that spoil the illusion they were trying to create? Perhaps he would have to come back to this show later in order to really understand it.

He pushed the “ch” button again, and this next show was very different from the previous two. Something about it told him right away that it was the “news” like Lois had described and that these were not actors, but reporters with a job to do.

They talked about a fire blazing in an apartment building, and footage was shown from the scene. An address was given, and Kal felt that he could find it, given the rough sketch Lois had given him of the city. He stood up from his seat. Learning more about Earth culture could wait a while. For now, he had more important things to do.

Lois entered her apartment to something completely foreign to her in this building.

The smell of cooking.

“Kal?” she asked, entering her kitchen and seeing him bent over the stove.

“Lois!” his head snapped around to meet her gaze. “You surprised me.”

“The super sensitive hearing didn’t kick in?”

“I was concentrating on this,” he replied, gesturing to the stove.

“It smells amazing,” she told him. “You didn’t have to do this, though.”

“I wanted to do something for you,” Kal replied. “And it is good practice for me. Martha had taught me to make this while I was staying with them.”

Lois stepped towards the stove and peered at the bubbling tomato sauce. “The burner isn’t on,” she observed.

Kal blushed. “I could not figure out how to turn the knobs, so I used my heat vision.”

That explained why he wasn’t wearing his glasses.

“There’s a safety lock on them,” she explained. “You have to push the knob in, then turn it.” She demonstrated, turning the burner to medium.

“Oh.”

“It must be hard,” she sympathized. “Having to figure out everyday things like this.”

“It is, sometimes,” he agreed. “Although I did manage the basics of the TV today. That is how I found out about

the fire.”

“I heard about that. And a few other things. I guess you’ve been pretty busy your first day.”

“Yes,” Kal nodded. “But that is what I want to do. I am sorry I was not able to give you any exclusive interviews today, though.”

“That’s fine,” Lois waved aside. “The Planet got quite a bit of material, and I was at my desk for a large part of the day, working on my next big project.”

“Oh? What is it? If that is acceptable to ask.”

“I don’t mind telling you,” she told Kal. “You’re not going to spread it around to anyone who shouldn’t hear it.”

Before she could continue, Kal lifted the spoon he had used to stir the sauce and moved it towards her mouth.

“Taste this,” he commanded.

Her mouth opened, and she received a taste of the sauce on her tongue. Although it was hot, Kal had cooled slightly so it did not burn her.

“Mmmm,” she replied. She normally didn’t get this type of food unless she was at the Kent house.

“Good?” Kal asked.

“Yes, definitely.”

Kal switched the burner off and moved to drain the pasta. “You were saying about your story?”

“Oh, yeah. Well, I’m still curious to see who was behind the Prometheus sabotage. I’m not convinced that case has closed.”

“Do you have any idea who might have done it?” Kal asked, pouring the sauce over a plate of pasta.

“I have a few suspects,” Lois replied. “But none I’m ready to fully investigate yet. You would have to be pretty rich and powerful to benefit from destroying a space station.”

“And you would want to be careful investigating any of those people,” Kal filled in.

“I’m not scared to investigate them,” Lois spoke suddenly. “It’s just that this type of thing needs to be carefully executed so there’re no holes left.”

The well-connected could make even the tiniest hole big enough to collapse the entire case. She had learned that the hard way once before.

“This is ready for you now,” Kal told her.

Lois sat down at her table in front of the steaming plate. Kal sat across from her in front of nothing. He really was serious about the not eating thing.

“I got a call from a contact of mine today,” she announced, taking a bite of pasta. “This is fantastic, Kal, by the way.”

“Thank you. Who was this contact?”

“He works for the NIA.” She saw Kal’s look of confusion and explained. “The National Intelligence Agency. They do a lot of . . . Well, it’s difficult to explain, but they’re a government agency that does a lot of hidden operations and such. I’ve helped him out with an assignment or two in the past, and he’s helped me out with a couple stories, too.”

“Is he going to help you with your investigation?”

“I haven’t told him anything about that,” she waved aside. “He was actually calling about you.”

“Oh. Does the government want to speak to me?”

“Well, I imagine they would, but it wasn’t about that. He wanted to offer you a protected identity so you could live the life of a citizen here without anyone having to know about who you are.”

“No,” Kal replied abruptly.

Lois looked up in surprise. “You’re not even going to think about it?”

“Having a second identity where I pretended to be an ordinary citizen would be a lie. It would not be right for me to lie to people here. I am a visitor, and they deserve the truth.”

“Kal, I’ve thought about this, and I really don’t think there’s any way you could have a normal life here with everyone knowing about you.”

“I do not need a normal life, Lois. I just want to help people here on Earth.”

“But the media attention on you — ”

“Will not keep me from doing what I have to do,” Kal cut in. “I will still be able to help out regardless of the media.”

“You hid yourself when you were staying with the Kents,” Lois tried.

“I was doing that for their protection,” Kal replied. “Just like I will not do anything to draw attention to your apartment while I am staying here. I know you do not want any attention drawn to you because of this, and I will respect that wish. But I will not do anything to mislead the people living here, and that is all I want to say about it.”

Lois didn’t dare say anything else about the subject.

Part 5

Lois stumbled out of her room to the kitchen to get a glass of water, her eyes still scrunched together from sleep. She hated getting out of bed in the middle of the night, but she knew she wouldn’t be able to sleep if she didn’t get something to drink first.

She opened the fridge and nearly jumped in fright when she caught sight of movement in the far corner of the room.

“Kal!” she gasped clutching the front of her robe. “You scared me.”

“Sorry.”

Lois felt the cool air that drifted through the apartment.

“Did you just get in?” she asked.

He nodded. “I was out around the city.”

A yawn stretched across Lois’ face. “It’s the middle of the night,” she told him. “Unless Kryptonians are nocturnal, you should be getting some sleep.”

“I do not need as much sleep as you,” he shrugged. “It is one of the benefits of my new abilities.”

“Oh.” She didn’t know what else to say to him. He looked so bleak in the pale light coming from the refrigerator. The bright colors of his suit seemed garish in comparison to his serious face.

Kal sat down at the table, resting his head in his hands. He let out a heavy sigh and muttered something under his breath. Lois couldn’t hear enough of it to understand, but then again, he could also be speaking in Kryptonian. He did that occasionally, although not as often as she thought he would.

“Does it ever get lonely?” she asked him. “Being awake this late at night?”

He didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he lifted his head and just looked at her.

The eyes that were normally so carefully controlled were instead burning with raw emotion. He kept his hands clasped tightly in front of him, but she still saw them tremble. Never had she seen him looking so vulnerable.

“Oh, Kal.”

She took two steps towards him, but before she could go any further, those eyes shuttered closed.

“I am fine,” he told her, shaking his head. “The extra time at night gives me the opportunity to help out those in need.”

“Kal ... ”

“Lois, please do not worry about me,” he told her in a tight tone. “I do not need your sympathy.”

She flinched back.

“Okay,” she replied, stung at his refusal to talk. “I guess ... I’ll just go to bed, then.”

“Yes,” Kal nodded. “You need your sleep.”

“Yeah.” She pulled a cup from the cupboard and filled it with water. “Goodnight, Kal.”

“Goodnight, Lois.”

Lois twisted her wrists in a futile attempt to get free of her bonds. But she was securely tied to the chair, and there was nothing she could do to get free. Situations like this were always frustrating, and this one was doubly so. This time, she was in absolutely no danger, physically. She was only tied up to provide the thieves with enough time to get out of Metropolis. Lois liked to think she was worth more than that.

She blew out a heavy sigh and leaned back against the chair. On top of Arthur Potts and his gang escaping, if she wasn’t found soon, there was no way she would be able to finish the article in time for the evening deadline.

But there was no way anyone would hear her in the back room of the museum, and it wouldn’t be until morning before someone would come back here.

Unless ...

Kal had been working on sharpening his sense of hearing. He said that sometimes he heard calls for help, and he wanted to be able to respond to those better. Perhaps this would be a good exercise for him.

“Hey, Kal!” she spoke loudly into the dark room. “Can you hear me? I could use some help right now.”

It felt ridiculous to talk to him here, where logic told her there was no way anyone could hear her.

“Kal!” she spoke louder. “I said I could use some HELP!”

Nothing happened.

Finally, she took a deep breath and pushed out as much air as she could.

“Help, Superman!” she called.

There was a whoosh just outside the room, and the door opened with a crunch.

Kal strode in, wearing the blue and red costume that Martha had designed.

“Lois?” he asked in shock. “What are you doing tied to a chair?”

“Some people I was investigating wanted to make sure I didn’t go too far,” she replied ruefully. “Can you get me free?” She shuffled around a little to show him her bound wrists.

“Uh, sure,” he replied. “Do you have any scissors?”

“In my purse,” she replied. “Over by the door. But wait,” she realized. “You could just break the ropes yourself, couldn’t you?”

“Oh!” He blinked in surprise. “I suppose I could.”

“Still not used to it yet, huh?”

“Well, I am getting more and more used to having the abilities,” Kal replied, snapping the ropes for Lois. “But I am still realizing all of the different applications they would have.”

“Thanks, Kal,” Lois said, standing as she shook the

aches away from her newly freed wrists. “Now, I have to go make a phone call to the police.” She had already made it halfway across the room when Kal called her back.

“Lois?”

She turned around. “Yeah, Kal?”

“I have only known you for a short time, yet it seems you are constantly getting into these extreme situations. Does this happen a lot to women here on Earth?”

Lois had to grin at his apprehensive expression, probably a result of him contemplating his future on a planet filled with Lois Lanes.

“Not to most women,” she replied. “I’m a bit of a special case.”

“Oh.” Kal’s face visibly relaxed. “Thank you.”

“No problem. Now, I’ve got to go make a phone call. If I call Inspector Henderson now, I’m sure the police can catch the culprits in time.”

After making sure that Lois would be okay, Kal flew off again to see where else he could help in Metropolis. He hadn’t gone far before he caught sight of a multi-car pileup on one of the main freeways.

Kal landed at the scene of the accident, taking in the mangled bodies of the vehicles that had crashed into each other.

“Superman!” One of the EMTs called as he ran past. “Man, am I glad to see you. There are three people trapped inside the SUV. Can you get them out?”

Kal sighed in frustration. He had been on Earth for almost a month now and had been public for two weeks, but there were still many things he needed to learn, and he disliked it when people just assumed that he knew everything. Of course, he would probably dislike it equally as much if everyone felt the need to explain everything to him.

But pushing his irritations aside, which vehicle was the SUV? Thanks to his time with the Kents, Kal knew the distinguishing features of a pickup truck, but that was about it.

Feeling the crunch for time, Kal finally used his vision to look for people trapped within their vehicles. He found the right vehicle and was able to get the people out and delivered to the EMTs with relative ease. Although the young girl looked like her leg was wounded, and the family did have some cuts on their faces and arms, none of the injuries were life threatening.

There were no other people in danger, but Kal decided to stay at the scene for a while and observe what was going on and perhaps help with some of the cleanup. It would be good for him to see some of the procedures.

It seemed as if the police were almost ready to leave when a younger-looking officer approached him. Kal guessed that he was around the same age as Lois.

“Um, Superman?” the officer asked timidly.

“Yes?”

“Look, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way or anything . . . ”

“Go on,” Kal prompted.

“Well, I saw you have some problems with the EMT’s instructions.”

“Yes, I did,” Kal agreed ruefully. “You know I have been helping out publicly for over two weeks now, but there are still many things on Earth I need to learn about.”

“Right. Yeah, I can understand that. Look, I was just going to offer . . . ” The officer reached up and scratched the

back of his neck.

“Yes?” Kal asked.

“Well, we have a sort of resource book at the precinct,” he finally told Kal. “It’s got different car brands and makes and years and all that. Maybe you’d want to take a look at it.”

“That would be very helpful,” Kal replied enthusiastically. “Could I come sometime to see it?”

“I’m almost done here,” the officer told Kal. “How about I meet you at the precinct at . . . ” He glanced at his watch. “Three o’clock?”

Kal confirmed the address with the officer but stayed to watch the cleanup only for a few minutes longer. He decided that a walk to the precinct would be a good way for him to get to know the city better.

His comfort towards the idea was a sign that he was adapting to life on Earth, he decided. Up until now, he had flown wherever he wanted to go.

Making his way off the freeway, Kal entered a more residential street. He made it down a few blocks with only a few curious stares. That was to be expected, he decided. After all, people were still unused to seeing him.

He was halfway down the next block when he saw a child tentatively inch towards him. He stopped and crouched down to be level with the child.

“Hello,” he greeted softly, not wanting to frighten her.

“Hi,” she replied shyly. She ducked her head and giggled but then brought it up again. “Can you sign this for me, please?” she asked, sticking a napkin out in front of him and holding a pen in her other hand.

Bewildered at the request, Kal took the pen from her and wrote “Kal-El” in English on the napkin and handed it back to her. He was able to cover up his discomfort in forming the strange letters by putting in a touch of his recently acquired speed.

She glanced at the napkin and wrinkled her nose. “This doesn’t say Superman,” she said in confusion. “Superman starts with an ‘S.’”

“Oh. Right, sorry.” He took the napkin back and added “Superman” to it.

She thanked him cheerily and ran back towards her waiting mother.

Kal straightened up, only to come face to face with three more people holding out pieces of paper and pens. By the end of signing for them, he had given up on signing “Kal-El” and just scrawled “Superman” as quickly as he could.

He continued to walk down the street, but this time he got much more reaction. Everyone greeted him and smiled, but the way they treated him made him nervous. It was like they were in complete awe of him and were perhaps even a little afraid.

Five more people came up to him and asked him to sign various things. He was starting to worry. Just what was it about signing things that was so appealing to these people? He hoped it had no legal ramifications he wasn’t aware of.

“Superman, this is Linda King from the Metropolis Star. Why are you walking on the streets? Has something happened that caused you to lose your powers?”

“No, of course not!” Kal replied. “I just wanted to get a sense . . . ” He paused to write his name on someone’s baseball cap. “To get a sense of what Metropolis is like from the ground.”

The crowd had grown very large, and he was no longer able to move forward without pushing people out of the

way.

“Superman, will you sign my forehead?” one person asked, pushing a felt marker in front of Kal’s face.

“Superman, I want you to sign my t-shirt!”

“Hey, Superman, want to sign —”

“Miss, please pull your shirt back down!” Kal exclaimed, averting his eyes hurriedly. He was fairly certain that *that* was socially unacceptable here just as it was on Krypton. He looked up with caution, but that particular woman was nowhere to be seen, pushed out by newcomers. The crowd was pressing in on him at all angles, and there seemed to be no escape.

Except up, he suddenly realized. Rising slowly to avoid anyone being injured, Kal broke free from the mob.

“I am sorry, but I must leave,” he announced to the group.

He flew up even further until the clamor of their voices could no longer be heard. He breathed in the fresh air as his head slowly cleared.

What had just happened there?

Kal hovered outside of the police station, hesitant. He regretted his earlier thoughtlessness in not getting the police officer’s name. It seemed like the only way he would be able to get a hold of the man would be to walk in the front entrance, but he loathed the attention that would create.

But just before Kal was about to take the plunge, he noticed someone whistling a tune near one of the back doors. Circling around the building, Kal was glad to see it was the same officer from before. He landed in the alley beside the man, who smiled at Kal sympathetically.

“I heard what happened to you on your way over,” he told Kal. “Thought you might appreciate a more discreet way in.”

“Thank you,” Kal spoke gratefully.

“No problem, Superman,” he replied, gesturing Kal to go through the door ahead of him.

Kal winced at the name, the memory of those signatures fresh in his mind. “Call me ‘Kal,’ please,” he told the officer.

He blinked in surprise. “Sure. You know, I never thought about it before, but I bet it must be strange to come to a new place and have everyone call you by a different name.”

“Usually, I do not mind,” Kal replied. “But sometimes, it is nice to hear my name again.”

“I’m Brian, by the way,” the policeman told Kal as he closed the door behind them. “I realized I never told you that at the scene of the accident.”

Kal nodded to show he had heard Brian. They began walking down the hall together when Kal decided he couldn’t wait until he got home to ask Lois about the burning question inside of him. “Brian, may I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“What is the reason behind everyone wanting me to sign something of theirs? That seemed to be all that people wanted.”

“You mean autographs?” Brian paused to think. “Well, I guess they’re a neat keepsake because it’s a personal mark of whoever you met. It’s something that is unique to them and can act as a memento or something. Really, it’s just a frivolous thing.”

“Oh, good. I am glad to hear I did not accidentally promise marriage to half the population in Metropolis or

something.”

Brian let out a bark of surprised laughter. “I didn’t think you were the type of person who made jokes,” he commented.

“I am just an ordinary person,” Kal shrugged. “Before I came to Earth, I was no different from anyone else.”

“And now you’re an international celebrity. Must be tough. Here, we’re in this room.” Brian unlocked a door and led Kal into a room with a large window looking into another room. “It’s the other side of the interrogation room,” Brian explained. “From the other room, this window looks just like a mirror so we can watch whoever is in there without being watched ourselves.”

“I have seen this on TV before,” Kal commented, walking closer to get a better look.

“I don’t have an office,” Brian apologized. “Or even a desk, for that matter. Of course, that’ll soon change, hopefully. I’ve applied for a position as Detective. Anyway, for now we’ll have to make due with whatever’s available. And I figured it would be best if you kept out of the spotlight.”

“Do you think people are always going to react that way around me?” Kal asked, sudden fear gripping him.

“Maybe not quite that crazy,” Brian shrugged. “You’re a bit of a novelty still. But you’re the first alien to ever try to settle down here, so who knows what things will be like?”

Kal sighed heavily. Lois had been right when she said that the media attention would be very intense. He had had no idea daily life would be like this.

“Sorry, man,” Brian spoke up. “I’m not sure if you noticed, but we can get a little crazy here on Earth.”

“It is not your fault, Brian,” Kal told him. “But it is discouraging to think that I will not even be able to walk down the street without being mobbed.” He shook his head to clear it of the morose subject. “But anyway, you said you had a book for me?”

“Oh, yeah.” Brian turned and grabbed a small cart and rolled it towards Kal. “I picked up some other ones that you might find useful as well. Municipal laws and police procedures and stuff.”

Kal eagerly reached forward to look at the books. This was exactly what he needed in order to do his job better.

But as he began paging through the books at speeds that impressed even him, he couldn’t help but mourn the fact that direct contact with this world seemed out of the question.

Living with a Kryptonian certainly had its advantages, Lois decided as she bit into the baked chicken Kal had prepared that night. For one thing, Kal had apparently taken the little joke she made about him helping out with the housework to heart. Her apartment had never looked neater. And the meals he created were astounding.

Lois had told Kal that she really didn’t expect him to do all this work for her, but Kal always insisted, saying that he wanted to do something for her. And she certainly had no reason to complain.

“This is fantastic, Kal,” Lois told him. “I have no idea how you picked all this stuff up in the short time you’ve been here. I’ve lived here my whole life, and I still can hardly manage to boil water.”

“But cooking is so interesting,” Kal replied. “The way the different ingredients react together to create something completely new is so magical. We have nothing like this on Krypton, but when you think about it, it is very similar to

chemistry.”

“I was never very interested in chemistry,” Lois confessed. “Much to my father’s disappointment,” she added bitterly.

Kal watched her closely, but he didn’t pry any further. She had probably scared him from asking about her family with her original outburst a few weeks ago.

“My interest in chemistry or any other science never matured beyond making concoctions that smoked, or glowed, or did something else interesting,” Kal shared. “Although I am sure my parents would have enjoyed it if I was more apt in the area.”

Lois glanced up at him, surprised. This was the first time he had mentioned his parents to her, but she didn’t push him any further. Although he never mentioned it, the tragic weight of what he had gone through was always present in her mind when she talked to Kal.

“So, the police managed to get those art thieves,” Lois mentioned after a reflective pause.

“That is good,” Kal nodded. He looked distracted, though.

“Is something wrong, Kal?” Lois asked. Maybe he was willing to share with her more of what life on Krypton was like.

But what he said next was very different than what she expected.

“I tried to take a walk today,” he shared.

“Yeah, I heard about that,” she winced. “Apparently, they had to call a few police cars down to clear everybody out. I’m sorry it didn’t turn out well.”

“Do you think it will always be that way if I want to go out in public?” Kal asked.

“I want to say no, Kal,” Lois told him. “But I really can’t. Like it or not, you’re a celebrity.”

“I cannot understand the reason for celebrities,” Kal said in frustration. “True, we had people on Krypton that were given more ... respect, I suppose, than others, but the sense of curiosity and fascination humans have for these people is completely foreign to me.”

“I’m sorry,” Lois apologized. “I know you don’t want any of this.”

“I need to learn more about Earth culture if I am to be able to help people with my abilities,” Kal reflected. “But how can I do that if I am mobbed wherever I go?”

Lois chewed on her bottom lip, hesitant to continue. Finally, she decided to go ahead.

“That’s why I thought the idea to give you a separate identity would be a good one,” she explained, head down towards her plate. “I know there’s no way you’d be able to spend time out in the open unless you acted like a human.”

She sneaked a glance up at him, and he appeared to be deep in thought.

“I do not like the idea of lying to the people of Earth,” he spoke quietly.

“Well, you don’t even have to look at it as a lie,” she told him. “If anyone asks you outright if you’re Superman, you could say yes, if you wanted to. But if people don’t recognize you, then you don’t have to correct them, either.”

“That seems to be a small distinction,” he frowned.

“Well, maybe it is,” she admitted. “But it’s something you’ll have to do to be able to do your job better.” She had wanted to say that it would also give him a break, but she felt that he wouldn’t be as responsive to that.

Kal’s brow furrowed, as he was deep in thought. Finally, he met her eyes.

“All right,” he told her quietly. “Let us give your NIA contact —”

“Jack,” Lois filled in.

“Jack,” Kal repeated. “Let us give Jack a call.”

Part 6

Kal checked himself in the mirror one more time and pushed the glasses up on his nose again.

For some reason, he was very nervous about venturing outside today. Maybe because this was his first time trying to pass as “normal” ... and not as a stranger to this planet. Although Lois had assured him that any minor oddities in his behavior would be overlooked, he was still worried about what would happen if he were confronted with something that he had never experienced before ... and if he reacted strangely.

Of course, this disguise wasn’t a matter of life or death, he reminded himself. The opportunity to walk unnoticed in the city wasn’t something he *needed*, although he would like the option.

It surprised him, actually, how much he seemed to care about it.

“Stop twitching, *Clark*,” Lois admonished him. “You look great.”

Kal felt a fresh flutter of nerves at Lois’ use of his acquired name.

“Are you sure this style of hair is acceptable?” he asked Lois. “It seems so ... loose.”

“It’s not scraped back and plastered to your skull, you mean. It’s fine, Kal. This is actually closer to how most people wear their hair, and it’s different enough from your usual style that it makes you look pretty different.”

Kal ran a hand through his hair again. Then he fiddled with a button on his jacket. Then he checked to make sure his shoes were still tied.

“Okay, that’s it,” Lois announced. “We’re leaving right now before you can second guess this any more.” She pushed him out towards the door until Kal stood nervously fidgeting in the hallway as she locked the bolts. Then, Lois looped her arm around Kal’s and led him down the hall. “It’ll be fine,” she told him. “I know this is a little nerve-wracking, but no one will notice anything off about you. I promise. You meet a lot of weird people in Metropolis, and you’re not that high up on the list.”

They were just about to step outside when they were stopped by a friendly-looking couple just entering the building.

“Lois!” the woman called.

Lois stopped. “Michelle! Hi, how are you?”

“Oh, we’re just fine,” the man answered for the pair. He glanced over to Kal, who tried not to squirm. Kal had certainly not planned on meeting someone this soon!

“Oh, Michelle, Arnold, I’d like you to meet ... Clark,” Lois spoke, nodding in Kal’s direction.

“Yes,” Kal spoke up, reaching his left hand out towards the pair. “I am Clark. Kent. Clark Kent.” He looked down at his hand and hastily switched it with his right.

If the couple noticed anything off, they didn’t show it. Michelle simply smiled as she shook Kal’s hand.

“It’s wonderful to meet you,” she smiled, overly sweet. “Are you and Lois ... ?” She gave them a meaningful look.

Kal glanced over at Lois, confused. What was this woman asking?

Thankfully, Lois seemed to know the answer.

“No, we’re not, Michelle,” Lois smiled.

Was Kal just imagining it, or did that smile seem a little strained?

“Clark and I are just friends,” Lois continued.

As opposed to what? Kal wondered.

“Well, I don’t imagine you’d want to wait too long before settling down, Lois,” Michelle admonished. “The Arnolds of the world are getting scarcer and scarcer. And you know, not everyone is privileged enough to have a perfect marriage like we do.”

“Eight years and never a cross word,” Arnold spoke up, nuzzling against his wife.

Michelle giggled like a schoolgirl.

Lois growled like a pit-bull.

“Well, we really should be going,” Lois spoke through clenched teeth. “Clark here is visiting from Kansas, and I want to show him all the sights before he has to leave.”

Kal said his farewells to the couple and followed Lois out of the building and to her Jeep, where she climbed inside smoothly.

Kal stood outside of the door opposite Lois’. After some hesitation, he grabbed the handle of the door and pulled. To his pleasure, it opened nicely, and he was able to sit beside Lois. He had never actually ridden inside a vehicle before.

“Pull that strap around in front of you and buckle it on your left,” Lois instructed him. “I know you’re not about to get hurt in a car accident, but we’ll still use it for appearances.”

“Where are we going?” Kal asked Lois as she pulled away from the curb.

“Centennial Park,” she replied. She stared straight ahead and didn’t say any more.

“Lois?” Kal asked, breaking the silence. “Were those people your neighbors?”

“Yeah,” Lois replied. “The Sitkowitzes. They’re always just ... Well, you saw them. Patronizing and perfect and absolutely in *love*. To them, anyone who isn’t married is just asking to be drowned with pity.”

“Marriage is not a requirement in this country, is it?” Kal asked.

“No,” Lois answered. “But that doesn’t stop some people from thinking that you need to be married to be considered successful.”

“Have you considered getting married?” Kal asked. “Do not feel as if you have to answer that,” he told her. “I am just trying to learn more about life on Earth, and you are one of my few sources.”

“I don’t mind answering,” Lois responded. “Normally, I don’t like sharing a lot of personal information, but with you it’s different somehow. I’m not really sure why.”

“Perhaps because I am asking out of objective interest rather than being patronizing like the Sitkowitzes,” Kal suggested.

“Maybe,” she shrugged. “Anyway, I’m not *opposed* to the idea of getting married one day. But I guess right now I’m not planning on ‘settling’ just in order to get a husband. If I were to meet someone and he turned out to be the kind of guy I would want to spend the rest of my life with, then I would be happy to marry him. But I’m not going to marry any guy just because I’m getting a little older. I’ll wait for the right guy, or I just won’t get married at all.”

“So you believe that you have a soul mate,” Kal inferred.

“I don’t know I always thought that ‘soul mates’ seemed like such a subjective term. Is there really a person out there who is meant for me, or do people just make their

significant others into their soul mates?”

“On Krypton, many marriages were arranged, especially in the upper classes,” Kal spoke, surprising himself in sharing this. “But at the same time, the idea of a soul mate was esteemed beyond the contract of an arranged marriage. If a couple was believed to be soul mates, then the previous engagement was dissolved, as long as there had not been a marriage yet. Of course, many people never found their soul mate. So they proceeded with the planned arrangement.”

“Did you ever meet ... I mean, did you have an arranged marriage?”

“Yes,” Kal replied. “Although she had found her soul mate, so the arrangement was dissolved. I hadn’t, though,” he told her, answering her unspoken question.

“Oh,” she nodded.

Memories bubbled to the surface, but Kal clamped them down, trapping them like a lid on a pot of boiling water. He wanted nothing more than to spill the memories out, but he felt that they were still too painful to handle. So, instead, he tapped his fingers on his thigh in a desperate attempt to release some of the trapped energy simmering under the lid.

“My parents were soul mates,” he managed to blurt out, nearly sighing at the release of pressure. He longed to tell Lois more. To explain to her the bond of love that had joined his parents in a way much greater than any civil service could. But the memories were too raw, and the emotions too painful.

So, instead, he relapsed into silence, nursing his scalded emotions.

When she thought about it, Lois realized just how cooped up Kal had been for the last few weeks. At the Kent farm, he was free to walk wherever he wanted without any attention and could do some real exploring. But ever since he came to Metropolis, he hadn’t been able to go out in public at all without fear of causing a riot.

That had all changed now, of course. Jack Olsen had certainly come through in creating Kal’s civilian identity. “Clark Kent” was the son of a distant cousin of Jonathan and Martha Kent, with no immediate family still alive. He had a complete background history and owned everything from a birth certificate to a social security number. The one thing he did not have was a driver’s license, and Kal had shown a surprisingly typical male reaction to that and had immediately asked about how to get one. Whether or not she would be lending him her Jeep to practice was another matter entirely.

But after weeks of confinement, “Clark” was now walking around Centennial Park with Lois, taking in the sights with fascination almost equal to his reaction to the rainstorm he had encountered the day they met.

The fresh air had even seemed to cure Kal of the melancholy mood he had sunk into since their conversation on soul mates.

A Frisbee landed at their feet, and Kal picked it up carefully, turning it over in his hands.

“Hey, buddy! Throw it back, will you?” a man called out to Kal.

“You spin it,” Lois tutored quickly. “Flick your wrist sideways like ...” But Kal had already managed to figure out the throw and had tossed it back to the waiting players. “That was pretty good,” Lois told Kal as they moved away from the group. “Did they have something like that back on ...” She stopped, aware of the public location. “Back at

home, I mean?”

“No, nothing like that,” Kal replied. “But I am quite physically able — even without the abilities I have here. I tend to pick up on those types of things fairly quickly.”

“Oh, really?” Lois asked, her competitive streak lit up.

“Yes,” he replied, seeming slightly amused. “I am very good at what you would call ‘sports’ here.”

“If you’re so ‘physically able,’ like you say, then you wouldn’t object to a match of some kind against me.”

“With that plastic disk?” Kal asked.

“Frisbee,” Lois corrected absently. “And no, that wasn’t what I meant. I was thinking ... tennis.”

“I am not familiar with that sport,” Kal told her. “That would put me at a serious disadvantage.”

“Well, if you’re as good as you say you are, you should be able to learn fast,” Lois shrugged. Of course, she didn’t mention that she had been a champion at doubles tennis in college. That little detail wasn’t all that important, anyway.

Kal studied her for a moment in silence. “Fine,” he finally spoke. “I agree to your challenge.”

“Yes!” Lois crowed. “We’ll do it next Saturday, okay?”

“Okay,” Kal agreed.

Lois smiled to herself, looking forward to the day where she could say that she beat Superman in tennis. Well, not that she would actually *say* she beat him. Not in public, anyway. It wouldn’t be good for everyone to know that she had that much of a relationship with “Superman.” Jonathan and Martha would be the only people who she would be able to gloat to. But of course, she would still milk it for all it was worth.

Still happily planning, Lois caught sight of an ice cream stand out of the corner of her eye and decided to treat herself to a pre-victory snack. She didn’t bother to ask if Kal wanted anything. In the weeks he had stayed there, she hadn’t seen him take even a sip of water.

Lois paid for her fudgesicle quickly and looped her arm back through Kal’s, resuming their walk as she ripped open the package.

“Lois,” Kal asked curiously, “did you just give that man with the ice cream stand money?”

“Yeah,” Lois replied. “The ice cream cost a dollar, so I gave him one.” She took a pleasurable bite of the treat.

Kal dropped her arm in shock and turned around to face her. “You mean you have to *pay* for food here?”

“Well ... yeah.”

“But ... what about the people who cannot afford to pay?” he asked, almost panicking at the thought.

“Well, there are organizations to help,” Lois told Kal uncomfortably. “There are food banks and soup kitchens and ...” she trailed off. No matter how well intentioned those organizations were, there were always going to be people who slipped through the cracks.

“And for those people who cannot access those organizations?” Kal demanded, hitting her own insecurities with deadly accuracy. “Do they starve?!” He shook himself free of her arm and stalked off away from her.

“Ka — Clark!” Lois called after him. She dumped her forgotten fudgesicle in the trash and jogged after him. By the time she caught up, he had already calmed down.

“I am sorry, Lois,” he apologized softly. “I was upset, but I did not mean to get upset with you.” He allowed her to loop her arm back through his, and they kept walking through the park. “I have seen a lot of things that I am not used to, Lois,” he shared. “Some of them are wonderful. The diversity of life on this planet is ... just amazing. You

have no idea how lucky you are to live here. And the artistic expression here is unlike anything you could ever find on Krypton.

“But there are things that shock me,” he continued in a more subdued tone. “Things I have never experienced firsthand before. All the injuries and sickness and unlawful violence. They are all things that I am not familiar with in the slightest. And the idea of one member of society going hungry because they cannot afford ...” Kal paused for a moment and shuddered. “It is a thought I can hardly comprehend.”

“It is a terrible thing,” Lois agreed. “And we help when we can, but, for the most part, I think we’ve trained ourselves not to think about it. And it never really occurs to us until someone like you comes around and points out what’s right under our noses.”

“I want to use my abilities to be able to help out here,” Kal told Lois, “but I have no idea how I can use them to help with this.”

“I can’t think of any way,” Lois confessed. “It’s a basic fact of life here that food costs money. So, in order to provide it to people, you need to have money. But you’re helping out in so many other ways, Kal,” Lois told him. “Don’t think about the things you can do nothing about, and just be glad for the things you can do. You’re a symbol of hope for all of us here now. And whatever you can actually physically do is enough. Because that energy of hope spreads to everyone else.”

“You do the same thing,” Kal realized. “Perhaps not in any physical gestures, but your words are an inspiration to many and give people hope that someone is looking out for them.”

“I guess I do,” Lois agreed. “Although I hardly ever think of it that way. You shed a more positive light on it than I normally do.”

“I cannot have any actual power in this matter with the hungry,” Kal decided.

“Sorry, no.”

“Then I suppose I will have to just inspire others to do the work for me,” Kal declared. “In this matter, I am not any different from you.”

“Jimmy!” Lois shouted across the newsroom. “Do you have that list of financial holdings for me yet?”

“In a second, Lois,” Jimmy replied. “This kind of thing takes time, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” she grumbled, tapping her pencil impatiently on her desk. She only had half an hour before she needed to leave to go cover the ceremony of the mayor giving Superman the key to the city. While she did want to be there anyway to support her friend, it did mean that her free time at work was cut in half. And free time had been a little scarce lately, anyway. Perry expected all of his reporters to be scrambling to cover whatever Superman rescues they could get their hands on. Although Lois could get unlimited exclusives just over dinner, she felt that she should put up a good show in order to avoid suspicion. She knew it wasn’t a good idea for her to have a public connection to Superman.

“Here you go, Lois,” Jimmy announced, placing the folder on her desk. “Why did you want a list of the financial holdings of the wealthiest people in Metropolis, anyway?”

“I can’t tell you that yet, Jimmy,” Lois replied. “I’m working on a hunch right now. As soon as I know more, I’ll be coming to you for help, I promise.”

“Okay, Lois,” Jimmy shrugged as he strolled away. Lois opened the folder eagerly and began sifting through the information.

In order for someone to sabotage space station Prometheus, there had to be some sort of benefit, Lois decided. So she was looking through these lists to determine who among the wealthy had holdings in some sort of space program. If Prometheus failed, then whoever sabotaged it could potentially gain significant benefits if their company was chosen to build a new model.

Tim and Amber Lake were out of the question, Lois decided. Most of their investments were in arts and culture areas, and the few technology-based investments had nothing to do with space exploration. Besides, how could a couple that disgustingly in love be behind any criminal schemes?

Arthur Chow had a division of research within his company that devoted itself to space exploration, Lois discovered. She hated to suspect him. He seemed to be one of the few people who did not let his extraordinary wealth get to him and was instead committed to making Metropolis a better place.

Of course, she couldn’t let appearances deceive her. That’s what everyone had thought of Luthor before her investigation had come out. And she wondered sometimes if some people of Metropolis still thought that way about Luthor.

Speaking of the sociopath ... Lois paged through the file until she came to his list.

Although his financial worth had decreased dramatically, he still owned a company that devoted itself to space exploration, she discovered. To her, it seemed like a rash way to get back on top, but Luthor had been known to make mistakes in the past, and there was no way she was cancelling him out of suspicion on this one.

Another name that made it on her list was a woman named Arianna Carlin. Lois wasn’t familiar with her, which meant that she was probably a newcomer to Metropolis. But newcomer or not, a large portion of her investments were geared towards space exploration, and that made her a suspect in Lois’ books.

So she was left with a list of three people. Chow, Luthor, and Carlin. But she had no idea how to narrow the list down any further. She needed more information to do that.

Or a partner, Lois realized as she collected her notebook and pencil and went off to grab Jimmy to take pictures at the ceremony. A fresh perspective on this would be very helpful.

The trouble was ... she wasn’t ready to trust anyone at the Planet with this. Not yet, anyway. Which meant that she was on her own.

Part 7

Brian O’Hara sneaked a glance around to check if anyone was watching. Finding no one, he reached up to undo the top button of his shirt. He remembered just a few years ago when he had been so happy to don the MPD uniform and patrol the streets. Now, he was counting the days until the end of the week where his job description would officially change and he no longer had to wear a uniform to work every day. He had already decided he was going to be one of those slouchy, grungy detectives who came into work unshaved every day and *never* did the top button of their shirts.

The head of a co-worker poked around the corner, and Brian hastily reached up to cover his undone button.

“Hey, Detective O’Hara,” the man spoke.

“Shh!” Brian cautioned, his hand falling back down.

“Quiet, Ron, or else you’ll jinx it.”

“Relax, it’s all signed in paper and everything,” Ron waved aside. “Come Monday, you’re going to be working with Henderson and all the other big shots busting the real criminals rather than handing out traffic tickets to teenagers.”

“Well, I still don’t like to count my chickens before they’re hatched,” Brian spoke cautiously. “Did you want something from me?”

“There’s a guy up at the front,” Ron told the future detective. “He’s asking for you.”

Brian reluctantly did the button up again and followed Ron out to the front desk. A man stood up as he approached, and Brian automatically took in his appearance.

He was tall and well built, with glasses. His hands were shoved in his pockets, and his feet shuffled nervously on the floor. The man’s brown eyes shifted all over the place, taking in the sights of the station while his shoulders slouched and his head hung, showing vulnerability.

“Can I help you?” Brian asked the man. He was searching to remember where he might have met this man. Why was he the one who was specifically requested?

“Well, I have not had any problems with this so far,” the man spoke in a low voice. “But I felt that this would be the best possible test.”

Brian stared blankly at the man. What was going on?

“You do not recognize me, do you?” the man smiled.

“Well ... no.” Although the formal speech pattern was familiar.

The man nodded, as if that was the answer he expected. “Can we take this somewhere more private, perhaps?”

Brian led the man to a small conference room away from the noise of the station. The man refused coffee or water or anything else, and finally Brian sat down across from him.

“So, are you ready to spill?” he asked the man. “Can you tell me exactly what’s going on here?”

“Maybe it would be easier to recognize me if I did this,” the man spoke.

Then he floated a foot off of his chair.

Brian’s eyes widened, and he looked up at the man’s face once again. Taking away the different hair style and the glasses, the resemblance ...

“Well, some detective I’ll make,” Brian spoke wryly.

“Most of the disguise is psychological,” Superman, or Kal, rather, explained. “You did not expect to see me dressed like this, so you did not see *me*.”

“Well, it’s pretty impressive,” Brian conceded. “So this is your solution to get around town without your mob of devoted followers?”

“Yes. I want to be able to observe and learn about Earth culture, and this is the only way to do it. With this disguise, I will be able to participate in anything I wish to without fear of being discovered.”

“Do you have an ID?” the policeman in Brian asked.

“Yes,” Kal replied. “Although I do not think I should tell you how I came about it. All you need to know is that it was legal.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Brian said, holding up his hands. “So, what’s your name when you’re dressed up like

this?”

“Clark Kent,” Kal replied. “I have a complete background story as well, in case anyone asks.”

“Pretty thorough job,” Brian commented in approval. Probably NIA, he guessed, although he wasn’t going to pry. “So now you’re just wandering around Metropolis and getting the whole experience?”

“Yes,” Kal nodded. “Today, I got a library card and spent an hour reading some of the works of fiction there. They were quite interesting.”

“I bet they were,” Brian smiled. Although he had originally been intimidated by Superman, he was quickly learning that Kal was very much an ordinary man craving to know more about the world he had been dropped into. That realization gave Brian an idea. “Hey, Kal, would you be free one evening this week?”

“Yes, I would. Assuming something does not come up where my assistance is needed.”

“I was wondering if you’d like to come to dinner at my house. My wife would love to meet you. That’s, of course, assuming it’s okay for me to tell her about you.”

“Of course,” Kal replied. “Although it is probably best if as few people knew about Clark Kent as possible, you should not keep a secret like that from your wife.”

“Well, there are some things I can’t tell her,” Brian shared. “As part of the job. But I try to keep those instances down as much as possible.”

“Well, I would love to meet her,” Kal spoke. “I have yet to meet a young married couple.”

“We’ve got a son, too,” Brian told Kal with pride. “Adam. He’s four, so we wouldn’t tell him about you, of course. He has no idea how to keep a secret.”

“I would like to meet him as well,” Kal said, his eyes lighting up at the possibility. “I have not had much personal time with children here, although I always enjoyed them back home.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that. Adam’s a bundle of energy, and I don’t think anyone with a low tolerance for kids would be able to spend much time with him.”

“Brian, could you answer a question for me?” Kal spoke up.

“Sure,” Brian shrugged.

“The children here. You call them ‘kids’ sometimes. But that is the name for young goats, and I do not understand the association between the two. Is it a derogatory term or something?”

“Ah, no,” Brian smiled. “It’s more of a casual term. Slang, I guess.”

“Oh,” Kal nodded. “I understand. Thank you.”

“No problem.”

“Well, I am looking forward to meeting your wife and your ‘kid’ sometime this week.”

Lois approached Cat’s desk with caution, circling around to get a better look at the gossip columnist.

“Cat?” she asked hesitantly. “Are you okay?”

Cat looked up at Lois. “Of course I am, Lois. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well ... are you feeling sick?” Lois tried.

“No! Why are you so worried about me?”

“Well ... It’s just ...” Lois looked once again at Cat’s attire and tried one last time. “Did you have a problem at the drycleaners or something?”

“No, I did not,” she replied testily. “Is it a crime for a woman to dress conservatively every once in a while?”

“Cat, this goes way beyond ‘conservative’ for you,” Lois argued. “This would be the equivalent of me hiding in a cardboard box for the whole day.”

“Based on your usual wardrobe, a cardboard box isn’t much of a change, Lois. You really need to start wearing some more flattering suits.”

“This isn’t about me, Cat,” Lois replied, rolling her eyes. “What’s with the clothes?”

“Well, if you must know ...” Cat glanced around the newsroom cautiously. Then she beckoned for Lois to come closer. “I’ve got a lunch date today,” she whispered.

“So?” Lois shrugged. “You always seem to have a lunch date with someone.”

“Not with one of the richest men in Metropolis,” Cat replied, smirking.

“You mean it’s with ... ?”

“Arthur Chow,” Cat announced proudly. “And it’s not just an interview date. It’s an after-interview date. Which means that after this ... Well, who knows?” she purred.

Lois forced herself to smile, although her list of suspects was still fresh in her mind. “That’s great, Cat,” she told her, trying to summon up more positive feelings.

“Lois, could you at least pretend to be excited for me?” Cat asked, seeing through Lois’ weak façade.

“I’m sorry, Cat,” Lois apologized. “But ever since the Luthor story, I’ve been a little wary of rich men.”

“I get where you’re coming from, Lois. But try not to let your prejudice interfere, okay? Be happy for me. He actually seems like a nice guy.”

“Okay,” Lois agreed. “But Cat? Can I give you a bit of advice?”

“Sure, why not?” she shrugged.

“There’s only so long you can hide your true nature from him. Dressing up like this may work for a while, but you can’t do that forever. Sooner or later, you’re going to want to go back to your workplace inappropriate garb, and he’s going to find out.”

“Yeah, right, Lois,” Cat scoffed. “Trust me, I know what makes guys like Chow tick, and it sure isn’t wild party-girl gossip columnists. They’re looking for stability. Which I can definitely pull off.”

And with that, Cat sauntered off to her date.

Kal walked up the stairs, smoothing his tie as he went. Changing from Superman into Clark Kent would require some practice, he decided. Not that he needed to be dressed perfectly as Clark for this, but he did think it was a good idea for him to be dressed as Clark whenever he wasn’t performing Superman duties.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Kal knocked on the door quietly, wincing at the time he saw on his watch. But the door opened anyway, and Brian seemed happy to meet him.

“Sorry I am so late,” Kal apologized.

“Don’t worry about it,” Brian waved aside, beckoning Kal in. “Marli and I saw the news report. We were just glad that I didn’t get called in.”

“I was not sure if I should even bother coming, but I saw that your light was still on, so I thought I would try knocking.”

“Don’t worry about it,” A voice called from the kitchen amid the clatter of dishes. “Brian and I are both night owls. We’ll be up for a while yet.”

“Kal, I’d like you to meet my wife, Marli,” Brian introduced as she walked out holding a mug of tea.

Marli was a good deal shorter than Kal, with thick

brown hair pulled back into a chaotic shape vaguely resembling a bun. She was dressed in jeans and a warm, bulky sweater with sleeves that fell past her wrists. The sweater was probably large enough to belong to her husband, Kal realized, and he wondered if Brian was actually the original owner.

"I've heard a lot about you, Kal," she told him. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"I also am happy to meet you," Kal replied.

"Can I get you something?" she asked. "Brian said you wanted us to just go ahead and eat if you got tied up, but I do have some leftovers in the fridge. Or some coffee? Tea? We've got beer, too, I think."

"Yeah, we do," Brian chimed in, heading to the kitchen himself.

"I am fine, thank you," Kal replied. "I do not need to eat or drink to sustain myself."

"Still, you might enjoy it if you let yourself," Marli suggested. But she didn't push him to accept. "You want to sit down?" she offered instead. She looked over at the loveseat and armchair placed in the living area and then rushed over to them, depositing her mug on the cluttered coffee table. "Here, I'll just ... clear off a space." Papers, toys, a blanket, and a few clothing pieces that looked like they belonged to a small boy were gathered up in Marli's arms. "You can sit down here," she announced. Then she ran off to the hallway, where Kal heard a door open and close rapidly. Marli reappeared almost instantly. Apparently, she had dumped all of the junk into the nearest room just to get it all out of the way.

"All cleaned up, honey?" Brian asked, emerging from the kitchen with a beer in hand and a grin on his face.

"Yeah," she smiled sheepishly. "I guess you can say that organization isn't our strong suit here," she told Kal. "I like a bit of chaos, and when you add Adam into the mix ... Well, it gets a little crazy. I don't know what we're going to do when this one comes along." She placed a hand on her stomach.

Kal noticed the small swell beneath the fabric of her sweater for the first time.

"Sometimes I think that a girl would be neater " Marli continued wistfully.

"But not if she shares your genes," Brian told his wife, sitting them down together on the loveseat.

"True," she agreed. "Well, I guess no matter what we have, we'll have to resign ourselves to more mess."

"You don't know the sex of the baby?" Kal asked curiously.

"Not yet," Marli shrugged. "We could find out if we wanted to, but we'd rather be surprised."

"On Krypton, everyone knew the sex of a child before it was born," Kal shared. "Of course, the technology was much more advanced there. The images received of a baby in the womb were much more detailed than the ones available here."

"I wish," Marli smiled wistfully.

"It must be weird to be in a world that's so far behind what you're used to," Brian commented. "Even just communicating with people. We're so dependent on things like phones and pagers and email and everything else — I don't know what I would do without them. And I imagine it would be kind of the same."

"Well, communication was quite different on Krypton regardless," Kal informed the couple. "Kryptonians are telepathic."

"Wow."

"I thought stuff like that was all just made-up," Marli smiled sheepishly.

"Well, it is just as fictional as depictions of aliens," Kal smiled.

"Touche." Brian raised his beer bottle to Kal before taking a sip.

"It must be strange to come to this world where there are all those scary movies and books and everything about aliens," Marli sympathized. "I would be kind of afraid to make a wrong move and scare people."

"That is something I struggle with," Kal agreed. "I have to be careful to represent myself properly so as not to be misinterpreted. I do not want to frighten anyone. But I have been told by Lo — " Kal stopped. As much as he trusted these people, he didn't need to publicize who his friends were. "By a friend of mine," he corrected, "that most of Metropolis has warmed up to me."

"Oh, good," Marli spoke, visibly relieved. "And, not to sound silly or anything, but I'm glad to hear that you have friends who you can be yourself around. Brian told me about what happened on the street the day you met." She shuddered.

"Thank you for behaving reasonably as well," Kal replied. "I find that very few people treat me normally here. Even the President, when we met last week, seemed to be intimidated by me."

"As you can tell, we don't feel that way," Brian spoke up. "Anyone who spends any amount of time with you would probably realize that soon enough as well."

"Mommy? Daddy?" The sleepy voice came in the direction of the hallway. A little boy entered the room, blinking in the light. His hair stuck up on one side, and one of the pant legs of his pajamas was scrunched up around his knee. A stuffed toy was held in front of the boy's face, so Kal couldn't really see what he looked like.

"Adam." Brian stood up and walked over to his son. "What are you doing up, buddy?"

"Daddy, I ... " A huge yawn broke up the sentence.

"Daddy, who's he?" Adam squinted over in Kal's direction.

"This is Mr. Kent," Brian introduced. "Can you say hello to him?"

Adam glanced up at his father, then over at Kal, and then up again at his father.

He shook his head and buried his nose further into the stuffed toy.

"He's a little shy right now," Brian apologized. "I'm going to get him back to bed. I'll be out in a second." The pair disappeared down the dark hallway.

"Brian's always so great with Adam," Marli sighed happily. "He doesn't get as much time with him as he wants, given all the shift work. Although hopefully that'll decrease once he gets settled in the new job. I work from home, anyway, so at least we don't have to worry about childcare on top of everything."

"What do you do, Marli?" Kal asked.

"I design jewellery," she answered. "Although lately, it's been more of a hobby than a job. I just don't have as much time as I used to."

"Well, from what I've seen, that time has been well spent," Kal told her.

"Thanks."

The boy had certainly looked adorable, Kal remembered. The way he had clung to the toy had been endearing. But thinking of that toy ...

“Marli?” Kal asked.

“Yeah?”

“That toy Adam had ... it wasn’t a ... “ Kal *really* hoped it wasn’t ...

“Oh. Yeah,” she replied, running a hand over her hair.

“This is a little embarrassing with you over, but he just got the toy a couple days ago, and I couldn’t pry it away from him.”

“So, it is a ... ”

“Yeah,” she winced. “It’s a Superman doll.”

Part 8

Out of sympathy for Kal, Martha laid a hand on the Superman bobble head to stop it from jiggling around. But that still didn’t stop him from playing with the jack-in-the-box he held in his hand that was decorated with a multitude of House of El crests.

“This stuff is all over Metropolis,” Kal commented dully, cranking the handle of the toy, which released a few tentative notes.

“Well, I think this doll here is kind of cute,” Martha commented, trying to cheer him up.

Kal fixed her with a serious stare. “Martha, they are buying and selling Superman on the streets.”

“Kal — “ Jonathan tried to speak.

“And for what?” Kal complained, throwing up his arms, nearly losing grip of the jack-in-the-box. “For somebody to exploit the people of Metropolis and make a few dollars.” The handle of the toy made another rotation, drawing tinny music out of the box.

Martha patted Kal’s hand reassuringly. She wasn’t sure how to bring him out of this funk. Helping Kal through his transition to Earth was like walking through a minefield. Some problems had surprisingly simple solutions, while others were so infinitely complex that she could never quite reach the bottom of them.

“I wanted to help people on Earth, and yet others are using my image for profit,” Kal continued bitterly. “What sort of message does that send to people? They won’t separate me from the toys that are being sold, so I will be associated with this whether I like it or not.”

“Kal, is it the toys themselves that bother so much, or is it the profits gained from their sale?” Jonathan asked suddenly.

“The profits,” Kal replied. “My image is being used to fund the rich, who certainly don’t need it.”

“What if you were to find a way to control how the profits were being used?” Martha asked, catching on to Jonathan’s idea.

Kal shook his head in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“Well, stopping these items from being sold doesn’t seem very likely at this point,” Jonathan explained to Kal. “But it could be possible to demand that all the proceeds of these objects be donated to those in need.”

“That could happen?” Kal asked, his eyes lighting up.

“Yes,” Martha replied, smiling at the excitement on his face. “You’d need someone to take care of the funds, though. Someone who you can trust to manage it properly so it will go to the areas you want them to.”

“You have had experience with business administration in the past, right, Martha?” Kal asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “I manage all the affairs of the farm, and when Jonathan had back surgery a few years ago, I took a job to help get us through.”

Kal met her with an intense, scrutinizing stare.

Although she knew that he wasn’t judging her harshly, she knew that he was evaluating her in some way. It was at times like these that Martha was certain that Kal had once been someone very important on Krypton.

Then, obviously finding something he approved of, he spoke. “Could *you* take care of the funds, Martha?”

Surprisingly, Martha felt herself tear up at this question. Ever since she had married Jonathan, having children had been the one thing she wanted most of all.

That hadn’t happened.

For years, she had born the pain, putting her energy instead into other things. Her paintings took off, the farm’s business affairs were always in perfect order, and she won countless local baking contests. But she knew that something was still missing.

Then Lois had come into her studio that day and blown life into the dying embers of her dream for children. Lois had reawakened that need for nurturing that had almost disappeared in Martha.

And now she had Kal to look after, too. He didn’t need to ask for her help on this. Unlike when he first came to Earth, he was independent enough to find someone else to take on this project.

But he had chosen her.

Because he knew her.

Because he trusted her.

Because he relied on her.

“Yes, Kal,” she whispered, her voice not strong enough to be any louder. “Yes, I would love to do this for you.”

But she still had to be honest with him.

“But I won’t be able to stay with it forever,” she told him. “If this takes off like I think it will, it’ll be a fulltime job for someone to do in Metropolis. But I’ll certainly get you started.”

Kal’s face broke out into a smile, as if a large burden had just been lifted off his shoulders. “Excellent,” he announced. “Soon, the Superman Foundation will be able to bring help to those most in need.” With a flourish, he held up the jack-in-the-box on display for Jonathan and Martha. Then, he cranked the handle one last time.

A miniature Superman doll popped out of the box, surprising Kal. His fingers fumbled with the object, but he couldn’t catch it in time to stop it from falling to the ground.

He took a breath to calm himself and then bent down to pick up the toy. He closed the lid on the box and then laid it carefully on the table.

“Do you think there is any way we can avoid selling those?” he asked the Kents.

There are four stages a reporter goes through on a slow news day.

The first is “Optimism.” The reporter in question starts the day brimming with excitement and energy, willing to tackle whatever the day will bring. Of course, that’s how any good reporter starts the day, whether or not there is news. It’s what happens next that changes things.

The second stage is “Delusion.” Finding nothing worthwhile on the surface, the reporter searches through the list of story assignments, hoping to find something that has some meat below the surface. Of course, there is nothing there.

After that comes the “Realization.” The reporter admits that nothing worthwhile will be accomplished that day besides a phone call to the Border Collie Lover’s

Association to ask how their show went.

The last and final stage is “Surrender.” The reporter spends the remainder of her day backing up her files onto floppies and performing other ponderous office chores while secretly hoping that something exciting will happen.

Lois had just entered into stage three, although she had already called the BCLA and sent that article to Perry. And her *riveting* article on fruit flies had been finished yesterday. There was, of course, a blanket demand for Superman articles, but she knew that Kal was visiting the Kents today and would unlikely be performing any rescues unless there was a serious emergency of some sort. Of course, she wasn’t about to tell anyone that.

“Slow day, huh?” Jimmy commented, resting a hand on Lois’ desk.

“Yeah,” Lois replied moodily. “I don’t suppose you have any hot news ideas, do you?”

“Lois, this is Jimmy Olsen the office grunt, not Jimmy Olsen the oracle of story ideas.”

“Right. Sorry.” Lois cast her eyes around the newsroom, looking for some form of inspiration. What she found wasn’t exactly a story, but it would provide her with at least a few moments of entertainment. “Hey, Cat!” she called. “Is that Arthur Chow coming out of the elevator?”

Cat dropped hastily to the floor, crouching beneath a desk.

“Hand me the jacket by my desk!” she whispered frantically. “I can’t let him see me dressed like this.”

“Relax,” Lois told her. “He’s not there.”

“Lois! That wasn’t funny!” Cat huffed, brushing herself off as she stood.

“When are you going to give up on the charade?” Lois asked her. “You can’t keep hiding your true nature from him.”

“That’s what you think, Lois,” Cat replied haughtily. “I’m doing just fine, thank you very much.”

“Yeah. That’s why you hid under a desk at the mention of his name.”

“Well, if he was there, he wouldn’t have seen me, now would he?” she spoke smugly.

“Hey, Cat, do you have anything to do today?” Jimmy asked Cat. “We were just saying that it was a slow news day.”

“Slow news day?” Cat’s eyebrow rose questioningly. “Jimmy, this is the kind of day that gossip columnists like myself dream of.”

“Do we have a pair of adulterous celebrities in the copy room?” Lois asked dryly.

“No, Lois,” Cat replied with disdain. “Who needs to go the copy room when we’re having celebrities coming into this very newsroom?”

“Huh?”

“The perfume photo shoot,” she spoke with impatience. “Marketing’s allowing the newsroom to be used as a backdrop for the launch of this new fragrance called ‘Exclusive.’”

As if on cue, the elevator dinged, and a swarm of people entered. Some entered pushing trolleys full of equipment, others walking with an entourage of willing assistants. They immediately began to set up lights and prop pieces, touch up make-up on snooty-faced models, and circulate the room, passing out perfume samples to seated reporters.

“We’re never going to get any work done,” Lois spoke with despair, viewing the scene before her.

“Oh, relax, Lois,” Cat waved aside. “Two minutes ago

you were complaining about the slow news day, so this shouldn’t be a problem for you. And it happens to be a great opportunity for me. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I *have* to go get an interview with April Stephens.”

Cat was just about to step away when a woman carrying a perfume bottle walked past them.

“Would you like a sample of this one?” she asked. “Guaranteed to make you find your true love.”

Before any of them could reply, they were all doused with the foulest-smelling concoction that Lois had ever experienced.

“What died?” Jimmy choked.

“That stuff’s probably three hundred dollars a quarter ounce!” Lois declared, disgusted. “This is exactly why I was complaining about this kind of thing happening at the Daily Planet. ‘Find true love,’ indeed ...”

“I don’t know what that was, but it definitely wasn’t ‘Exclusive,’” Cat told Jimmy and Lois. “Maybe some independent perfumer is trying to gain some exposure here. Too bad she’s going to need a major formula overhaul before anyone would even take a look at that stuff.” She sniffed her wrist and wrinkled her nose. “But it did cover up some of the *real* perfume I had on. I’ll need to go freshen up before I try to talk to April,” Cat decided, walking over to her desk to get a bottle of her own fragrance.

“While she’s getting ready, I think it’s time for me to make my move on some of the ladies here,” Jimmy announced. “I’m the office gopher, so maybe they need some ... coffee or something.”

“Good luck,” Lois called, shaking her head. She knew Jimmy wouldn’t get very far, but she also knew that at least he’d be courteous.

While Cat and Jimmy were distracted by the models, Lois stubbornly continued to try to get some work done.

Really, she should be backing up onto floppies more often. After all, she did have her novel on this computer. What would happen if it were to crash for some reason? She would lose everything. It was best to be safe, and being organized couldn’t hurt, anyway.

She smiled to herself as she inserted the disk. She was starting to sound like Kal. Just the other day, she had caught him organizing the dishes *before* he ran the dishwasher. That idea had never even occurred to her before, and she was still a long ways away from actually summoning the energy to do it.

Thinking of her roommate caused her smile to spread. She had been a little nervous initially about the arrangement. Even with a sisterly bond, she had gotten into plenty of fights with Lucy while they were living together. But with Kal, things seemed to fit more naturally. After a few days of working out routines, they had managed to fall into a rhythm that worked for both of them. There was something almost natural about living with Kal. It made her think that they were really meant to be together.

Lois snapped her head upwards, shaking it a little. Where had that thought come from? There was nothing romantic about their relationship. Kal was from Krypton, and although Lois could certainly see why someone would be attracted ...

She paused to fan herself a little. Was the heating system malfunctioning again? Her face seemed flushed for some reason. And the image of Kal’s (admittedly attractive) body would not leave her head for some reason. It was a shame, really, that he didn’t wear the Superman costume around the apartment more. Everything had so much

more ... definition in that costume. Of course, even when he dressed as Clark, he was still attractive. The sport jackets he wore emphasized his broad shoulders, and occasionally he would leave a few buttons undone on his shirt. That gave her more of a glimpse than she had ever gotten. It was really a shame she had never stumbled in on him shirtless before.

But Kal had never shown any desire to have that kind of relationship with her or anyone else here. Maybe he just wasn't attracted to humans. Or maybe the tragedy he had gone through on Krypton was too much of a burden for him to think about romance.

She saw that burden in his eyes sometimes. It was a dark weight that he carried with him constantly, and although he hid it well most days, there were times when his eyes clouded over completely with memories. Sometimes, she would hear him muttering in his dreams, speaking in a language she didn't understand. Kryptonian, probably.

She wished that, for once at least, she could just make him forget all of the terrible things he had gone through.

And why couldn't she? They were obviously meant to be together, and maybe it was her job to show that to him. He was gone for now, but he would be back later today, which gave her more time to prepare.

Her mind made up, she stood and collected her things, making her way to the elevator. She heard Cat talking to Chow on the phone as she walked past and saw Jimmy talking with that model as well.

Lois smiled to herself as the elevator door closed in front of her. It looked like there were a few people in the newsroom who were going to find love today.

Kal flew over Metropolis, feeling lighter than he ever had here on Earth. Jonathan and Martha's idea to use the proceeds of Superman merchandise to fund various charities gave him a solution to two problems he had faced. Not only did he regain control of his image, but he found a way to help those unable to afford basic human needs.

He couldn't wait to share what had happened with Lois.

But when he stepped through the window of her apartment, he noticed something strange.

The lights were off.

Candles were lit instead.

Kal thought that was odd. The rest of the building seemed to have power, so why did Lois have to resort to candles to light her home?

"Lois?" he called once he closed the window. There was no immediate response, so Kal took the time to spin into his "Clark" clothes. He had taken to dressing as Clark whenever he was out of the Suit. Tonight, however, the tie seemed too irritating to bother with. Kal still wasn't used to the idea of dangling something around his neck as part of his wardrobe.

Removing the tie, Kal walked towards his room to put it away. Once he had opened the door, the mystery of where Lois had gone was immediately solved.

She was sitting on his bed.

And wearing his shirt, it appeared.

"I've been waiting for you to get home," she spoke in a husky voice.

"Oh. Well, here I am. Lois, why are all of the lights turned off?"

"To help set the mood," she murmured, drawing a finger along the collar of his shirt. The one she was

wearing, of course. Not his own. "Do you like it?"

"Well, it is nice, I suppose. Although electric lights provide a steadier source."

"You and your practicality," she waved aside. "The candles are supposed to be *romantic*." She lifted her arm in the air, striking a pose. "Don't you ever do anything for fun, Kal?"

Her pose had caused the shirt to fall open, and Kal dropped his gaze quickly once he caught a glimpse of the little amount she was wearing underneath.

"Lois, do you think ... " He swallowed dryly. "Do you think you can button up the shirt you are wearing?"

"Well, I guess I could." She played with a button. "But that wouldn't be as fun, would it?"

She uncrossed her legs, and Kal's eyes were automatically drawn to the skin she was showing. The light from the candles danced across her bare thighs, and suddenly, Kal understood why the candles were considered to be romantic.

"You can't deny the attraction between us, Kal," she breathed, rising up from the bed and taking a step towards him. "I feel it all the time. And I don't know why you won't act on it."

"I think ... " Kal could hardly form any words in his head.

She was slowly gliding closer and closer to him and finally stopped, a mere breath away. She tipped her head up, and he automatically tipped his down.

"Maybe it's time you stopped thinking," she murmured, her breath tickling his lips. "Maybe it's time for you to just ... act."

He wanted to say something. He wanted to ask her why she was doing this.

But everything seemed to be blocked out by her smell, her touch, and ...

Those lips. So close to him, he could almost taste them. What would that be like? he wondered.

There was only one way to find out

Part 9

Kal was so close to her that she could sense his every move. There was a channel of energy between them that seemed to pulsate with every breath. He brought up a hand that brushed her hair back from her cheek and then moved to cup the back of her head. She watched him come even closer to her, and yet she waited. Although she wanted nothing more than to reach out and drag him onto the bed, she waited for him make the move. Just before their lips met, his eyes flicked up to meet hers.

And that's when he pulled away.

"Lois?" he asked, his eyes searching her face.

"Why did you stop, Kal?" she complained. "Just when I thought things were going pretty good ... "

Kal looked at her for one more confused moment and then raced out of the room, going so fast that he blew out half the candles.

Lois sank back onto the bed, drawing the shirt closed across her. What had happened there?

Something was going on with Lois, Kal decided as he flew as far away from her apartment as possible. He noticed as soon as he looked into her eyes. They were hazy. Unfocused. Glassy.

He was upset with himself for not noticing it sooner. He should have noticed as soon as he saw her. Of course, she

had done an admirable job in distracting him. He hadn't realized before just how attracted he could be to someone from Earth. After all, they weren't technically the same species. But she had certainly smashed through those concerns. The image of her illuminated by the candlelight was still very present in his mind

Kal shook his head sharply. It wasn't right for him to think about that picture. She obviously wasn't thinking clearly when she presented herself like that, and to dwell on it would be a violation of her privacy.

But what was wrong with her? His knowledge of Earth health problems was too limited to really tell. He would have to ask someone, and since Lois was out of the question, that left him with one more option.

Angling himself towards the west, Kal began to fly towards the Kent farm for the second time that day.

Lois woke up the next morning full of the energy that only true love can give someone. Last night hadn't gone as well as she had hoped, and she had fallen asleep before Kal had gotten back. But today gave her another chance, and she wasn't going to let it slip through her fingers. Kal had to have come back by now.

She threw off the covers and padded out of the room in search of her missing roommate. And she didn't have to go far to find him. He was stretched out across her sofa, hovering just above the cushions.

He was sound asleep, with his mouth hanging just a little bit open. His hand fell across his face, and Lois took a moment to admire the grooves that traveled across his palm. She loved those hands and everything else about him.

Kal looked so beautiful in his sleep, and she almost didn't want to wake him up. But she also knew that it would be much better to spend time with him while he was awake. Leaning over the back of the sofa, Lois placed her mouth right by his ear and whispered into it.

"I missed you last night."

"Lois!" Kal jumped up from the sofa and stumbled across the room.

"You didn't come home," she pouted.

"I went to go visit Martha and Jonathan," he replied, staring fixedly at the wall behind her rather than actually looking at her.

"You already visited with them all day yesterday," she told him, taking a moment to stretch her morning sleepiness away. "Why did you have to go see them last night?"

"Because," he replied, slowly inching along the wall to get even further away from her. "Lois, something is wrong with you."

"There's nothing wrong with me, Kal. I feel wonderful!" she announced. Finally having enough of the distance between them, she sprang towards him.

He caught her wrists neatly with one hand and held her away from him. "Lois, you don't realize this, but you are acting very strangely," he insisted. "The Kents think you may have been drugged."

"The only drug I have is love," she insisted. "Oh, Kal, I don't know why it took me so long to realize this. Let's not waste another moment!"

"Lois!" Kal exclaimed, pushing her back once again. "You may not realize it, but there is something wrong with you! Now, I've talked it over with Jonathan and Martha, and they think it's probably best for you to go stay with them until I can figure out more about this. You will be safer there."

The thought of spending another second away from Kal was unbearable.

"Don't do that, Kal, please," she begged him, stroking his chest. "Let me stay with you. I can help you get to the bottom of this. I can be useful, I promise."

Kal looked her straight in the eye with scrutiny.

"Well, to be honest, you would be a big help," he replied. "I am not sure how to go about this."

"Oh, this is wonderful!" She threw her arms around him and sighed happily at their closeness.

Until Kal pulled her off again. "But I can't take you out in public if you are acting like this," he told her.

She couldn't have him leave her here!

"Oh, I'll be good," Lois promised. "Kal, whatever you want me to do, I'll do it. As long as I can be close to you the whole time. And when I say whatever ... " she couldn't help adding cooly, "I mean *whatever*."

"Yes, I understand that," Kal replied, grimacing. "Okay, first of all, I need you to get dressed."

"You don't like the shirt?" she asked, a little wounded. She had tried so hard last night to find something to wear that would appeal to him.

"No, it's wonderful," Kal replied gently. "But it's not something that you would want to wear at the Daily Planet, is it?"

"The Daily Planet?" she asked blankly.

"Yes. I thought that would be a good place to start. That is where you were all day yesterday, right?"

"Yes," she replied. "Good thinking, Kal. You're *so* good at this!"

"Thank you," he smiled. "Now go get dressed, please."

"Don't you want to come with me?" she asked.

"What? No, of course not!"

"Well, how else will I pick something out that you'll like?" she asked innocently.

"Lois, whatever you choose to wear will be wonderful," Kal replied.

"Are you sure?" she asked him.

"Yes," he sighed. "Positive. As long as you are covered, I will be happy with it."

Kal leaned against the wall of the Planet elevator in exhaustion. Handling Lois had been even more challenging than he thought it would be. Not only was she under the delusion that they were both deeply in love, but she also didn't seem to take no for an answer. Once again, he was questioning the wisdom of keeping her with him rather than depositing her with the Kents.

But he did need her help with this. Without her, he would be at a complete loss. And judging by what he knew of her character, he thought that she would be embarrassed to have the Kents witness her exhibiting this strange behavior. She would probably be embarrassed that he witnessed it as well, but at least this way her embarrassment would be kept to a minimum.

Delicate fingers reached over and brushed against his hand.

"Lois, what did I say about that?" he warned.

"Can't I just hold your hand?" she asked, nearly begging. "That's all I want, honest."

Sighing in resignation, Kal wrapped his fingers around hers. Flying over here had been equally challenging, but Kal didn't trust Lois to be focused enough to drive, so they didn't have any choice. She had held herself very close to him the entire flight, and Kal had struggled to remain

focused. He couldn't deny the physical attraction between the two of them, although, as the only sober one, he had to take the responsibility of keeping them on track. So he had firmly told her that she had to keep physical contact to a minimum.

He tried to ignore how deprived he was feeling because of that.

Lois rested her head against Kal's chest and gave a sigh of contentment. "Isn't this nice, Kal?" she asked.

"Yes. Very nice," he replied distractedly. "But you have to remember to call me 'Clark' here, okay?"

"Okay," she agreed, her voice muffled by his clothing.

He hoped that she wouldn't slip up. They were walking into a room full of reporters, and he was sure that they would be suspicious of the slightest mistake. After all, if they were at all like Lois —

He stopped suddenly, realizing what he was doing. How could he be worried about Lois' embarrassment in front of the Kents and not even think about her embarrassment in front of her colleagues? It would be far worse!

But going to the Daily Planet would be useless without Lois. The whole point of this was for them to see if there were any clues as to what happened. He wouldn't know what was out of the ordinary if he didn't have Lois with him.

Well, as long as she behaved somewhat decently, he could cover up the rest by just playing along, he decided. Not that he enjoyed lying. It was just the only way to preserve Lois' reputation.

But even then, his plan seemed to have shaky construction. He didn't have much more time to think about it before the elevator door opened into the newsroom.

As it turned out, however, his worries were unfounded. He wasn't sure how newsroom normally operated, but he guessed that this was not it.

The entire room was filled with red, white, and pink balloons. No one seemed to be working at their desks, and after one unfortunate eyeful, Kal averted his gaze from any corners or secluded areas.

"Jimmy?" Lois was looking at a young man with dark hair approaching the elevator.

"Lois, I'm off to find April," he announced with determination.

"Good luck!" she called. "Isn't this wonderful, Ka — uh ... " She giggled. "I mean *Clark*." She patted him on the chest.

"What happened here?" Kal asked as they walked down the ramp.

"Love, obviously, silly," she told him.

Whatever was affecting Lois was also affecting the rest of the newsroom. That would have to be the obvious answer.

"Okay, Lois, can we sit down at your desk and talk this out?"

"Of *course*." She led them over to a desk that was neatly kept, with the exception of a dead plant placed by the monitor.

Kal took the seat he was offered gratefully, although he was shocked when Lois chose to sit on his lap rather than in her own chair. Of course, given her behavior today, he shouldn't have been surprised.

"Okay," he spoke, trying valiantly to avoid the distraction in his arms. "We need to determine what happened here that could cause all of this. Can you walk me through your day here?"

"Well ... It was a *really* boring day," she told him, tracing a pattern with her finger along his arm. "That's why I came home early to wait for you."

"Lois, can you please focus?" he asked in exasperation. "Something very strange is going on here, and we need to get to the bottom of it."

"Fine," she sighed. "If you say so."

"Did anything happen that was out of the ordinary?"

"We had some people come in to promote some kind of perfume," she remembered.

"Great!" Could perfume cause this type of thing? It seemed unlikely, but Kal was willing to take anything he could get at this point.

"It wasn't all that great," she replied, wrinkling her nose. "There was one woman who sprayed us with this *awful* sample. It smelled disgusting."

"Was she with the rest of the promoters?" Kal asked, becoming curious.

"I don't think so," Lois shrugged. "Cat said ... Cat! Hi!"

Kal groaned at the distraction and turned to see a thoroughly mussed woman rushing towards a desk. The woman knelt by a drawer and began rooting through it frantically.

"I can't talk now, Lois," she spoke, hardly looking up. "I need to get back to Arthur. Do you think the purple one is okay?" She held up a small lace garment for inspection.

Kal blushed at what he saw but was not about to be distracted. "Wait! Uh ... Cat!" he called. "Do you remember anything about a woman who was spraying a bad-smelling perfume around the newsroom yesterday?"

"Oh, yeah," Cat rolled her eyes. She threw the purple garment back and began to dig through the drawer again. "Talk about bad odor. Hey, remember how I said that she wasn't a real perfumer, Lois?"

"Yeah," Lois replied, uninterested.

"Well, it turns out I was wrong," Cat shrugged. "I remember seeing her in the latest Vogue. Miranda something. Anyway, she may be a real perfumer, but her latest is a real dud. Now, *here's* the black one!" Cat lifted the garment up in triumph. "Got to go, kids. I've got someone waiting for me downstairs."

"Lois, I bet that Miranda has something to do with what's happening here," Kal shared as Cat ran off. "Is there any way we can find out how to contact her?"

"Whenever I want to find out someone's address I just ask Jimmy," Lois shrugged. "But I think he's busy right now. Pursuing his true love."

"Poor girl," Kal muttered. "How about that magazine that ... uh ... 'Cat' was talking about. Is there any way we could buy a copy?"

"We won't need to," Lois shrugged. "Cat always has the current ones in her desk." She hopped off Kal's lap and walked over to Cat's desk. The magazine was in the top drawer, so Lois was able to easily find it and deliver it to Kal. Then she settled herself back onto his lap.

Using a judicious amount of speed, Kal flipped through the magazine until he found a perfume ad featuring someone called Miranda.

"Is this the woman you saw?" he asked Lois, showing her the picture.

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "That's her."

"Great. There's even an address there for her shop. We can go talk to her." He started to stand up.

"Wait! Clark!" Lois exclaimed before she was dumped off his lap.

“What, Lois?”

“We can’t just go in and ask her what she’s up to,” Lois told him. “We have to be more ...” she leaned in closer to Kal’s ear, “secretive than that,” she whispered.

He gently pushed her back. “What do you mean?”

“We need a cover,” she explained, playing with the knot of his tie. “You can be my boyfriend, searching for the perfect fragrance for me, while I can be your girlfriend, who is just *all over* you the whole time.”

Kal hesitated. This sounded like a ploy of Lois’ to increase the level of physical contact between them. However, she was more knowledgeable in this type of thing, so perhaps he should bow to her expertise.

“All right,” he finally agreed. “We will pretend to be a boyfriend and girlfriend. As long as you do not get too distracted, Lois. I need you to be focusing on this, okay? Lois?”

She pulled her head up from the crook of his neck. “Yeah, Clark. I’m focused.”

“Right,” Kal sighed. This trip was going to be interesting.

Miranda’s perfume shop was a tiny little store tucked away amongst a strip of shops that all had the same quaint, artsy charm. Luckily, Kal had no problem in finding it. The shop was the source of a bewildering mixture of different smells blended together in a way that made them hardly recognizable.

As they entered, a bell above the door tinkled, and the woman from the magazine ad came out from behind the desk.

“Looking for something in particular?” she asked.

Kal didn’t miss the look of recognition that Miranda gave Lois.

“Something for my girlfriend,” he spoke, keeping an arm around Lois.

Lois giggled appropriately.

“Have we met before?” Miranda asked Lois.

“You were in the newsroom yesterday,” Kal spoke up.

“Oh, yes. Promoting my new perfume. ‘Revenge.’” She didn’t give anything away in her words, but Kal caught her gaze moving sideways and landing on a large atomizer sitting by itself on a shelf.

“Lois just loved it,” Kal told Miranda, ignoring Lois’ roaming fingers, which were perfectly in character for a woman “all over” her boyfriend. “Is there any way we could purchase a bottle?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Miranda spoke. “The formula isn’t perfected yet. Would anything else interest you? How about my ‘Jungle Passion’? Pure white petals, picked from a flower grown only in Micronesia.”

She turned to get the bottle, and Kal took that opportunity to zip over and nab the atomizer she had been watching before.

“No, thank you,” he replied once she had turned around. “We’ll just have to wait until ‘Revenge’ is perfected.”

They exited the shop together.

“We didn’t get much information,” Lois spoke glumly as they walked down the street together.

“Not information,” Kal spoke. “But I did get this.” He drew the atomizer out of his pocket.

Lois’ eyes lit up. “That’s what she was spraying yesterday! Oh, Kal, you did it!”

Before he could stop her, she landed a kiss square on his lips.

His steps faltered, and they stopped on the sidewalk.

He gently pulled them apart.

“Yeah, I found it,” he spoke huskily. He cleared his throat. “Now we need to take this to get it analyzed. I want to know what’s in this. Do you know somewhere we can go?”

“Yep,” Lois nodded happily. “There’s a lab I know. C’mon, flyboy, we’ve got to get to the alley. I’ll give you directions from the air.”

As Kal allowed himself to be dragged off to the alley, he fervently hoped that the perfume would either wear off on its own or the lab would have a solution. He wasn’t sure how much more of this he could take.

Part 10

Miranda stroked her cat as she stared straight ahead, seething with anger.

It hadn’t been enough.

Spraying the entire newsroom with Revenge hadn’t been enough to convince him. She had *shown* him that ridiculous headline that the Daily Planet had put out, and he still wasn’t convinced. And instead of *going* to the Planet to see for himself, he had spent all his time cuddled up with *that woman*, completely oblivious to the world around him.

No wonder things were going so poorly for him lately. If it wasn’t for that disgusting woman, then he would be right on top where he belonged.

“He’s just not thinking clearly,” Miranda whispered to the animal on her lap. “The Daily Planet stunt didn’t work, so I’ll just need something bigger to get his attention.”

And she had the perfect idea

As soon as she woke up that morning, Lois realized that she had made a mistake. Sleeping for another ten years would be better than facing the hangover that she was now dealing with. What had she done last night to deserve this? Lois groaned and rolled over in bed.

Then she stopped, running her fingers over the sheets. That wasn’t the pattern on her sheets. It looked more like the pattern on ...

She sat bolt upright, the pounding in her head temporarily forgotten. What was she doing in Kal’s bed?

“Kal?” she called quietly. He didn’t seem to be anywhere in sight. And although she was thankful for that, she did want some answers.

“Kal?” she asked again, this time a little more loudly.

The door to his room opened, and Kal poked his head inside. “Lois?” he asked cautiously.

It looked almost like he was afraid of her. Something tickled in the back of her head, but she couldn’t quite grasp it. What exactly had happened last night? Suddenly, that question was much more important than before.

“Kal ...” she groaned. This was far too much effort with the headache she was having.

“I’ll get you some water,” he told her, leaving the door ajar as he left.

“And at least three Tylenols,” she told the empty doorway.

The pills were soon pressed into her hand, and she gulped them down quickly. Even the sip of water helped to make her feel better, and she soon was able to push herself into a sitting position.

And that’s when she realized what she was wearing.

Or what she wasn’t wearing.

“Here,” Kal offered, holding a t-shirt out to her yet not

making eye contact.

She slipped it on quickly and then pulled the covers up to her chin.

“Kal ... “ She wasn’t really sure how to continue. How did she tell him that she had a big blank space in her memory before waking up here? Clearly, she had done something very irresponsible beforehand.

Hadn’t she?

“Kal, do you have any idea what I’m doing here?” she finally burst out.

“You don’t remember?” he asked in surprise.

“No,” she spoke in a small voice.

“The newsroom at the Daily Planet was sprayed with a perfume,” he explained. “It made everyone feel as if they had fallen in love. Everyone acted very strangely, although I can see it’s worn off of you.”

A flash of memory hit Lois then. A mental picture of her on this bed amidst a sea of candles wearing one of Kal’s shirts. And her conveniently forgetting to button that shirt. She looked up at Kal, and the look of discomfort he was giving her provided all the confirmation she needed.

She groaned. “Oh, Kal, I’m so sorry.”

“You were not in control,” he shrugged. “It is not your fault.”

The more she thought about it, the more she remembered the last two days. Including her embarrassing attempts last night to get Kal to sleep in the same bed as her while she had “forgotten” where her pajamas were.

“I am going to get even with Miranda,” she growled. “Why on earth would she pull a stupid stunt like that? People might have gotten hurt!”

“We took the perfume to be analyzed, and the lab said it used an animal-based pheromone to override a person’s inhibitions. I imagine there could be plenty of uses for something like that. She might have sprayed the Daily Planet simply as a test.”

“We’ll find out her motives,” Lois growled. “And then we’ll expose it all in the Planet.” Thinking of her reporting career gave Lois a fresh reason to groan. “Kal, I acted like an idiot at the *Daily Planet*,” she moaned.

“Everyone there was too busy with the pheromone’s effect on themselves to be paying attention to you,” Kal told Lois.

“Well, that still doesn’t make up for what I did to you,” Lois grumbled. “I must have made you so uncomfortable, Kal.”

Kal shook his head. “Lois, you did not — ”

The phone rang.

Wincing at the noise, Lois reached over to grab it from its cradle.

“Hello?” she grunted.

“Lois!” Jimmy practically yelled through the line. “Turn on the TV! Now!”

“What channel?” she asked miserably.

“Doesn’t matter — she hijacked the broadcast system,” he replied, hanging up immediately.

Lois really didn’t want to get out of bed, but the urgency in Jimmy’s voice spurred her to get up and make it all the way to her bedroom, where she turned on the TV.

Miranda was on the screen, holding a pilot’s helmet and with a plane in the background.

“... staff of the Daily Planet has felt the effects of my one percent solution,” she was saying. “I am about to spray the entire city with the one hundred percent solution of my formula. This is to prove once and for all that my formula

is functional. Unlike the diluted formula, the one hundred percent solution will have permanent effects.” She smiled wickedly.

“Kal ... “ Lois looked over her shoulder to see him standing in the doorway.

“I see her, Lois,” Kal replied. “She’s at the Metropolis airport, I think. I can stop her.”

With a spin and a blur, Kal was gone.

Lois turned back to the TV. Normally, she would be hopping in her Jeep to race over to the airport and nab an exclusive. But her head still hurt, and she wanted to wait for her medicine to kick in. Besides, she could easily get an exclusive interview with Superman later.

That is, if he was still willing to talk to her. Her cheeks flamed as she remembered some of her behavior while she was under the influence. She hadn’t taken no for an answer. Every second he had spent with her, he had been under constant attack. Now that he was gone, the memories seemed so much more mortifying. She remembered with painful clarity her desire to spend every waking moment with him and how she was constantly touching him, in some ways more appropriate than others. There was probably more physical contact squished into that forty-eight hours than in the whole time she had known him.

The worst part about it was that she wasn’t even sure if he was attracted to humans. It was one thing to be shamelessly throwing herself at someone who might appreciate a part of it, even from an objective standpoint. It was another thing entirely to be throwing herself at someone who would have no appreciation for it whatsoever.

It seemed silly to her, but that’s just the way it was. Maybe it was a feminine pride thing.

Anyway, Kal had arrived at the scene and had taken Miranda and tied her up to a chair, her hijacked broadcast still airing. Then he took the barrel of Revenge she had attached to her plane and flew it up out of the screen. He would probably throw it into space or something.

Kal reappeared in front of Miranda’s camera.

“The pheromone has been dispensed with,” he announced. “The police are on their way to the scene, and Miranda will be taken into custody. Everyone is perfectly safe.” His arm reached up to the side of the camera, and then the screen went blank.

Lois slumped in her bed.

Kal had saved Metropolis.

She should feel proud for him. This was the biggest thing he had done since his original appearance. But she couldn’t rise up from the narrow canyon where her self-respect had buried itself. Soon, Kal was going to come home, and she would have to face him again.

Of course, if she was to go into the newsroom, then she wouldn’t have to see him. Sure, it was supposed to be her day off, but it was a big news day. Perry would probably be calling her in a few minutes, anyway.

In record time, she had dressed, brushed her teeth, and was out the door. She told herself that she was rushing so much because she wanted to get to the Planet quickly, but an annoying little voice kept insisting that it was because she wanted to avoid Kal.

No matter the reason, she was glad to come into the newsroom. As soon as she entered, she walked over to where Perry was standing with Jimmy and Cat.

“Hi, Lois,” Jimmy greeted her glumly.

“Jimmy, what’s wrong?” Lois asked with concern.

“Well, thanks to Miranda’s pheromone spray, I made an

idiot of myself in front of April Stephens,” he replied.
“Repeatedly.”

“You think that’s bad, son?” Perry asked. “I’ve got a sexual harassment charge to deal with, *and* I have to find a way to get out of Alice’s doghouse.”

“Well, I do have something that might make you feel better, Chief,” Lois offered. “I’ve got lab results of an analysis of Miranda’s perfume that will fit perfectly into a story.”

“That’s great, Lois,” Perry said, cheering up a little. “Friez has got some interviews from the airport coming in, so can I get you two to put a story together?”

“Sure,” she nodded. As a general rule, she preferred to work alone, but she didn’t mind being partnered up occasionally. As long as it wasn’t too frequently.

“No one was able to get an interview with Superman, though,” Perry lamented. “If you’re at all able to work the same magic you did in order to get that first interview, I would be grateful.”

“I’ll have to see,” she replied. “No guarantees.” Especially if she was too embarrassed to talk to Kal ever again.

“That’s great, Lois,” Perry patted her on the back and walked away, Jimmy tagging along in his wake.

“So, did you actually have a good time while you were under the influence of that perfume, Lois?” Cat asked. “Something like that can only do someone like you good.”

Every instinct within her told her to keep quiet, but it seemed as if everyone had been embarrassed somehow through this whole fiasco.

“Nothing too exciting,” she told Cat. “I just embarrassed myself in front of a friend. Luckily he was a gentleman and didn’t take advantage of me.”

“A gentleman?” Cat asked with raised brows. “There’s no such thing, Lois. I’m thinking your friend there is gay.”

Or an alien, Lois added silently.

“I don’t think so,” she said out loud. “He’s probably just not attracted to me.”

“Ouch,” Cat winced.

“I guess the pheromone didn’t work out too well for you, either, huh?” Lois asked, remembering Cat’s brief appearance in the newsroom yesterday. That performance had probably been enough to scare Arthur Chow away from Metropolis for good.

“Didn’t work out?” Cat asked. “Are you kidding? It was the best thing that’s ever happened to me!”

“So, Arthur ...”

“Turns out he wasn’t after stability,” Cat replied with a smug grin.

Lois bit her tongue to keep from speaking. Hadn’t she been trying to convince Cat to act more like herself with Chow? But of course, Cat wouldn’t take that comment very well at all.

“I’m happy for you, Cat,” Lois said instead. “At least something good came out of this whole thing.”

“Oh, yes,” Cat purred. “Something *very* good, Lois.”

It didn’t take her long to type up the article with Eduardo. After that, she hung around the newsroom stalling until Perry forced her to leave.

“It’s supposed to be your day off!” he told her. “Now, I don’t want to see you again until tomorrow, you hear?”

Having no more distractions at work, Lois finally gave up and headed home. She couldn’t avoid talking to Kal indefinitely, and maybe getting it over with now would be better.

Yeah, right.

She entered her apartment with trepidation, and Kal stood to greet her. Seeing him again brought back all of her painful memories from the last two days. She had really behaved terribly.

“I went over to the Planet,” she told Kal, not able to make eye contact with him.

“I thought that is what you would do,” Kal replied. “It was either that or I would meet you at the airport, with you demanding an interview.”

“Well, one of the reporters working today was there anyway. You didn’t give him an interview, though.”

“Maybe I am only comfortable with talking to you,” Kal suggested.

Lois didn’t respond, not really in the mood for those types of sentiments, even if Kal only meant them in friendship.

“Miranda was taken into custody,” Kal spoke, trying again to make conversation. “Hopefully they will find out more about her motives when they question her.”

Lois nodded, still not looking at him.

“Do you still have a headache?” Kal asked with concern.

She nodded brusquely. It was a good excuse for not talking to him.

“Lois, are you sure you are okay?” Kal asked, not letting her off the hook with her pretend headache.

“Fine,” she replied. But realizing this wasn’t going to get Kal off her case, she tried to think of something else to say. “Uh, so I noticed that you were handling that big barrel of pheromone. You weren’t affected by that at all were you?”

“No,” he shook his head. “It must be part of being invulnerable. I don’t feel anything.”

“Or maybe you’re just not attracted to anyone here,” she suggested lightly. “Remember what the guys at the lab said? There has to be some sort of base attraction in order for the pheromone to work.”

There was an uncomfortable silence. Why did she have to bring something like that up? All it made her think of was her desperate attempts to get closer to him yesterday.

“That ... would not be the issue,” Kal finally said.

Lois looked up in surprise. To her disbelief, Kal was blushing and didn’t seem to want to look her in the eye.

“Oh,” she replied, a little pleased to hear this. Maybe she didn’t have to be as humiliated after all.

“Lois?” Kal asked after a pause.

“Yeah?”

“Does that ... matter to you? Attraction?”

“Well, I guess I just thought that maybe you weren’t attracted to humans,” she replied, a little embarrassed now. “I don’t know what women looked like on Krypton, and sure you look like a typical male, but that doesn’t mean everyone on Krypton was like that. Maybe you were some kind of freak.” She froze in horror as she realized what she had said. “Not that you’re a freak or anything. Just that ... I mean ... Well ... Or maybe there’s some kind of subtle difference that I haven’t picked up on but that you can’t stop noticing because your senses are so much more perceptive than mine. Or maybe ...

“But that’s really none of my business,” she finally spoke, shaking her head.

Kal stared at her, still openly processing what she had just said. Then he spoke into the silence.

“Lois?”

“Yeah?”

“I do find humans to be attractive. But for a while I thought that wasn’t true,” he confessed. “Kryptonian females are very similar to human females, but I still thought there was a difference, somehow. But when you were under the influence of the pheromone, I realized that there is no difference, really. At least not in any way that matters for this issue.”

“So, are you saying ... That you liked what you saw?” Lois asked curiously. She had no clue why she was pushing with issue so much. Was some of the pheromone was still in her or something? There had to be some excuse for her acting this crazily.

“I ...” Kal scratched the back of his head nervously. “Well, yes, I ... I did. But Lois, nothing is ever going to happen between us in that regard.” He winced. “That sounded cruel. I am sorry — ”

“No, don’t worry about it, Kal. I wasn’t really expecting ... You know, my question was just out of curiosity.”

“Okay,” he nodded.

“Just ... How can you be so sure?” she pushed further. “That’s a pretty definitive statement, so you must have a reason”

“I do. Lois, I am not interested in romance with anyone here on Earth.”

“But ... You said there’s attraction”

“Yes, there is that. But I can’t ignore the reason why I was sent here.”

“The reason?” she asked with curiosity. Up until now, she had thought that he was sent here because it was the only planet his parents knew of that he could live on.

Kal sighed. “My parents sent me here with the hope that I would use my abilities to help people here on Earth. They knew that the yellow sun would give me these strange abilities, and they hoped that I would use them for the greater good. A romantic relationship would only distract me from that purpose.”

“So ... They wanted you to spend the rest of your life basically being a slave to people here on Earth?” She frowned at the thought. “They didn’t want you to have a life of your own?”

“Lois, the people of Earth have given me *life*,” Kal argued with sudden heat. “Without this planet. I would be as dead as ... as everyone else I knew.”

Lois knew she should stop there. She knew that pushing him further would only upset him and wouldn’t help. He *never* talked about his life before he came here, and she could see that even the little he was sharing was almost too much for him to handle.

She saw all this, and yet she didn’t stop.

“Kal, you don’t need to *pay* anyone here,” she told him. “You’re not an indentured servant. You can have a life.”

“And romance?” he asked accusingly. “Is that what this is really about, Lois? You must have some sort of base attraction to me as well. Is that what you are really asking?”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m ultimately after,” she said sarcastically. “Who wouldn’t want a relationship with a moody alien who has such severe survivor’s guilt and PTSD and whatever else that the thought of living a life is just too terrible for him to comprehend.”

“Human psychology will not work on me, Lois,” Kal snapped. “I am not human, remember?”

“How could I ever forget that?” she replied. “You’re always so — ”

ring

Lois stopped mid-sentence.

ring

“Are you going to answer it?” Kal asked.

Lois wordlessly snapped up the phone.

“What?” she demanded.

As she listened to her source speak, the energy she felt drained from her.

“Okay,” she replied softly. “Thanks.”

She hung up.

“What is it?” Kal asked.

“That was a contact of mine at the police station,” she told Kal. “Miranda’s dead.”

Part 11

Bill Henderson blindly reached for the cup of coffee at his side and took a gulp while still reading through the reports in front of him. It had gone cold, but he didn’t really taste it anyway.

He glanced over at the junior officer who was paired with him and nudged the man to jolt him awake.

“More coffee, Detective O’Hara?” he offered dryly.

“Any chance I can skip that and just get an IV drip of caffeine?” O’Hara asked. “I think I’m past the point of coffee by now.”

“Get used to it,” Bill replied. “Have you finished going through the interviews of everyone who was working at the station that night?”

“Yeah. No one’s saying anything,” O’Hara reported. “Either they’re all sticking together, or someone’s really covered their tracks.”

“Keep looking,” Bill instructed. “Keep an eye out for any inconsistencies. We’re still waiting to hear back from the morgue to see what exactly killed her, and we’ll know a lot more once we do.”

Bill’s phone chirped, and he snatched it up. “Is this Palmer?”

“No, sir, it’s Jenkins from the front desk.”

“What is it?” Bill demanded.

“Lois Lane is here to see you.”

He sighed. “Of course she is. Send her in.” He replaced the phone in its cradle. “You’re in for a treat, O’Hara,” he told the detective. “It’s not every day you get to see a hurricane blow through this office.”

O’Hara looked at his mentor in confusion, which was soon cleared up when Lois burst through the door.

“Who killed Miranda, Henderson?” she demanded.

“You’ve been on the case for over twenty-four hours now, so you must have *some* leads. I want to know what they are.”

“Slow down, Lane. You can’t expect us to just give over all our information.” Bill moved his head to catch a glimpse of the man standing behind Lois. “Who’s your friend?”

Lois moved to the side to let her quiet partner further into Bill’s small office.

Bill noticed how Brian tensed as the man came into view.

“C-Clark?” he stammered.

“Hello, Brian,” the man smiled.

“This is Clark Kent,” Lois introduced. “We’re ... working together on this.”

“You’re actually working with a partner on this?” Bill asked. “I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“Well, people can change,” she replied unconvincingly.

“It is nice to meet you,” Kent spoke, stepping forward.

Bill shook his hand cautiously. “You know him,

O'Hara?"

"Yeah, he's a ... uh, family friend."

Lane shot a curious glance between the two younger men.

"I'm Detective O'Hara," O'Hara told her. "I'm working with Inspector Henderson on this case. Kind of a way to get rid of my training wheels."

She gave him a passing nod before refocusing her attention to Bill.

"You have to have something," she demanded.

"Lois, even if we did have something, we wouldn't be able to give it to the public. Miranda was in police custody when she died, which means we're investigating our own people. Do you have any idea how sensitive that kind of investigation is?"

"So you don't have anything to give me," she moped, sitting down in the only remaining chair.

"Did you listen to anything I said, Lane? *I can't* give you anything."

"Off the record?" she wheedled.

Bill sighed. She always managed to wear him down. "She was going to plea bargain," he told her. "That's all I can say."

"So you think that whoever killed her was trying to keep her from talking?"

"Lois, that's all I can say," he said. "You won't pull anything else out of me."

Lois stood, drawn upright with determination.

"Fine. If you can't help us, then we'll just have to see what we can dig up ourselves. C'mon, Clark. Let's go."

She strode out of the office.

"It was nice meeting you," Kent nodded politely before following her.

Bill turned to his junior partner. "So, how did you and that Kent guy meet in the first place?"

"He was uh ... at the scene of an accident I responded to," O'Hara replied. "We got to talking and kind of hit it off from there."

"Uh huh."

Somehow, Bill didn't believe that was the whole story. But unlike a certain reporter, he knew when something wasn't his business.

"So that was your police officer friend," Lois commented as they pulled away from the police station in her Jeep. "He seems nice."

"He barely got in two words between you and Inspector Henderson," Kal replied.

"Which shows that he's probably a nice guy. Based on what little I saw of him, I like him." Lois paused, considering the man she had met briefly. "He *looks* nice," she decided.

"He's married," Kal blurted out.

"Uh, okay," Lois replied, shooting a confused glance over at him. "That wasn't really what I meant."

"Oh."

Lois was tempted to push the subject and ask why he had felt it necessary to say that to her, but she decided against it. Their argument had been cut short due to the phone call announcing Miranda's death, and since then, they had both chosen to pretend like it never happened. Lois knew that she wasn't going to be able to say anything that would convince Kal he could have a life here on Earth without betraying his parents, and the last thing she wanted to do was lose his friendship. Perhaps he just needed more

time before he would be able to heal.

Anyway, it was probably best to tread lightly around any subject that could lead back to their fight.

"Kal, you know you really don't have to stick around with me," she said instead. "I know what I'm doing."

"Miranda should not have died," Kal replied, staring straight ahead at the road. "I thought she would be safe at the police station, but instead I sent her to her death."

"You had no way of knowing."

"Still, I feel responsible."

Right. Of course he did.

"So, do you have any idea who might have killed her?" Kal asked.

Lois paused, preparing herself to share this with Kal.

"This whole situation reminds me of someone," she finally spoke.

"Who?"

"Have you ever heard of Lex Luthor?"

"That business man you exposed last year?" Kal asked. "Everyone thought he was a wealthy philanthropist, but you found out what he was really doing."

His knowledge surprised her. "How did you know about that?"

"I read your articles," Kal told her.

"You did?" she asked, feeling pleased. "Every one?"

"Yes. I wanted to get a better sense of what a reporter did, and I thought that reading your articles would give me the best example. It must be a fascinating job to have."

"Well, I like it," Lois smiled. But she frowned as she remembered Lex. "Well, it's great until something like the Luthor story happens."

"What exactly happened with him?"

"I was always a bit suspicious of him, so I investigated," she told Kal. "I put together a case based on the information I had, and I wrote the story for the Daily Planet. Luthor was arrested, and the case was brought to trial."

"... and?"

"And he squirmed out," she spoke with frustration. "Sure, he got nailed for a few things, but those were all white-collar crimes, and with a guy as rich and well-connected as Luthor, the penalties were pretty minor. My sources went mysteriously missing or were discredited, none of the evidence that was collected held up in court " She punched the steering wheel of her Jeep in frustration. "Basically, all Luthor lost was a ton of money and his tarnish-free reputation. He should be locked up for the rest of his life."

She parked in the Planet parking garage, and they both got out of the vehicle and walked towards the elevator.

"I'm sorry, Lois," Kal spoke as she pushed the button.

"Yeah, well, that's all in the past now," she told him, entering the elevator. "My point was that this whole thing feels like the kind of stuff that Lex used to be behind. Miranda would've taken the blame for the whole pheromone affair if she didn't come forward to talk. And when she did, she was immediately killed."

"So does that mean you think it was Luthor?"

"I don't know," she chewed her bottom lip thoughtfully. "I'm not sure if Luthor would have the assets anymore to hire someone like Miranda." She debated about whether or not to tell Kal her other suspicions but then finally decided to go for it. "I have a couple other suspects," she announced.

"Really?"

“Well, the Luthor trial left room for a new crime boss to come into Metropolis, and my gut tells me that this is a similar situation to what happened with Luthor. Everything can be connected back to one person. And that includes what happened with the shuttle launch.”

“You think the same person is responsible for both?”

“I know it sounds crazy,” she admitted. “But I really think so. I haven’t made any more progress in my investigation of Space Station Prometheus, but I do have two other suspects besides Luthor for sabotaging the station. Arthur Chow and Arianna Carlin.”

“The second-richest man in Metropolis? And who is the woman?”

“Carlin. She’s a psychologist,” Lois replied. “But with a *lot* of money. She probably inherited it or something. Anyway, she’s got companies and investments across the board.”

The elevator opened, and Lois led Kal into the newsroom.

“You’ve been here before,” she acknowledged. “So you already know where my desk is. I just need to go — ”

“Lois!”

“Hi, Jimmy,” she acknowledged. “Did you get that background on Carlin done for me?”

“Sure. But I don’t know why you’re researching a woman who writes self-help books.”

“Call it a hunch,” she shrugged. “Oh, this is Clark Kent. He was here the day before yesterday, but I’m not sure if you remember him.”

“No, I don’t,” Jimmy winced. “I’m still a little fuzzy on the details. Nice to meet you, CK. Now, I have to go bring the Chief his donuts or else.” He walked away from the pair. “Oh, by the way, Lois, Mayson’s waiting at your desk.”

“CK?” Kal whispered into Lois’ ear as they descended into the pit.

“That’s Jimmy for you,” Lois shrugged.

“And who is Mayson?” Kal asked.

“Assistant DA,” Lois replied. “She helped me out a lot with the Luthor trial. Although I can’t say we’re necessarily friends, we work well together professionally.”

“Lois. Hi,” Mayson greeted her.

“Hi, Mayson. This is Clark,” she introduced. “He’s helping me out with my latest investigation.”

“Nice to meet you, Clark,” Mayson nodded. “I’m assuming that when you’re talking about your latest investigation, you’re referring to Miranda’s death?”

“You read me *way* too easily,” Lois grumbled. Then, she brightened. “Do you have something for me?”

“Not much,” Mayson shook her head. “I went to see Miranda after she was taken into custody. We talking briefly, I ... gently informed her of the consequences of her actions. She completely broke down, begging me to make a deal. She said she could lead us to the person funding her research. This same person is apparently responsible for the majority of criminal activity in Metropolis.”

“So you accepted?” Kal guessed.

Mayson shook her head. “I had to clear it with my boss first. I knew the case would be high profile, so that meant I had to proceed carefully. I drove back to the Hall of Justice to talk it over, but by the time we had reached an agreement, Miranda was already dead.”

The mood between the trio was somber. Although Miranda had clearly been a criminal, did she deserve to be killed for what she did?

“I am sorry that happened,” Kal spoke softly. “It is not your fault, Mayson.”

She nodded. “Thanks. Anyway, that’s the exact same thing I told the police. Nothing new there. But what did get me thinking was Miranda’s claim that the name she would give me was also the person responsible for a lot of other things in Metropolis. It made me think of — ”

“Luthor,” Lois completed.

“Yeah,” Mayson nodded. “Lois, is there any chance that he’s back in business?”

“I don’t think he would have the financial resources to be doing this type of thing,” Lois shrugged. “At least not yet. But you know his financial losses better than I do.”

“It’s very unlikely,” Mayson admitted. “The one thing he did lose was a lot of money.”

Lois debated on whether or not to share her other suspicions with Mayson. But the lawyer had proven herself to be trustworthy in the past. Plus, it would be good to have some legally acquired information on these people rather than just the stuff Jimmy was able to sniff out.

“I do have a few suspects,” she told Mayson. “Ever since Prometheus. If you’ll come in the conference room with me, I’ll tell you all about it. You, too, Clark.”

It was exactly what Lois needed. Being able to talk through her ideas with other people gave her the fresh perspective the case needed. Of course, they didn’t get much further than Lois had gotten on her own. The people they suspected were going to be careful and wouldn’t leave any easy trails for them to follow. But at least Lois had two more people on her side.

“I have to get back to work,” Mayson announced after a length of time had passed. It was early evening already, and the newsroom had started to empty of the daytime staff. “But I will look into that stuff on Chow and Carlin you wanted, Lois.”

“Thanks.”

“Clark?” Mayson asked, her voice sounding slightly anxious. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Of course,” Clark nodded. He stood, and they walked over to the door of the conference room. They stepped outside but didn’t close the door fully, so Lois was still able to hear their conversation.

Not that she was eavesdropping, of course.

“Look, I don’t normally do this,” Mayson was saying. “But I’ve kind of been left out to dry here. I have two tickets to see a production of ‘Oleanna’ tonight. It’s the first time it’s been performed in Metropolis, and ... Well, I was going to go with my sister, but she had to cancel.”

Lois had to keep herself from gasping. Mayson had always been brazen, but this seemed pretty bold. Well, at least Lois knew that Mayson’s efforts wouldn’t pay off. Kal had been more than clear about his romantic plans yesterday.

She waited to hear the inevitable rejection.

“Thank you, Mayson,” Kal spoke.

He must be letting her down gently.

“I would love to go to the play with you.”

What?

Lois was mad at him for some reason.

He sensed it as soon as he stepped back into the conference room after Mayson had left.

Although she didn’t speak, living with her had made Kal exceptionally good at reading her, and he could tell that she was upset about something. She held her back

inhumanly straight, and there was an extra snap as she flipped through the pages of her folders. When she refused to look at him and instead gave him a cold reminder to check the city, he knew that he had something to do with the thing that was upsetting her.

He wondered about it all while he was doing his patrol and still hadn't come up with any reason when he returned to the Daily Planet.

Kal and Lois drove back home together, and the stifling atmosphere in the car caused Kal to wonder even more. Lois clenched the steering wheel tightly in her hands and had her eyes glued on the road ahead for the whole trip.

"Thank you for taking me with you today," Kal spoke.

"You're welcome," Lois replied stonily.

"It was interesting to see you work."

"That's nice."

They made it back to her apartment before Kal got the courage to speak again.

"Lois, are you mad at me for some reason?"

"No," she said. "You better hurry if you want to meet Mayson. You're meeting at her place, right?"

"How did you know about Mayson?" Kal asked.

"I heard you two talking," Lois replied shortly. "The door to the conference room didn't close completely, and I guess you guys were louder than you thought." She disappeared to her room.

"Well, maybe you can help me," Kal suggested. "I am not sure what to wear to something like this. I have never been to a play before."

"Whatever you have is probably fine," Lois replied behind the closed door.

Kal frowned in confusion but went into his room to change. He had wanted her advice on this, but it looked like Lois wasn't about to give him any. He would just wear a suit that was a little nicer than the one he had on and would make sure that his tie was knotted neatly rather than in the disarray it usually was.

He took his time changing, and by the time he came out, satisfied with the way he looked, Lois had come out of her room and was sitting in front of the TV. She had a carton of ice cream sitting on her lap, and she dug into it viciously with a spoon.

"Well ... I'm leaving now," Kal spoke into the silence.

"Fine," Lois replied.

"I'm not sure when I will be back," he spoke again.

"I won't wait up."

Kal waited, not really sure what he was waiting for. Finally, he turned away to exit the apartment. His hand had just touched the doorknob when Lois spoke.

"Have fun on your date."

Kal's hand froze on the handle.

"My what?"

Part 12

Kal pulled his hand back from the handle and turned around to face Lois.

"What did you say, Lois?" he asked with increasing panic.

"I heard you and Mayson talking today outside the conference room," she told him, staring into her carton. "I don't know how you expected to hide it from me."

"I wasn't trying to hide anything, Lois!" Kal told her, pushing his hand through his hair. "We are just going as friends! Purely platonic."

"Oh, please," she rolled her eyes. "You can't expect me

to believe that."

"Why not?"

"It was just ... the way she said it. There's no way anyone could see it as platonic."

"Really?" Kal asked in surprise.

"No one could've mistaken it," she said affirmatively.

"I did!" Kal exclaimed. "Lois, I honestly didn't think that Mayson saw it that way."

She snorted impatiently. "Kal, have you never been hit on in your whole life?"

"Hit on?" he asked desperately, trying to grab hold of one thing in their whole conversation to make sense of.

"What does that mean, Lois?"

The spoon fell from Lois' hand.

"You haven't," she realized. "You've never been hit on. I mean, not really. Unless you count girls who are constantly swooning over Superman, but that doesn't really give you enough experience to know if someone's flirting with you. All they do is breathe heavily and stare. I'm not going to give Mayson much credit, but at least she's more intelligent than that."

Kal sank into the armchair as he let Lois' words wash over him. The only thing he knew about Earth romance was that it was messy. Humans were more emotional than Kryptonians were, and he knew that people often got hurt in human relationships. Mayson seemed like a good woman, and he didn't want to hurt her, but at the same time he wasn't sure what to do.

"Lois, I cannot meet her tonight," Kal told her, putting a stop to her chatter. "If she thinks it is a date, then I will only disappoint her."

"So, what, you're just not going to show up?"

Kal sighed, feeling completely lost. He had no idea how to handle this. "What do you think I should do, Lois?" he asked.

Lois tapped her spoon against the carton of ice cream, clearly thinking the problem over.

"Well ... You could go on the date and then let her know sometime during the evening that all you want out of it is friendship. That would probably be the best option. It would still hurt her, but not as bad as some of the other options."

"I don't think that would be a good idea," Kal shook his head. "Clearly, I cannot understand social situations like this well enough to respond appropriately. I could end up making a bigger mistake without knowing it."

"Unless Kryptonians have a habit of lifting up the skirts of their casual friends, I think you'll be okay," Lois replied.

"Lois!"

"Sorry," she apologized. "I know this is uncomfortable for you." She sighed as she dug her spoon into the ice cream again. "But I really see this as being the only decent way to tell her. You could call her, but —"

"I can do that," Kal decided. "If I call her now, that might give her time to find someone else to go with."

Lois shook her head. "You can't stand her up, Kal. Look, I'm not the biggest fan of Mayson, and the way that she just asked you out after only an hour or so of you working together seems a little bold. But you made a commitment to her, and you can't just back out now."

Kal hesitated, not sure what he should do. But Lois seemed very sure, and he supposed that she would know best. Given her initial reaction when she thought that Kal was actually going on a date, she probably felt that at least seeing Mayson tonight was important. And although he had

no romantic interest in Mayson, he didn't want to hurt her.

"All right," he agreed. "I will go with her tonight. But I'm going to explain to her that there is no way that we are having a romantic relationship."

Lois nodded her approval. "It's the best thing for you to do, Kal. Really."

Kal turned back around to head out the door when Lois called him back again.

"Wait, Kal!"

"Yes?"

Lois got out of her seat and reached for her purse. She dug out her wallet and pulled a few bills from it.

"If she wants to go out for coffee or something after," she explained. "Mayson seems like the type of woman who would offer to pay at least her half, but you should offer to pay first. Then she'll probably offer again, and you should offer back one more time. If she looks like she wants you to pay, then you should insist, but if she wants to pay, then you should let her."

Kal took the bills, suddenly feeling more anxious. How was he going to cope with these complicated rituals by himself? Up until now, he had had Lois to rely on.

Lois, seeming to sense his fear, patted his shoulder reassuringly. "It'll be okay, Kal," she told him. "You've learned a lot about Earth culture, and I'm sure you'll do fine. Just relax and everything will work out okay."

Mayson looked across the table at her date for the night. So far, the evening with Clark had been a disaster. If she had known what the play had been about beforehand, she wouldn't have asked him to go with her. Of course, her sister was the one who couldn't make it through "Hairspray" without gagging, so Mayson really shouldn't have expected her to choose a cheery play. "Oleanna" was definitely not good first-date material, and now she was anxious to just forget about it for the rest of the evening.

But Clark was being frustratingly close-lipped. She had suggested they go out for coffee to help conversation, but all he had done so far was stare at his untouched cup.

"So ... " she spoke awkwardly. "Are you from Metropolis originally?"

"Uh, no," he replied.

She waited. When he clearly wasn't going to elaborate, she dug deeper. "Where did you grow up?"

He looked up at her, his eyes wide. "Uh ... K-Kansas," he stammered.

She nodded politely. Maybe he felt that she was being too nosy. She should share something about herself. That might make him feel more comfortable.

"I grew up in Metropolis," she told Clark. "I moved away from home for college but then ended up coming back here to work. I actually went to Harvard for my Law degree," she mentioned nonchalantly. Normally, she wouldn't brag about going there, but she felt that she needed all the points she could get here.

But Clark showed no sign of recognition at the mention of the school.

"You know," she tried again, "Harvard."

"Oh. Yes, of course," Clark replied hastily. "I am familiar with the school."

She could tell he was lying, which confused her even more. Who hadn't heard of Harvard? And even if he didn't, why did he feel the need to lie about it? There was something he was hiding, and she was extremely curious to find out what it was.

Of course, that was completely inappropriate behavior for tonight. This was supposed to be a date, she reminded herself.

But there was no reason for her not to do some gentle questioning to see if he gave anything up. And she would be subtle about it. She was pretty good at finding out the truth about people.

"So, what do you do for a living, Clark?" she asked casually. A perfectly normal question to ask someone.

And Clark looked completely panicked.

"You do work, don't you?" she asked innocently, taking a sip of her coffee.

"Uh, yes, of course I ... Uh ... Well, just like every *normal* person ... who works." He stopped talking abruptly, his eyes widening in realization of how he was sounding. He ducked his head in embarrassment and mumbled a few words that sounded like absolute gibberish to Mayson as he raked a shaking hand through his hair.

"Clark?" she asked, genuinely concerned now. "Are you okay?"

He was silent for a moment but then lifted his head, looking much calmer now. "Yes," he said decisively. "I am fine. Sorry I got so upset. The thing is that I have just recently moved here, and I do not have a job yet."

"Oh." Now Mayson felt bad for pushing the issue. Obviously, he was going through a rough time and she wasn't making it any easier for him. "Well, I'm sure you'll find something soon," Mayson told him.

Kal nodded. "Thank you."

They were silent again. Kal ran his fingertips over the rim of his cup, and Mayson swirled the cold dregs of her coffee around in the cup.

She put down her cup abruptly. "Are you sure you're okay?" she asked. "You just seem so ... distracted," she told him. "Like you don't really want to be here," she added hesitantly.

Clark looked up at this with an expression on his face that came very close to relief.

"Mayson, I don't want to hurt you," he began. "But I have to tell you the truth. I'm not looking for a romantic relationship right now."

She nodded, biting her bottom lip. Based on the outcome of the night, she had sort of suspected something like this. Of course, that didn't stop the swell of hot tears that started to build up.

"You are a wonderful woman," Clark was continuing. "But I just cannot be in a relationship right now."

"Okay," she spoke, trying to keep her voice even. "I understand that." She smiled wryly. "How come all the nice guys are always unavailable?"

"Mayson, I —"

"No, it's fine, Clark." She stood up. "Look, I need to get going. I have a big case tomorrow." She reached into her purse to pull out some money.

"Oh, let me pay for it, Mayson," Clark offered reaching for his back pocket.

"No, I have it Clark," she replied hastily. She didn't want to feel like she owed him anything.

"But —"

"Really, I've got it. Besides, I'm the only one who had anything, anyway. You didn't even touch your coffee."

Clark hesitated for a moment and then nodded. "Okay," he replied.

"I'll see you around, Clark," Mayson told him.

"Bye, Mayson."

She left the restaurant. It was official. Her worst date ever.

“Hello?”

“Lois, it’s Henderson.”

“Inspector Henderson!” Lois wedged the phone between her shoulder and her chin and grabbed her notebook. “Do you have something for me?”

“I have information on the Miranda murder case.”

“Really? What is it?” She had just been getting ready to go out on an interview, but she could certainly spare a few minutes for this.

“Miranda was killed by a time-release poison that must have been given to her sometime during her stay at the precinct,” Henderson told her in a rehearsed tone. “Given the autopsy report, we were able to determine when she was administered the poison, and by comparing it to the log kept at the station, we found a reasonable suspect. Unfortunately, Detective O’Hara and I were unable to interview the officer in question. Douglas Kennard has gone missing, and none of his acquaintances have received any contact from him.”

“That’s all you have?” she asked in disappointment.

“Until we can find Kennard, our trail has gone cold,” Henderson replied. “We’ve been through all of his things and haven’t found anything to point the way to the person who put him up to this.”

“So you know for sure that he was working for someone,” Lois noticed.

“Off the record?”

“Of course.”

“There was no motivation for him to do it himself. Why would he risk his job to kill someone who was going to go to jail anyway? As far as we can tell, Kennard had no reason to want revenge. It just doesn’t make sense for someone to take that kind of risk unless there was some sort of outside reason.”

“Extortion or bribery?”

“Does it matter?” Henderson asked wearily. “Whoever got Kennard to do it managed somehow. It’s not the method that I’m most concerned with but rather the person behind the methods.”

“Reminds you of someone, doesn’t it?” Lois spoke quietly.

There was silence over the line.

“Lane, you have to learn to give up on Luthor,”

Henderson finally told her. “I know you’re still upset about the way things went down, but you can’t keep seeing him around every corner. That’s the kind of thing that will kill your credibility.”

“But you have to admit that it sounds like him,” Lois tried again.

Henderson sighed. “Yeah, it does,” he confessed. “But I can’t have him as an official suspect without something concrete to go on. You know that, Lois.”

“So, if I were to get you proof ...”

“Then I would have something. But right now, I don’t have anything, Lois.”

“Not yet,” she replied. “But you will. Just give me some time.”

The car sat in the middle of the abandoned parking lot. They had no other company besides a few flattened wrappers that littered the asphalt.

“Okay, so the gas is the peddle on the right, and the brake is the peddle on the left,” Brian instructed Kal.

“And I steer with this,” Kal continued, placing his hands on the wheel in front of him.

“Right. See, you’re getting the hang of it.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Kal muttered.

“Of course you are. Here, why don’t you start up the car and go for a little bit. There’s a nice straight stretch ahead of you, and you can just gently curve around in a circle.”

Dubiously, Kal reached forward and turned the key over. To his satisfaction, the machine grumbled and then roared to life.

He pushed the gas peddle with his foot but was disappointed when the car didn’t move forward.

“You have to put the car into drive,” Brian instructed, indicating the gear shift.

“This is a ridiculous system,” Kal muttered.

“Just pull the stick back until it’s lined up with the ‘D,’” Brian told him. “Make sure your foot is on the brake, too.”

“This car is unable to anticipate any of my desires,” Kal complained.

“Well, we still have to learn to read each other’s thoughts before we can start making machines that are able to do it,” Brian replied, grinning.

“I suppose,” Kal smiled. “But I doubt that humans actually have the capacity for telepathy in the first place.”

“No? Have you tried it with someone here?”

“Yes,” Kal shrugged. “With a few people. It did not work.”

“Have you tried it with me?” Brian asked with sudden curiosity.

“It was like talking to the broad side of a barn,” Kal replied.

“I think you mean like talking to a brick wall,” Brian corrected after a moment of confusion.

“Oh. Yes, that would be it. Anyway, it is different than just not getting anything in response. I can sense somehow that my messages aren’t getting through. Although my hearing is infinitely better that it was on Krypton, everything is still strangely quiet.”

“That must be lonely, Kal.”

Kal didn’t reply. Instead, he reached forward and put the car into drive.

“Okay, good,” Brian said, going along with the change in subject. “Now give it some gas.”

The car lurched forward, and Brian grabbed onto the dash for support.

Kal braked harshly. “Sorry,” he apologized.

“No, it’s okay,” Brian told Kal. He slowly removed his fingers from the dash, taking a moment to calm himself.

“This might take us a little longer than I thought.”

At that, Kal’s head shot up as he listened to something that Brian couldn’t hear.

“It may take even longer,” he told Brian. “I need to go.”

“Okay,” Brian replied. “We’ll pick this up another time. Go save the world, Superman.”

Kal exited the car and shot straight up in the air, faster than Brian could follow. Thankfully, he had remembered to put the car back into park before he had left.

Brian got out of the car and circled around to the driver’s side. There was always such a difference in Kal when he was needed as Superman. He looked so much more confident and in control of the situation.

But that wasn’t what stuck with Brian the most. What Brian remembered most of all was Kal’s expression on the rare occasions that he mentioned something on Krypton.

It was always the exact opposite of the way he looked

when he became Superman.

Part 13

Martha glanced around the table at the people gathered there as tears collected in her eyes. It really hadn't been that long ago when she and Jonathan were condemned to spend holidays alone together in the house. Of course, they were always invited over to spend time with extended family, but as those families grew, Martha found it more and more painful to be reminded of what she was incapable of having.

But ever since Lois had visited that one Christmas, holidays at the Kent house had been much merrier. And now they had Kal to spend Thanksgiving with, too. And if she had anything to say about it, he'd be here at Christmas as well. Even though he was just one more person, the house seemed so much fuller with him around.

"I'm thankful for the good crop we've had this year," Jonathan was saying. "I was a little concerned with the weather we had in August, but things pulled around in time, and now we've got a great harvest. Of course, a lot of that is because of you, son," Jonathan turned to Kal. "You put in more work than a whole crew of farmhands ever could have."

Jonathan nodded over to Lois to pass the sharing forward.

"I'm thankful for Perry giving me the time off," Lois said.

"Honey, that's what you always say," Martha smiled.

"Well, it's true," she shrugged. "Perry works the newsroom hard, and getting time off for holidays is difficult. Of course, it was easier this year with Kal coming because I didn't need to schedule time for a flight. So, I guess I'm thankful for Kal giving me a ride, too."

"Well, I'm thankful for how well my art show went last week," Martha told her family. "It's sometimes hard to build enough of a client base to run a show out here, but the community was also very supportive. I'm also thankful for you, Kal. I know the situation of your arrival was tragic, but you've gifted us with your presence over the last two months, and I'm so grateful for it."

All eyes turned to Kal as his turn to share came up.

Martha watched him with sympathy. He had lost so much that it must be hard for him to think of something to be thankful for. But it would be good for him to focus on the positive things in his life rather than all of the negative things.

"I'm thankful for all of you," Kal told the group. "You have helped me so much ever since I arrived here on Earth. I cannot possibly repay you."

"You don't need to, Kal," Martha told him, laying a hand on his. "You don't owe us anything."

"And given the way you've helped each of us out, you're not exactly a burden," Jonathan chimed in.

"Thank you," Kal nodded. "So, after we have said what we're thankful for, what happens next?"

"Now we eat," Martha told him. "This is the biggest tradition of Thanksgiving."

The food was passed around the table, and Martha pretended not to notice when Kal didn't take anything.

"I have been meaning to talk to you, Martha," Kal told her. "I may have found someone to help out with the Superman Foundation."

"Wonderful. I knew it would be popular, but I had no idea it would be this demanding," Martha shared. "I don't

mind helping out, but I'll be glad to pass over the responsibility. Who is it you found?"

"Her name is Constance Hunter," Kal answered. "A recent graduation of Met U. But she's discovered soon enough that she is not cut out for the corporate world."

"Well, she sounds lovely. I'm sure she'll do the Foundation a lot of good," Martha decided.

"You never told me about her," Lois commented.

"I just recently met her," Kal shrugged. "And we haven't talked much lately. You've been busy with your drug investigation."

"Oh, are you still working on that, Lois?" Martha asked anxiously.

"You are being careful, aren't you?" Jonathan asked.

"Yes," Lois replied, smiling as she rolled her eyes.

"Honestly, I'm fine. I finished it before we came out here, and nothing went wrong."

Kal cleared his throat and shot a pointed glance over at Lois.

"Okay, fine," she grumbled. "Kal might have had to pull me out of the river a little bit. But everything was okay in the end."

"Kal, we sure are thankful that you're here," Jonathan told him. "It's a miracle Lois lasted this long without you."

"Hey!" Lois objected.

"I'm sure she would have been fine without me, Jonathan," Kal replied graciously.

"Actually, you did help me out a lot with that one," Lois admitted grudgingly.

"Well, I'm glad that Kal is able to help you keep safe," Martha told her surrogate daughter.

"If I win a Kerth for the article, I'll be sure that you get an honorable mention in my acceptance speech, Kal," Lois offered jokingly.

"Thanks, Lois," Kal smiled. "With all of the effort I've put into keeping you safe, I would certainly appreciate the recognition."

"Hey!" Lois exclaimed.

Martha smiled to herself. There was nothing like having family here for the holidays.

Kal didn't need the creak of the screen door to sense Lois' arrival. Her steps were the loudest sound in the house where Martha and Jonathan were already sleeping. He could hear her heartbeat get progressively louder as she exited the house and walked to the edge of the porch.

"It's a clear night," she commented, following his gaze to the sky.

"You can see the stars much better here than in Metropolis," Kal agreed.

They stood there a moment in silence, taking in the millions of little lights.

"I used to know all of the constellations," Kal told her. "I loved star gazing, and I spent hours looking up into the sky connecting the dots."

"Not anymore?" Lois asked.

"They're all switched around from here," he told her, waving his hand impatiently at the sky. "It is a different perspective than I'm used to."

"Here." Lois stepped close to him and grabbed hold of his hand.

He was surprised by her sudden move but allowed himself to be manipulated.

She traced a shape in the sky with his finger. It looked like a box with an arm attached to the upper left corner.

“That’s the Big Dipper,” she told him.

“The Big Dipper?” he echoed questioningly.

“It’s like a ladle,” she replied. “I’m not really sure why it’s called that.”

“All right,” Kal smiled. “Can you show me another one?”

“Uh ...” She scanned the night sky, searching for more things to show him. “Oh, over there.” She pointed his finger towards three stars lined up in a straight line. “That’s Orion’s Belt. And if you look at the stars around him ...” She drew his finger to connect the stars. “Then you can see his body.”

“Who was Orion?”

“Um ... A hunter?” she guessed. “There’s probably a story behind it, but I don’t really remember. Some guide I am, huh?” She dropped his hand.

“You’ve shared more than I know. Thank you, Lois.”

“My sister Lucy took this class on Astrology once,” Lois shared. “It was all about telling the future with the stars. For three weeks, she gave fortunes to anyone who would stand still long enough. She would be the one who could tell you more.”

“Do you believe that?” Kal asked. “That your fate is spelled out in the stars?”

“Not really,” Lois shrugged. “I like to think I have control over my destiny.”

“I used to think the same thing,” Kal agreed. “But now ... My life is so different, thanks to forces so much beyond my control. I can’t help feeling like a pawn of the universe.”

He dropped his head so he wouldn’t have to look up to the sky anymore. Somehow, it just seemed too big right now to be a part of.

An arm gently curled around him, and Lois rested her head on his shoulder.

For a second, he leaned into it, glad for the support from someone.

Then, something shifted between them, and his nerve endings lit up, feeling more sensitive than ever. Every single point of contact between them seemed to be supercharged with energy. Kal could smell her hair and feel her heart beating in her chest.

He stepped back hastily.

“I think I’m going to go check around Metropolis,” he told her abruptly. “Even though it is a holiday, that doesn’t mean crime stops, does it?”

“I ... guess not,” Lois replied, confused.

“I’ll be back later tonight,” Kal told her as he floated upwards. “Probably once you are already asleep.”

“Uh, okay,” Lois stammered.

“Goodnight, Lois.”

“Kal —”

He didn’t hear the rest of her sentence. He was too far away.

Kal flew into the telescope lab and landed silently. He had been completely surprised when Lois told him that the Professor Daitch had needed to talk to him regarding the discovery of Nightfall. He and Lois both agreed that there must something that he wasn’t telling the general public.

“You wanted to see me, Professor Daitch?” Kal called out.

The scientist jumped in the air and pulled himself away from the telescope.

“Superman!” he exclaimed.

“Mind if I take a look?” Kal asked, gesturing towards the telescope.

Daitch stepped aside to allow Kal access but then stopped suddenly.

“I thought you had enhanced visual abilities,” he told Kal in a critical tone.

Kal blinked, taken aback by that reminder. He squinted up in the sky to check if he could see Nightfall by himself.

He couldn’t.

“I do,” Kal told the professor. “But even I have my limits.” It was comforting for Kal to realize that. He didn’t like to think that he had become a god of some kind.

The professor seemed to accept this explanation, and Kal pressed his eye to the lens of the telescope.

He saw a dark chunk of rock flying through space that brought a cold shiver through his body. It was one thing to stargaze, but this brought him far too close to the terrifying emptiness.

“Nightfall is close to seventeen miles across,” the voice of the professor informed him. “It’s traveling close to thirty-thousand miles per hour.”

Kal tore himself away from the telescope to focus on what the professor was saying. Clearly, this information was important for him to know.

“You told Miss Lane and the other reporters as much at the news conference,” he told the professor, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “Why am I here?” He was maybe being a little harsh on the man, but the sight of that asteroid had made him edgy.

Instead of answering Kal, Daitch typed a command on the keyboard. A countdown appeared on a large screen. The numbers read 99:52:23, but they soon changed, and Kal realized that they must stand for hours, minutes, and seconds.

“If my calculations are correct, in a little over four days, it’s going to hit the Earth,” Daitch told Kal somberly. “The sky, literally, is falling.”

Kal swallowed the bolt of nausea he got at this statement. “What ... What kind of damage would that cause?” he asked around his dry mouth.

“Superman,” Daitch spoke fearfully, “this could knock the Earth off its axis. Even throw us out of our current solar orbit. It’s far larger than the meteor that caused the extinction of the dinosaurs. The crater alone will throw enough dust into the air to start a new ice age.”

In other words, catastrophic damage. Kal’s head swam with the implications this would have. But before he could become too concerned, his sensitive hearing kicked in, and he heard voices just outside the room.

In a flash, he was by the door, swinging it open.

“I am not completely used to the customs here on Earth,” he told the two men he found there, “but I do know that humans and Kryptonians both look down on those who eavesdrop.”

“Superman, my apologies,” one of the men spoke. “We felt you should hear the news from Professor Daitch before we were introduced. I’m General Robert Zeitlin. This is Secretary John Cosgrove.”

Kal nodded sternly towards both men. Maybe he should have been more solicitous, but there was something about the whole situation that had him on edge. The possibility of the asteroid hitting Earth hadn’t even come up in the press conference, and now Kal was supposed to be part of some sort of clandestine military operation? He didn’t like the idea of keeping secrets from everyone else.

“You can’t keep this a secret,” Kal told the men, crossing his arms in front of him to emphasize his point. He had already known one civilization that had suffered as a result of government secret-keeping.

“The President will tell the public, but he wants to avoid a panic, too,” Cosgrove told Kal. “He simply wants to get you on board before making an announcement.”

“Get me on board ...” Kal echoed.

The general spoke some tactical stuff, but Kal was barely paying attention. He had a pretty good idea of where this was going, anyway.

“You’re asking me to fly a million miles into space to stop a rock the size of Metropolis that’s traveling faster than any spacecraft you’ve been able to design,” Kal spoke, talking over the scheming men.

“Can you?” Cosgrove asked.

And with the look that Cosgrove had, Kal realized how much they needed him.

“I don’t know,” he told them honestly.

“You’re our only hope,” Zeiltin told Kal.

Of course, Kal knew from the beginning that he would help in any way that he could.

“I guess I will find out where my limits really are,” Kal decided, turning to look at each of the gentlemen in turn. They nodded grimly back at him in response.

Part 14

Lois fought her way through the crowd of reporters until she got to the edge of the rope barrier. Normally, working her way to the front of a pack of anxious reporters was a difficult task, but her anger gave her extra fuel. She couldn’t believe that Kal hadn’t told her any of this beforehand.

Once there, she was able to see Kal standing among a crowd of government and military-looking men. No one else would have noticed the stress he carried in his shoulders, but it spoke volumes to Lois, making her forget her anger temporarily. Ducking under the rope, she began to jog over to where Kal was standing.

“Miss,” one of the men spoke, “you have to go back —”

“She can stay,” Kal told the man. “I need to talk to her for a moment.”

Although they still got a few strange looks, everyone backed off enough for Lois to have some privacy with Kal.

“How are you feeling?” Lois asked him worriedly.

“This will work,” Kal spoke confidently, looking over her head and at the preparations going on behind her.

“Gee, that’s a relief,” Lois spoke sarcastically. “You never told me that telling the future was one of the powers you got here on Earth.”

“Lois —”

“How can you possibly know that this will work?” she demanded.

“Because ... it has to,” he finally said.

“Oh, well in that case ...”

“Lois, why are you so upset?” Kal asked.

“You’re asking why I’m upset?” she asked with disbelief. “Maybe it has something to do with me finding out through a press conference that my friend is risking his life.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t give you an exclusive on this, Lois,” he replied. “But we felt that this needed to be addressed right away.”

“I’m not upset about losing the exclusive, Kal!” she

exclaimed, stung that he would think so. “I’m worried about *you*.”

“I’m fine,” Kal told her. “I am just trying to focus. There is a certain angle I am to approach the asteroid from in order to assure maximum impact. I can’t afford to miscalculate.”

She opened her mouth to speak but was cut off by the arrival of a technician bearing equipment for Kal.

“Superman, we need you to put these on right now,” he told Kal.

Lois reluctantly allowed herself to be pushed away as Kal was outfitted with a headset and belt that had two small canisters attached to it.

“This should give you enough oxygen,” one of the men told him. “It’s a six-hour supply for an ordinary man.”

“That will be fine,” Kal replied, although he didn’t really seem to be paying attention to what the man was saying. Instead, his attention was directed towards an imposing man wearing a military uniform.

“Superman, I want to offer you the tactical nuclear option one more time,” the man said to Kal. “You’d only be acting as a delivery system.”

Kal shook his head emphatically. “The EPRAD science team has given me a clear indication of the asteroid’s structural weak point. If I hit it at maximum speed, it is their opinion that I will achieve a 50-megaton explosive force. I think we should try that first and not risk the fallout.”

The nuclear arms man nodded in reluctant agreement.

“This is your comm device, Superman,” the technician told Kal. “It’ll allow you to communicate with ground control.”

Kal slipped the headset on. “Is this working?” he asked, speaking into the microphone.

“Good,” the technician nodded. “Stand by for further instructions. We’ll be organizing your takeoff shortly.”

Alone again for the time being, Lois moved in closer to him. “Are they saying that there was an option that would have been a lot safer for you?” she demanded. “And you decided against it?”

“It might have been safer for me, but it held a lot of risks for everyone else, Lois,” Kal told her. “And I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure that the people here on Earth are safe.”

Lois took a step back, taking in Kal’s determined face.

“You don’t care at all, do you?” she asked with dawning realization.

“Have you been listening to me at all, Lois? Of course I —”

“I mean you don’t care about yourself,” she spoke. “About whether you live or die.” Tears welled up in her eyes at the thought of never seeing Kal again. Never having him make sure she woke up on time in the morning or ask a bizarre question out of the blue ...

“Lois ...” Kal reached up to brush a tear from her cheek.

She shuddered from his touch, and the tears fell even harder.

“I got a second life here on Earth,” Kal told her gently. “And I always wondered ... I wondered why it was that I survived. And maybe this is my answer. Maybe I survived Krypton in order to save Earth.”

“But Kal,” she spoke, hiccupping from the tears. “We care about you here. Jonathan and Martha and ... And me. I don’t want you to die.”

“Lois ...”

“Don’t you want to stay here?” she asked. “Don’t you like it here?” She didn’t care how desperate she sounded. All that mattered was that she needed Kal to stay.

“Of course I like it here, Lois,” Kal told her. “It’s just that ...” He glanced over her head again, and his face wrinkled in frustration. “I have to go now, Lois,” he told her, his voice low and urgent. “They’re signaling for me.”

“No!” she cried, grabbing onto his slick sleeve.

He stopped abruptly, looking down to where they were touching.

Then Kal pulled her closer with those arms that were so powerful, too powerful in this case. She had no hope of fighting it, even if she wanted to. He pressed her into a hard kiss that caused even more tears to leak out. She tasted salt.

They broke apart, and Lois looked up into his face, gasping in a hard breath.

And then he lifted off, escaping from her arms and leaving only a ghostly memory of their contact. She craned her neck upwards and shielded her eyes from the sun to try to get a glimpse of him, but she couldn’t see anything.

He had gone.

They had made a scene, back there when Kal took off. In any normal circumstance, that would have worried Lois. When Kal first moved to Metropolis, Lois had given him a long talk about why it wouldn’t be a good idea for her to be associated with Superman. At first, she wasn’t sure if he understood it, but the longer he spent on Earth, the more he realized that having Lois Lane publicly connected to Superman would be a bad thing.

So they played it safe. Lois was careful about the amount of exclusive Superman interviews she claimed, and Kal was careful to avoid making too many public rescues of Lois, preferring to save her from peril in less noticeable ways.

But now Lois was stuck in the newsroom with all of her colleagues while pretending that their kiss had only been a casual one for luck and that there was no meaning behind it. Yeah, right.

There was no way Lois could have mistaken that kiss for something casual. What she didn’t know was what Kal had actually intended it to mean.

“I can see it now,” Kal spoke though the live feed. “In fact, it’s hard to see anything else. It’s immense.”

Lois squeezed her hands together tighter to keep from visually reacting. Kal was trying to put such a brave face on this all, but she knew that he must be so scared inside.

“Roger, Superman,” Ground Control replied. “We copy you on the ground. Do you have stress point acquisition in visual?”

“Yes,” Kal replied shortly.

Lois chewed on her lip to keep from yelling at the TV. How could they be so cool and distant while Kal was obviously struggling?

“Stand by for final briefing procedure,” the man told Kal.

“I know what I have to do,” Kal spoke.

Lois let out a soft breath of laughter at that. Trust Kal to be stubborn and want to do it on his own.

Gritting her teeth, she kept silent as they started counting down until impact.

“Five ... four ... three ... two ...”

Abruptly, the sound of harsh static came over the TV. Everyone in the newsroom leaned forward closer to the

screen.

“This is EPRAD control,” a voice spoke over the set. “We have lost transmission with Superman.”

“Well, his microphone went out,” Lois blurted out. “He’s fine.”

She felt the sad stares of her colleagues on her back.

“He’s got to be,” she spoke quietly.

As a group, the staff turned sadly away from the TV, leaving Lois sitting by herself, staring into the screen for answers.

There was no way that he could be gone.

Brian O’Hara was tired. Nightfall had been a nightmare for the MPD, and things had just been starting to calm down until Superman went missing. Underneath it all, Brian was deeply worried about his friend, but with all the rioters needing to be brought in, he had barely had time to breathe, let alone feel apprehensive.

“Detective O’Hara!”

“I’m busy, Shannon,” he brushed the constable off. “I need to get these guys processed.” He gestured to the pair of dirty men sitting sullenly on the bench.

“The Inspector wants to see you,” Shannon told him. “He says it can’t wait.”

“Great,” Brian muttered. It hadn’t taken him long to realize that his promotion had come with a lot more stress and responsibility along with the pay raise.

“I’ll finish up the paperwork on them,” his colleague offered. “You’re supposed to delegate this type of thing now, anyway.”

Free of the two muggers, Brian walked down the hall to Henderson’s office. He knocked lightly before opening the door.

Henderson was clearly harassed by the piles of papers on his desk, but his face cleared a little bit when he saw Brian.

“You know that Kent guy, right?” he asked Brian.

“Yeah,” Brian replied cautiously. “We’re friends.”

“Good. I need to you come to the interrogation room with me and look at something.”

Brian’s mind raced during the short trip to the interrogation room. As far as he knew, Kal was still missing. Why was Henderson asking about Clark Kent?

“Here,” Henderson gestured to the glass.

Brian sagged with relief when he saw Kal sitting patiently at the table. Sure, Kal was wearing some strange glasses, and his clothing looked like it had been plucked from the dumpster, but it was still him. He was safe.

“That’s him, right?” Henderson asked Brian.

“Yeah, that’s him,” Brian confirmed. “What is he doing here?”

“Listen.”

The door opened, and one of the department psychiatrists walked in. Brian could never remember her name. Mc-something.

“What is your name?” the doctor asked Kal.

Brian held his breath. He couldn’t quite place it, but something told him that something was off with Kal, and the last thing that needed to happen was Kal blowing his cover in the police station while he wasn’t up to his usual ability.

“I already told them earlier,” Kal replied, a bit of frustration creeping into his voice. “I don’t remember.”

Brian’s breath caught again. Among all the things he had suspected, he hadn’t guessed that.

“Do you remember your favorite color?” the doctor asked.

Kal’s brow wrinkled in concentration.

“No,” he replied finally. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right,” she replied. “Just take your time.”

“I really can’t remember anything,” he told her.

Brian felt the fear that was behind those words.

“Can I see him?” Brian asked Henderson.

“McCorkle says it’s okay,” Henderson shrugged. “I’ve given Lois Lane a call, too, and she says she’ll be over to pick him up soon. Maybe you can just keep him company until then.”

Calling Lois was a good thing, Brian acknowledged. After all, Kal was living at her apartment, so she would be the best person to help him.

The psychiatrist exited the interrogation room.

“Are you Detective O’Hara?” she asked him.

“Yeah,” Brian replied.

“You can go in to talk to him now,” she told him. “It’s unlikely that he’ll have any memory of you, so try not to be alarmed.”

“Can I tell him that I know him?” Brian asked.

“It’s best not to actively hide anything from Mr. Kent,” McCorkle nodded. “Lying would only cause him confusion. However, try to avoid telling him everything. It’s best if he discovers his memories for himself.”

With those confusing instructions in his head, Brian entered the interrogation room.

Kal lifted his head in response to the door opening and closing.

“Hey,” Brian greeted him.

“Hi,” Kal answered back warily.

Brian watched him closely. This whole situation had the added complication of everyone thinking this was ordinary Clark Kent, while Superman was actually sitting in this chair. Maybe Kal had forgotten who Clark was but remembered who he really was?

That was unlikely, Brian decided. There was no hint of recognition as Brian sat down across from Kal.

“I know you don’t remember me,” Brian spoke, “but we’re actually friends.”

“We are?”

“Yes.”

“Then you can tell me who I am!” Kal said, sitting forward in his chair.

“Uh ...”

Dr. McCorkle had said not to lie to Kal, yet Brian found himself in an impossible situation. Not only was Kal listening, but so were the people on the other side of the glass. He couldn’t just not say anything, but at the same time, he could hardly tell Kal the truth while they were here.

“Your name is Clark Kent,” Brian finally told Kal, wincing as the lie came out.

“Clark Kent,” Kal echoed. “And you are?”

“Brian,” Brian replied. “O’Hara. We met at the scene of an accident a few months ago. You were assisting, and I was one of the officers called to the scene.”

“I was assisting? So, is that something I do for my job?”

“Uh ... Sort of. But it was more of a volunteer thing ...” “How on Earth was Brian supposed to explain Kal’s job while he was still supposed to be Clark Kent?”

“So, what do I do for a living?” Kal asked.

“I don’t really know if I can tell you,” Brian stalled, glancing back at the mirror. He hoped that the doctor would

interrupt, but he had already guessed that this was one of those things that Kal should know about.

Kal was frowning. “So you can tell me my name, but you can’t tell me anything else?”

“Well, that’s not entirely true”

The door burst open, and a brunette tornado flew into the room and ran into Kal’s arms. Kal hugged her, a bewildered expression on his face.

“You’re safe!” Lois exclaimed. It was difficult to hear her not only because she was speaking into Kal’s shoulder, but also because she was speaking incredible fast. “I was so worried about you when the radio went off and no one had heard anything. Everyone thought you were dead. I did, too, but now here you are! You’re safe. And I’m sorry I got upset with you before. It was completely my fault. All that matters now is that you’re back.”

“Uh ... Lois?” Brian reached forward to touch her gently.

She pulled herself away. “Yeah?”

“Did anyone ... tell you? About Clark?” He emphasized Kal’s pseudonym to remind Lois of where they were.

“No, what would they say?” Lois’ hand tightened on Kal’s shirt.

“Lois, Clark can’t remember anything,” Brian told Lois gently.

“Anything?” She gasped and turned to face Kal’s sheepish and bewildered expression.

“Nothing,” Kal confirmed. “I’m sorry ...”

“Lois,” she filled in absently.

“I’m sorry, Lois. I just don’t remember anything about myself or about you or about anything.”

Brian watched Lois’ face as she processed the information. She seemed to go through a range of emotions until she finally settled into one of determined sympathy.

“It’s okay, Clark,” she said, sliding her hand over to touch his. “I’ll help you remember everything you need to. Come on. Let’s get you home.”

Lois watched Kal as he walked into her apartment and surveyed the space. He didn’t seem to recognize anything.

The drive over had been stiff with tension. Lois had barely been able to watch the road as she prattled on and on about the weather and sports teams and any other meaningless thing she could think of while all the time staring at Kal and watching for any reaction.

She had never seen him looking so helpless. If he was uncomfortable in this world when he first arrived, it was nothing in comparison to the way he acted now. Before he did anything, he would always glance back at Lois, the gesture a tacit request for approval.

“Anything look familiar?” she asked.

“No,” he replied morosely. “I don’t recognize anything.”

“Well, take your time,” she encouraged. “Feel free to explore around. You never know if something may jog your memory.”

Kal walked slowly around the apartment, running his fingers lightly over objects and occasionally leaning in to get a closer look.

She tried to pay attention to him. It was clear that he needed someone to guide him through this, but for some reason she couldn’t stop thinking about that farewell kiss.

What did he mean by it? Was it actually just a kiss for luck like she had told her coworkers, or was it supposed to mean more? The passion behind it made her think that it

was supposed to be more, but maybe she was just deluding herself.

Kal had made his way to the kitchen and was playing with the coffee maker.

"You always make the coffee," Lois told him, coming up to stand beside him. "I don't know how you do it, but it's always way better when you make it."

"I don't know how I do it either," Kal told her, a small smile flickering across his face.

"Well, I can make it now, I guess," she spoke. It would give her something to do.

Kal watched as she dumped the grounds in and started the machine. They both stared at the machine, riveted by the stream of fresh coffee slowly filling up the pot. Finally, Lois couldn't take the tension anymore.

"I'm just going to get changed," she announced.

Kal nodded blankly, and she raced from the room.

But as soon as she was gone, she wished she was back with him again. As hard as it was to see him like this, not seeing him turned out to be even harder. She had come very close to losing him, and now she was the only person taking care of him.

She changed as quickly as she could and joined him in the kitchen again just as he was setting her cup on the table.

"I didn't know what you take with it, so I just set everything out," Kal explained, gesturing to the table.

"Thanks," she replied. He had put out cream and sugar. Silently forgoing her calorie count for the day, she reached for the cream.

Kal sat down opposite her, and she glanced up to give him another reassuring smile. That's when she noticed the coffee cup in his hand.

Her jaw hanging open, she watched as he lifted the cup to his lips and took a casual sip. He blinked in surprise and pulled back to look at the cup.

Well, of course he was surprised. He had never actually tasted coffee before.

Lois continued to stare as he took another cautious sip and swallowed it this time without any difficulty.

Finally, he glanced up and noticed her stare.

"Is everything all right?" he asked her.

"Uh ... yeah," she spoke, pulling herself together.

He placed the cup down. "What's wrong, Lois? You're staring at me."

"Oh, sorry," she replied, flustered. "It's just that ... You ... normally put sugar in your coffee," she lied.

"Oh," he replied, not suspecting her at all. "I guess that might be why it didn't taste like I expected."

"Maybe," she spoke, her voice oddly strained.

Kal put two spoons of sugar in his coffee and stirred it slowly.

Lois watched him carefully.

Despite his painful confusion, there was something about him that seemed different. Lighter, even.

He was no longer carrying the weight of an entire dead planet on his shoulders.

It was amazing how much healthier he looked because of that. Lois felt tears gather in her eyes, so she hastily looked down.

Why did it have to be so hard for him? All that guilt could not be healthy for him, yet he refused to let it go. It shouldn't have taken amnesia for him to move on. Why couldn't he do that himself?

"Lois?" he interrupted her thoughts with his gentle voice.

"Yes, Clark?" she blinked the tears from her eyes and lifted her gaze.

"Are you okay?" he asked gently.

"I'm fine," she replied quickly, brushing the last traces of wetness from the corner of her eye.

He looked so concerned. His brow was furrowed, and his mouth was pressed together. That mouth ...

Why couldn't she get it out of her head?

"Look, Lois ... " Kal ducked his head but reached his hand forward until it was touching hers. "I don't really know how to ask this ... And maybe I shouldn't ask and just wait for it to come back to me, but I see you hurting, and I just can't stand that. I don't want something to be kept from me just to make me feel less ... pressured or something."

"Okay," she replied.

"And I may be totally off base here, and so if I'm wrong, can we just blame it on the head injury?"

"Sure," she agreed, smiling a little despite her anxiety. He would ask about being Superman now. And once she told him the truth, the memory would probably come back. And the weightless man who drank coffee would be replaced again by the moody, guilt-ridden alien.

"Lois, I look at the way that you care about me, and although I don't remember you, I think there's an unconscious part of me that remembers how I feel about you. It feels like ... there's something going on between us. Romantically."

Lois pulled back her gasp, hoping it wasn't too noticeable.

"I'm not sure what it is," Kal continued. "Maybe we're dating, or maybe it's more. But I do think it is ... something." He twisted his fingers around her hand and glanced up at her. "Am I right?"

She couldn't breathe under the pressure of those eyes. She had noticed before how deep and intense they were, but never had they been directed towards her in the total, complete, focused way they were right now.

"Yes," she whispered, hypnotized by those eyes. "You're right. There is something between us."

Kal burst out a brilliant smile that was almost beautiful enough to distract her from his eyes.

"I thought so," he spoke.

In tandem, as if they were reading each other's minds, they leaned forward across the table and met with their lips in the middle.

Part 15

Lois couldn't stop staring at the smiling man standing in her kitchen. How had she never noticed how attractive he was when he smiled?

Maybe it was because his other smiles were always tainted somehow. Even when he was happy, there was always a little bit of him that seemed sad.

But now there was no trace of that. Lois had to fight to keep her concentration as she watched him stir the spaghetti, casually leaning against the counter.

"Careful, Lois. The sauce is bubbling over." He reached over and pulled the spoon from her slack hand and took over stirring.

"Oops," she blushed.

Kal turned the burner down and smiled over at her. Her jaw dropped lower.

"You didn't lie when you told me you weren't very good at this," Kal grinned.

"Well, I figured I should let you know as soon as

possible,” Lois told him. “That way you wouldn’t try to get me to help.” There was no need to tell him that he was being more distracting than usual.

“I should have taken your word for it.” Kal shrugged.

“Well, now you know better.”

“So, is this how it usually is for us?” he asked. “Me cooking, you watching?”

“Something like this,” Lois shrugged. He was actually pretty close in his guess, but somehow it never seemed this intimate before.

“I think I could get used to that.” He leaned closer to her, and she let his kiss fall onto her lips.

But she didn’t let it go any further. When she said that there was something between them, Kal seemed to assume that that meant that they had some sort of relationship. Not that she had corrected him so far ...

“Taste this,” Kal commanded her, lifting a spoonful of sauce to her lips.

The spoon slid in and out of her mouth, and she licked her lips slowly as she savored the taste.

“Mmm ...” she acknowledged. Somehow, Kal still remembered how to make Martha’s signature sauce.

She opened her eyes to see Kal gaping at her. As soon as their eyes met, Kal dropped his, fumbling with the spoon still in his hand.

“Does it need more oregano? Or how about pepper? I thought maybe —”

Lois placed her hand on his, silencing him.

“It’s perfect, Clark,” she spoke. “Just perfect the way it is.”

He smiled, and Lois felt a warm glow wash over her. It was so different to see Kal flustered and obviously attracted to her, and she was enjoying every minute of it.

Kal reached his hand towards her and cupped her face, brushing his thumb along her cheekbone. She sighed in contentment at the physical contact. They didn’t touch enough ordinarily.

But when he leaned forward to kiss her again, she stiffened. No matter how much she was enjoying this, it was essentially lying to Kal if she let this continue without explaining at least some of their complex history.

Kal caught her reaction and saved her the trouble of asking him to stop by pulling back and dropping his hand. “Lois? Can you answer a question for me?”

“Of course, Clark.”

“What is our relationship exactly? You never said.”

“Um, yeah. I know.” This had been exactly what she needed to talk to him about, yet she still wasn’t looking forward to it. “Look, Ka — Clark. We’ve been taking things a little further here than we had before you lost your memory. We’re not dating or anything.”

“Oh.” He frowned, and Lois winced at the confusion written on his face.

“I mean, we do have a relationship. It’s just ... complicated.” She wasn’t sure how to even bring up his farewell kiss he had surprised her with before he left to take care of Nightfall. It was probably safer for this conversation to just think like it hadn’t happened.

“How so?”

“Well, we both ... like each other,” Lois stammered. “It’s just ... You ...”

“Me? I’m the one who was holding us back?” Kal seemed so surprised at that.

“Yeah,” Lois spoke quietly.

“I can’t believe I would do that, Lois. I must be a real

idiot with my memory intact.”

“Well ... I may disagree with your reasons,” Lois began uncomfortably. “But you did have a good reason for keeping your distance from me.”

“Oh.” Kal’s brow furrowed. “I’m not married to someone else or anything, am I?”

“No, you’re not,” she hastily reassured him. “It’s just that you have some ... personal trauma that you’re still working through.” She watched him anxiously to see how he would react to that. Maybe this would be the thing that would trigger all of his alien memories.

The frown deepened on his face. “I think I might have known that,” he told her quietly. “It’s like there’s this weight in the back of my head, even if I don’t really know why it’s there.”

“Maybe I should just tell you what it is,” she told him reluctantly. “It may trigger some memories or something. And then you can get back to ... back to being yourself.” She was mourning already the passing of the man in front of her. The brooding alien would soon be back in his place.

“Well, you could ...” Kal spoke slowly, obviously thinking hard. “But Lois, I don’t think I want that.”

“You don’t?”

“Whatever it was that was dragging me down is in the past. I *like* the way I feel with you, Lois. And I don’t want to have anything come between us.” He reached up to touch her cheek like he had before.

“Sooner or later, you’re going to remember,” Lois pointed out, for her own benefit as well as his. “I know you will.”

“Maybe,” Kal shrugged. “But maybe by that time I’ll have enough positive experience with you to knock some sense into me.”

“Trust me, it’ll take a lot to knock some sense into you,” she teased. “You’ve got a very thick skull.”

“Well, then we’ll just take our time,” Kal told her. “There’s no rush for me to get my memories back.”

The man known as Clark Kent looked over at the beautiful woman sleeping in his arms. They had stayed up watching TV that night until Lois had fallen asleep.

She had been asleep for hours, but for some reason Clark did not seem to feel tired and wasn’t anywhere near ready to go to bed. Instead, he just watched the pictures flicker across the muted TV.

It was strange, but even though he should feel completely lost with no personal memories, he somehow felt so comfortable and safe just holding Lois. Whatever else he was missing out on didn’t seem to matter to him.

He supposed that any normal person put into this situation would be asking a million questions. Like how he apparently lived here even though they weren’t supposed to be in a relationship. And what his life was like aside from not dating Lois. He must work somewhere. And what about family? Lois had made a call to Jonathan and Martha Kent to explain his condition soon after they had gotten home. She had said that the Kents were distant relations, but he must have parents somewhere. What had happened to them? Maybe that was the personal stuff that had somehow kept him from Lois.

But he didn’t like dwelling on that thought. He could feel the presence of some darkness lurking in the back corner of his mind, but he subconsciously steered clear of that area. He didn’t want anything to come between his cozy position with Lois. Even by the look on Lois’ face, he

could tell that it was painful, and he didn't want that to ruin the wonderful thing that was happening right now. Whatever terrible thing lurking in his past could just stay there, along with everything else.

The freckled kid selling cereal on the screen suddenly cut away, replaced by a severe man sitting behind a news desk. Curious, Clark turned the volume back on. Lois stirred gently beside him.

"What's going on?" she asked sleepily.

"That asteroid," Clark told her. "It looks like we're not out of the woods yet."

She had gone stiff. "But it was smashed up," she whispered.

"I guess that ... What was his name again? Superman? He broke up the asteroid but left the chunks. And one of those is still heading for Earth."

"No!" She threw her arms around him and squeezed him hard.

Seeing how upset she was, Clark held her close. He guessed it probably would be scary to hear that something like this hadn't been taken care of, but somehow he felt a strange sense of disconnect towards the story. Maybe it was because he couldn't remember the first news of the asteroid. All he had was a terse explanation Lois had given him over supper. She hadn't seemed to want to talk about it for some reason.

"It's okay," he told her. "They've got the top experts in the country working on it. Superman might not be around, but I'm sure they can still deal with it."

"That's not —"

"Shh ... " Clark quieted her. "Don't worry about it now. Look, I'm turning the TV off now. No more thinking about that kind of thing tonight. We'll just concentrate on being together."

She paused and then finally nodded silently. It didn't take long for her to fall back asleep against him.

Clark stayed awake for a while longer yet. For some reason, he couldn't take his own advice. The problem of Nightfall picked away at the back of his mind. He couldn't seem to forget about it.

Lois threw papers around her desk in frustration. Not because of anything that was happening at work, but because of the turmoil going on in her mind. Everyone else in the newsroom was busy getting all sorts of Nightfall-related stories, but Lois couldn't concentrate long enough to even make a phone call.

The world was scrambling for a solution to the latest Nightfall situation while Lois was keeping the best solution hidden away in her apartment. Just like with the original asteroid, Superman was the best candidate to take care of the job.

The best candidate for everyone else, that is. She had the evidence of the toll the job had taken on Kal, and she just wasn't ready to try to force him to remember so he could fly back into space and risk his life all over again. Who knew what would happen to him if he tried to wrestle with the asteroid again?

"Lois? Are you okay?"

Lois looked up in surprise to see Cat standing over her looking concerned. Oddly enough, dating a billionaire had actually softened her personality. They hadn't fought in weeks. Even her outfits hadn't looked as trashy lately.

"I'm fine, Cat," Lois replied. "I'm just worried. Like everyone else is."

"Yeah." Cat nodded. "But hopefully that rocket will smash it up."

"Hopefully," Lois agreed.

"Look, I'm heading over to Arthur's now. We figured that either way this goes ... Well, it'll be better to experience it together. I know that you don't have any family in town, so you can come over if you want. No one should be alone today." Surprisingly, the offer had actually seemed genuine.

"I'm fine, Cat," she declined. "I'm going to try to get some work done in case we get out of the woods. Besides, you'll want to be alone, I'm sure."

"Well, we probably will want to be pretty close," Cat smiled, winking richly.

"Even with a steady boyfriend, you don't change much," Lois shook her head.

"Some things are bound to stay the same," Cat agreed.

"Take care, Lois."

"Bye, Cat."

Although they had had their differences over the years, Lois felt hollow when she realized that this could be the last time they saw each other.

Mentally, she reminded herself to stop being melodramatic. If the ASGARD rocket failed, then Lois would try to make Kal remember. She really would. As much as it would hurt him, she knew it would hurt him more if he died along with everyone else on Earth.

But she still didn't want to push him unless she absolutely had to.

The phone rang, and she grabbed it distractedly.

"Hello?"

"Lois? Thank God I finally got through to you. How's Kal?"

"He's fine, Martha," Lois told her. "He's back at my apartment right now."

"And he still doesn't remember anything?"

"Nothing," Lois replied.

Martha sighed. "What sort of things have you tried to get his memory back?"

"Nothing," Lois blinked. "I don't want to pressure him."

"Lois, he needs to remember," Martha spoke sternly. "Nightfall is still coming to Earth, and he's got to remember if he's going to help. I don't know what he must be thinking knowing that he's Superman and being unable to remember *how* to be Superman."

"Uh ..."

"Lois, you did tell him that he's Superman, right?" Martha asked suspiciously.

"Martha, you haven't seen him," Lois rushed to explain. "Yes, he doesn't have his memories, but he's so much happier. He laughs and smiles now, and he actually *eats*. Without all those memories of Krypton, he's free of all that guilt."

"Lois, you may think you're doing him a favor, but he won't appreciate it in the long run," Martha told her gently. "He would want to know. And of course, there's that chunk of Nightfall to contend with."

"The rocket might work," Lois justified lamely.

"Lois ..."

"But, yes, I know you're right, Martha. I'll tell him as soon as I get home," she resolved.

"I wish I could help you, sweetie, but Jonathan and I couldn't find a spare seat on any plane, and it really would be better coming from you than from two people over the phone who he doesn't even remember."

“Lois, get over here!” Jimmy called from across the room. “You need to watch this!”

“I have to go, Martha,” Lois explained in a rush. “But I promise I will tell Kal.”

“Bye, Lois. I love you, sweetie, and I know you’ll do the right thing.”

Lois hung up, sighing heavily. Martha was right. Although Kal seemed reluctant to learn about his life, she still should have told him the truth, especially when the news of Nightfall came last night. Stiffening her resolve, she walked over to where Jimmy was standing with the rest of the Planet staff by the TVs.

“What’s going on?” she asked, approaching the group.

“Live feed of the rocket,” Jimmy replied, barely glancing back at her.

The newsroom watched in horrified silence as the rocket flew right past the asteroid, missing it entirely.

“That’s it,” Jimmy announced. “We’re doomed.”

“Don’t talk like that, son,” Perry spoke up. “You never know what could happen. Hope is never completely lost.”

No, it wasn’t, Lois decided, walking back to her desk. She would go home now and talk to Kal. Martha was right. She needed to talk to Kal and try as hard as she could to get him to remember. He was their best hope now.

She put on her jacket and threw items into her bag. She didn’t have a clue how she would approach the subject. And what would the knowledge do to the new step they had taken in their relationship?

She picked up her keys and was just about to head up the ramp when she saw Kal exit from the elevator. He scanned the newsroom until his eyes landed on her, and he exhaled visibly in relief. As he jogged down the ramp, Lois glanced at his rumpled appearance. It looked like he had been tugging at his tie and running his hands through his hair.

“Clark! What are you doing here?” she asked in surprise as soon as he had gotten close enough.

“Can we talk somewhere in private?” he asked her urgently.

Lois turned her head towards the conference room but saw that it was already occupied.

“Come on, we’ll go to the stairwell,” she directed, pushing him across the room and through the door. As soon as the door closed behind them, she turned towards him. “What is it, Clark?”

“I’m not really sure,” he told her nervously. His eyes danced around the space and he seemed very uneasy. “It’s just ever since last night when we found out about the chunk of Nightfall, I’ve been feeling ... Anxious, I guess.”

“Anxious?” She felt an anxious energy of her own begin to crawl around in her stomach.

“Yeah, as if there’s something that I could be doing. But that’s crazy, right? There’s nothing I can do about it. I’m just an ordinary guy,” he babbled. “And yet I have this feeling I just can’t get rid of! Just now when I found out that the rocket missed, I got this awful feeling in the pit of my stomach, and it felt like it was more than just me being nervous about the asteroid. It felt like the rocket missing meant something for me in particular. Is any of this making sense?”

“Yeah, it is,” Lois nodded quietly. He had given her the perfect opening to tell him. “I should probably tell you, but ...” Now that it came to the moment, she was losing her nerve.

“But what?” Kal pressed.

“Are you sure you want to know?” she whispered.

“Yes!”

“Even if it changes things?” She thought back to how close they had been last night, mourning it already. There was no way it would be the same after she told him the truth.

“Lois, you have to tell me!” Kal demanded.

“Okay,” Lois nodded, composing herself. She couldn’t get her thoughts together for some reason.

“Just blurt it out,” he pushed, not wanting any further delay. It was such a change from the purposely ignorant man from last night.

“I will, I’m just thinking of how to — ”

“Lois, just do it!”

“Kal, just give me a second, okay?” she snapped.

He froze. “What did you call me?”

The truth was out.

“Kal,” Lois told him. “That’s your real name. Kal-El.”

Kal slumped against the wall, pressing his hand against his head as if he had a headache.

“Are you okay?” Lois asked him worriedly.

After a moment, Kal pulled himself up and met her eyes. He stood straighter than he had before.

“I remember,” he murmured.

“I can see that,” she whispered.

The pain was back in his eyes. Just as raw as it was before.

His eyes narrowed. “You’ve waited this long to tell me?”

“Well, I had reasons ...” she stopped speaking under the power of his glare.

“Reasons,” he echoed, not looking like he believed what she said.

“Yes!” she spoke, crossing her arms defiantly. “And if you remember from last night, you didn’t want me to tell you anything.”

“Lois, I was barely myself,” he shook his head. “I would not have been a good judge of what was best for me. It was your job to look out for my best interests. I had trusted —” He cut off suddenly. “There isn’t time for this,” he decided abruptly. “I need to take care of the remaining piece of Nightfall.”

“Wait, Kal — ”

“I’ll be fine, Lois,” Kal told her. “It’s a lot smaller. I bet I can just push it out of the way this time. No risk at all. And when I get back, we’ll talk about this.”

The next thing Lois felt was a gust of wind as Kal took off, leaving her alone in the stairwell. She sank down to sit on the steps.

He had gone to take care of Nightfall again. And although she had also heard from the news that the asteroid was much smaller than the original Nightfall, something else was causing her to worry even more than last time.

He hadn’t kissed her before he took off. He had just disappeared.

Part 16

Kal was sitting on the sofa when Lois got home. She was reminded again of just how much had changed when he barely looked up to greet her. There was no trace of the happy, carefree man she remembered from yesterday sitting there.

“Hi,” he greeted flatly.

“Hi,” she replied. It was so cold between them.

After dealing with the asteroid, Kal had called a press

conference to explain what had happened with the remaining fragment and why he had gone missing. All he said was that he was injured by his first attempt and that it took him longer than he expected to recover. Of course, he made no mention of his amnesia, but Lois still felt as if he was somehow blaming his long recovery time on the fact that she hadn't told him earlier who he was. He had barely glanced in her direction at all the entire press conference, except when he was apologizing for not being able to get in touch with anyone to explain. Then, he looked at her straight on.

Lois hung up her coat and purse and went over to sit across from Kal. She knew that he still wanted to talk about it, and it was probably best to get it over with as soon as possible.

She had planned to let him go first, but the silence turned out to be too long for her, and she had to break it somehow.

"So, are you really okay?" she asked, her voice wavering with uncertainty. "I know you couldn't really say everything at the press conference. And you seem okay, but I wouldn't be able to tell if there's still holes in your memories or if that last chunk of Nightfall caused you any problems."

"I'm fine," Kal replied. "I didn't keep anything out of my statement that you didn't know about already."

"Good," she nodded blankly.

They relapsed into silence.

Finally, Kal spoke again.

"Lois, I've trusted you with pretty much everything ever since I arrived on Earth."

She nodded mutely, remembering back to those first few days when he hardly knew anything about life on Earth.

"And, not that I had any choice, but you would have been the person I would have picked to take care of me if something like that amnesia would have happened to me. Because I thought that you would know what I would want to happen, even if I wasn't really myself."

"Kal, I —"

"Lois, I remember what happened, okay?" he cut in. "I know that I told you not to tell me about myself. But I would have thought that you would recognize that I wasn't myself. I had no idea what I was talking about, and I definitely didn't understand the consequences of my actions."

"Kal, I just saw how much happier you were," Lois tried to explain. "I knew that you would get your memories back eventually, and I had resolved to tell you as soon as the rocket failed, but I didn't see the point of pushing you to remember something tragic when there was no rush for you to remember. Even the psychologist at the police station told me that pushing you was a bad idea," she remembered.

"Whatever that psychologist said is irrelevant, Lois," Kal told her. "My mind works differently than human minds. But that's not the most important point. You let us enter into some sort of romantic relationship while I didn't have any memories."

Lois flushed but didn't really know what to say. She still wasn't sure how he was going to react to that.

Kal sighed. "Lois, I've told you why I've decided not to date anyone. I know that I was the one who first thought that there was something going on between us, but you were the one who let things continue after I asked you. I was counting on you to tell me the truth about stuff like

that."

"I know." She bit her lip. "I guess I was just thinking that with your memories gone, this would give you the chance to see what you were missing. And not just with dating, Kal. With life in general. You're giving up living a life here just for the sake of being on call all the time as Superman. When you were just Clark Kent, you were happier. And in a lot of ways, more complete, even with the missing memories."

"And so you decided to keep Clark around instead of bringing Kal back," Kal said flatly.

Irritation flared up. "Maybe I did it because spending time with Clark is a lot more fun than spending time with Kal," she snapped. Instantly, she flinched, regretting her word choice.

"Clark isn't who I am, Lois," Kal frowned. "It's just something I do. I blend in as Clark. That's it."

"I know. I didn't mean it like that," she explained apologetically. "I just meant that ... there are two sides to you. Not counting when you're interacting with the public as Superman or as Clark. There are two sides to you when you're at home here or whenever you're really yourself. There's the side that's still caught up with what happened on Krypton and is still constantly mourning. And then there's another side to you that's completely different. This other side is what I think is probably closest to how you were like before all of that terrible stuff happened to you. When you lost your memories, Kal, it was like I was seeing how you could be if you could just let go of even part of the guilt you're hanging onto. And I didn't want to let you just go back to being the other you. The one who's suffering."

"Lois ... I don't —"

"Kal, before you get really upset with me, I just want to say one thing, okay? I don't know anything about your parents other than that they saved your life. But you keep talking about how they would want you to use your abilities to help people here on Earth. Which is great. But I can't help thinking, though, that if they really loved you, which I'm sure they did because they saved your life, then they would also want you to be happy here. They sacrificed so much to give you a life here, and I would think that they would want you to enjoy it rather than spend the rest of your days giving everything up for other people."

Lois blew out a shaky breath. She had no idea how he would respond to this, but at the same time, she was glad that she had finally addressed the issue head on.

Kal hadn't said anything yet. He just sat with his head bent over.

"Kal?" Lois asked fearfully.

"Lois, can you just stay there for a moment?" he asked her. "I need to get something."

"Sure."

He had gone and returned in less than ten seconds, holding a small globe in his hands. He sat down next to her, holding the globe up so she could see it.

"There's a translation device in this, so you should be able to understand what they were saying," he told her. Then he shifted his grip, activating it in a way that Lois didn't quite catch, and an image was suddenly projected from the globe and into the air in front of them.

An older couple stood before Lois and Kal. They were dressed in strange clothing, but Lois immediately recognized the crest on their clothing. It matched the one Kal wore on his Superman costume.

"This is the message my parents, Jor-El and Lara, left

on board the ship they made for me,” Kal told her.

The figures began to speak.

“My dear son,” the man said. “If you are receiving this message, then everything we feared has come to pass. The Council of Elders refuses to believe our findings, yet Lara and I remain convinced.” Jor-El glanced over to his wife. “The planet’s instability is increasing by the second, and time is running short.”

“As you know,” Lara continued for the pair, “we were entrusted with the task of keeping Kryptonian society safe. Without the support of the Council, there was no hope in saving this planet. But there is hope, Kal-El, for saving you. This is the only ship we were able to complete in time.”

A tremor shook the image, and Jor-El pulled Lara close to him as they struggled to keep their footing on the shaking ground. Finally, the shaking subsided, and they were able to stand straight again.

“We are sending you to a planet called Earth,” Kal’s father continued. “It is similar both in its physical attributes and in the inhabitants there.”

“We hope that you will find a home there, Kal-El,” Lara spoke up. “We weren’t able to protect Krypton for you, but at least we are able to give you this gift of a new life.”

“Always remember that we love you, son, and that we only want what’s best for you,” Jor-El spoke. “We are sorry we were not able to save your home, but this is the next best thing we can do.”

Lara brushed a tear from her eye.

“Now, there are a few things you need to know about your new life on Earth,” Kal’s father continued. But Kal did something to the globe, and the image disappeared.

“The rest is him talking about the physical effect the yellow sun will have on me,” Kal told Lois, his voice a bit unsteady. “You already know what that is.”

He placed the globe gently on her coffee table, and Lois was surprised to see that it didn’t roll off. This was obviously a very advanced piece of equipment. At least by Earth standards.

“Kal ...” She didn’t even know where to start. She couldn’t even process how huge it was for him to share that with her.

“That was the message I woke up to after my parents had placed me on the ship heading to Earth,” Kal told her. “I had gone to bed that night, worried about Krypton and what my father had told me, but I didn’t think that we had so little time. And the next thing I knew, my planet was dead, and I was trapped on that thing heading somewhere completely different. And I mean completely different.”

“Kal, I’m so sorry. I can’t image what that would be like,” Lois told him.

“I haven’t watched that since the first time,” Kal told her. His head was bent down, and she felt the strain his voice. “It had been so long that I had forgotten ... But you were right, Lois. My parents wanted me to have a life here. They wanted me to be happy. I just didn’t want to remember that.”

Lois was still thinking of the image of Jor-El and Lara explaining to their son what they had done and why he wasn’t coming home ever again.

Then, what Kal had said sank in.

“Do you mean it, Kal?” she asked him, excitement building. Was Kal really going to start having a life of his own?

He nodded. “Clark Kent is going to be used a lot more in the near future.”

“Kal, that’s wonderful!” She threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. That meant they could pick up right where they left off.

But she withdrew when she felt Kal in her arms.

“What is it?” she asked worriedly.

“This ... doesn’t change anything between us, Lois,” Kal told her softly.

“What?” she asked dumbly. “But you said —”

“That I needed to get a life of my own,” Kal told her. “That means I’m going to start doing things for myself rather than for the good of everyone on Earth. I’ll get a job and make more friends than just you and Brian. I’ll fly to different places in the world just for the sake of seeing them rather than because someone needs rescuing there. I won’t spend all day in this apartment waiting to see if someone needs Superman.”

“But you won’t date me,” Lois choked out. She didn’t understand what was going through his head. She *knew* that he was attracted to her. She *knew* that they got along well together. What was keeping him from this?

Kal sighed. “Lois, believe me, it’s *nothing* against you. You’re ... perfect. But I just can’t ...”

“Your saving the world excuse won’t work anymore, Kal,” Lois told him. “You’re giving that up, remember?”

“I know,” he frowned.

“And I know you feel the attraction between us. Yesterday when —”

“Right. Yesterday. When you lied to me about who I was and what our relationship was.”

“I never lied to you about our relationship,” Lois defended.

“Right. You just let me extrapolate falsely. And didn’t tell me why I had decided not to date in the first place.”

“You were happy with me! Which just shows that your whole idea that you can’t date anyone here on Earth is ridiculous.”

“I wasn’t myself,” Kal told her. “How many times do I have to tell you that?”

“But you were yourself,” Lois argued. “Just without the memory of all that trauma.”

“Lois, as much as I would like to have never gone through all of that stuff, I did. And it has permanently changed me. Yes, I think I might have subconsciously ran away from it when I ran into Nightfall, but there’s no way I can just erase it. It’s part of who I am, and it influences everything I do. You’ve said it yourself that I’ve got problems I need to deal with. And I am actually willing to deal with them now, but I know that’s going to be messy and that dating someone during that time is going to be difficult for me and unfair to whoever I date. Even you, Lois.”

“We can make it work,” Lois tried lamely.

Kal let out a dry chuckle. “Lois, I don’t even know *how* to date someone. People don’t date on Krypton, okay? That’s not something I’ve grown up with at all, and the view from the outside is pretty scary and confusing.”

“It’s not much better from the inside, either,” Lois admitted grudgingly. “It’s probably even worse.”

“You people on Earth make it so complicated,” Kal joked softly. “How can an alien ever hope to find a place in this world?”

“There’s room beside me,” Lois offered.

He shook his head. “You’ll have to give me a while before I’m ready for that.”

“I can wait,” she offered, realizing the idea as she said

it. “I’ll wait until you’re ready.”

He shook his head. “I don’t want you putting your life on hold for me, Lois. That’s even less fair to you than dating you right now would be.”

“Then I guess you’ll just have to date me,” Lois spoke smugly.

“Lois ...”

“No, think about it, Kal. How many times have we come close to something happening between us? And not even counting the amnesia or the weird pheromone stuff, there’s undeniable attraction between us. It’s only a matter of time before something happens.”

“I know,” Kal agreed. “That’s why I’m moving out.”

“What?! You can’t do that, Kal!”

“Lois, you said it yourself. If we keep living together, something will end up happening. And I don’t want to make a mistake out of our friendship. It kills me to do this, Lois,” he confessed. “But I really think it’s the best thing for us to do.”

“But where will you live?” Lois asked. “I’m never going to hear the end of it from Martha if you end up sleeping on rooftops.”

“That’s where the job plan comes in, Lois,” Kal reminded her. “It’s time I became more independent.”

“You can be independent and still live here,” she tried.

“I don’t think so, Lois.”

“But ... who will cook for me?” she asked pathetically, getting desperate. She was torn. In a lot of ways, this was all she had hoped to hear from Kal. He was finally working through his trauma. But at the same time, the thought of losing him from her life was just too difficult to even think about.

“I’ll still come over,” Kal told her. “No matter what, we’re still going to be friends, okay?”

Lois shook her head, not really trusting herself to speak.

“Lois? What’s wrong? Please tell me.”

“It’s just ... You say that you’re just not ready to date, but I can’t help but get the feeling that you just don’t want to date me,” Lois confessed.

“Lois ... That’s definitely not the case,” Kal told her, taking her hand. “Do you remember just before I left to take care of Nightfall? The first time?”

“You kissed me,” Lois remembered. That enigmatic kiss that had driven her crazy with curiosity. “Why *did* you kiss me, Kal? Do you realize how much that question was bugging me? And even when you came back the first time, I couldn’t ask you because you didn’t remember anything about it.”

“I can see that I caused you a lot of problems as an amnesiac,” Kal joked.

“Well, not too many problems,” Lois told him. “You still remembered Martha’s recipes. But you can tell me now, Kal. Why did you kiss me?”

“Because I was terrified,” Kal confessed. “I mean, I *thought* I would be okay, but I didn’t know for sure, and I had no idea if I would be successful in stopping the asteroid. And I thought that if I didn’t come back to the same Earth for some reason ... I wanted that kiss with you to be the last thing I remembered. Trust me, Lois. I don’t want to get rid of you at all. It’s the exact opposite.”

“Then why can’t you —”

“Lois, please. I honestly can’t right now. And I just need you to understand that, okay? Can you do that?” he pleaded.

“Okay,” she finally nodded. “You can’t date right now. I

understand that, Kal.”

“Thank you.”

“We’ll be friends,” Lois decided. “And you’ll still come by all the time to cook me things and watch TV and help me with story ideas and all that stuff.”

“Yeah. We will.”

“And I won’t bring up the subject again, Kal. I promise,” Lois told him.

“Thank you,” he nodded. “And thank you for understanding.”

Of course, the one thing that Kal didn’t know was that Lois was lying. Because she knew that eventually he would move past the trauma in his life. He would build a new life here on Earth, and eventually, if he was pointed in the right direction, he *would* be ready to date someone.

And Lois was planning on being there every step of the way. She would help him along the journey, and when he finally was ready to date ... Well, she would be there, too.

Part 17

“Who wants eggnog?” Jonathan asked the group, coming into the living room with Lois tagging behind, sharing the load of refreshments.

Cups were passed around, and Kal took one. He had gotten to the point of eating and drinking socially, although he still never bothered to consume anything when he was at home.

“How about a toast?” Martha proposed. “To Kal and the successful sale of his first short story.”

Everyone lifted a glass and drank.

“I’m still upset that you didn’t tell me you had been writing anything until you sold the story,” Lois complained. “I could have edited it for you.”

“I was insecure enough about my writing to begin with,” Kal explained sheepishly. “I didn’t want an award-winning journalist picking apart my every mistake.”

“Well, although I didn’t get to help, it’s still pretty good,” Lois grumbled.

“Writing about an outsider’s perspective on Christmas was a good story idea,” Martha winked. “Where did you get that idea from?”

“A lot of it was drawn on personal experience,” he admitted. To illustrate his point, Kal hung another glass ball on the dead tree placed in the center of the room and then stepped back to look at the placement. “When I first came to Earth,” he shared with the group, “I thought that the habit of placing dead flowers in vases on display in the home was strange. This seems completely bizarre.”

“I suppose it might seem strange to someone who hasn’t grown up with it,” Martha agreed. “But to me, the smell of having a real tree in the house is what makes it Christmas.”

“When I was a kid, we would always go out as a family to pick a tree,” Jonathan shared. “It was my favorite tradition.”

“I never counted on my parents for much,” Lois spoke quietly, “but every year Daddy made sure we had a tree. He’d disappear Christmas Eve to who knows where and leave us all alone, but he’d always make sure we had a tree to put our presents under.”

Kal stared at Lois in surprise. She had never shared anything about her family life. It had been a mystery to him ever since the day they had first met. He was so surprised at receiving this information that he couldn’t resist asking a little more.

“You don’t ever go home for Christmas?” he asked

Lois.

"My home is here now," she replied roughly, yanking apart a tangled group of crochet snowflake ornaments.

"So, you don't ever see your parents?" Kal asked, his curiosity growing. "They are still alive, aren't they?"

"Yes, they're still alive," Lois grumbled.

"Then why don't —"

"Look, Kal, I don't want to talk about it, okay?" Lois snapped, dropping her ornaments on the sofa. "I'm going to get some air." She practically ran out of the room. A moment later, they heard a door close upstairs.

Kal watched her leave, stunned at her reaction. In his curiosity to find out more information, he hadn't paid enough attention to her reaction. He didn't realize that she was getting so upset.

"It isn't your fault, Kal," Martha told him. "Lois is just very sensitive about her family situation."

"There's a lot of pain in her past," Jonathan spoke. "She doesn't like to dwell on it."

"Maybe I should go apologize to her," Kal wondered.

"She would probably appreciate that, Kal," Martha encouraged. "Just remember that she's had a hard time."

Kal found Lois upstairs in her room, sitting on her bed and staring out the window at the snowy landscape. He couldn't see her face, but the soft sniffle told him what she had been doing.

"I'm sorry I brought up your family," Kal told her. "I know you don't like talking about it, and I pushed you anyway. I guess I just can't understand not wanting to see your parents ever again. I would give *anything* to see my parents just one more time."

"I know you would," Lois croaked, her voice raspy from tears. "Things are different for me, Kal. My home life was always something for me to escape from, not something to cling to."

Kal sat down next to her on the bed, keeping silent. He was afraid that if he opened his mouth, he would be shooting her with all types of questions, none of which she needed right now.

"I guess I can start with how things were for us growing up," Lois spoke again. "Putting the story as simply as possible, Daddy's only accomplishment as a father and husband was making sure that we had that Christmas tree every year. Most of the time, he was just ... absent. Busy working in his lab or at the bar with his buddies or ... somewhere else. And even when he was home, it was usually only because he had to explain why the neighbor saw him check into a hotel with a strange woman yesterday. And my mom's response to all of this was to drink more and more until she couldn't feel anything. And then dad would rub her face in another affair, so she would have to drink even more."

She had shared all of this with a dry detachment, as if she was used to explaining it to people. She didn't seem overly upset about it, and Kal decided that this wasn't the only reason why she didn't see her family anymore.

"When I met the Kents," Lois continued, "I saw everything that a family could be. And everything that my family was lacking. Martha and Jonathan supported me in a way that my parents never did, and I loved them for that. We grew close. I started to spend most of my holidays with them because Mom and Dad were always too busy caught up in their own drama to care about their adult daughter who was no longer their legal responsibility. But I still kept in touch with my parents. They were still my family after

all, so I endured some stilted conversations over the phone, and I sent my mom and dad a card for their birthdays and for Christmas. But then I got nominated for my first Kerth."

"You must have been young," Kal commented. "I remember seeing the date on the trophy."

"I was young, thank you," Lois smiled smugly. "I was the youngest reporter ever to be nominated for a Kerth. And when the time for the awards ceremony came, I had no doubt in my mind who I wanted to take. I invited Martha and Jonathan. They were the ones who cheered me on all through college and encouraged me when I was working my way up at the Daily Planet. They deserved to celebrate my accomplishment with me."

Kal nodded in agreement. He had seen how much Martha and Jonathan cared for Lois, and he knew that they must have been honored and touched to be invited.

"My parents thought differently," Lois spoke coldly.

"They were upset?"

"Now that their daughter was a successful reporter, I guess they suddenly wanted to be back in my life," Lois explained bitterly. "We had a big fight. They accused me of trying to replace them with the Kents. I accused them of abandoning me for years" Her voice wobbled, but then she continued on, determined to tell her story. "We were both right, in a way, although we had exaggerated our arguments. In the end, I was told that unless I was willing to stop talking to Martha and Jonathan, I could expect to stop talking to my mom and dad."

"I'm sorry, Lois."

"You want to know the really awful part?" Lois asked bluntly. "I still miss them. Even though they haven't been good parents by any stretch of the imagination, I still want to talk to them and see them. I worry about my mom, and I want to make sure that my dad is doing okay." She sniffled noisily. "I should *hate* them for what they did to me, but all I can do right now is be hurt that they don't want to talk to me. It's ridiculous."

"That's understandable, Lois. I think it's pretty admirable that you still love your parents after all they've put you through. I honestly can't imagine what I would do in your situation. People don't act like that on Krypton. They're too concerned with holding up their duties."

"Yeah, well, I bet there's a lot of benefit to that," Lois commented moodily.

"Maybe, but although there aren't as many painful experiences, there are a lot fewer intensely good experiences."

"I guess," Lois shrugged.

"Have you tried talking to your parents recently?" Kal suggested. "It's been years now. Maybe they're even thinking the same things you are."

"It wouldn't do any good," Lois shook her head. "I'm not apologizing for the Kents being better parents than they are. Anyway, I still hear about them indirectly," Lois shrugged. "My sister, Lucy, talks to them sometimes, and I keep in touch with her ... Although she had the smarts to move to California, so she doesn't have to see them very often."

"Why did you stay in Metropolis?" Kal asked curiously. "It seems to me that you would have had every reason possible to want to leave."

"I love the city," Lois shrugged. "And it was my dream to work at the Daily Planet. And who knows, if I didn't stay in Metropolis, I might not have met you." She nudged him gently with her elbow.

"I don't know about that, Lois," Kal teased. "I think no matter where you would have gone, I think I would have ended up saving your life at least once by now."

"Probably," she admitted grudgingly.

"Ha!" he gloated. "You're finally admitting how useful I am."

"Okay, fine. So I've spilled something really close to me," Lois told him. "Two things if you count my admission that I need your help. It's your turn."

"What do you mean?" he asked, suddenly sober.

"Tell me something about Krypton." She said it without pressure, but the look on her face told Kal that she was dead serious. "Just like I almost never talk about my family, you almost never talk about Krypton. Talking helps. Start doing it."

"What do you want to know?" he asked with discomfort.

"Tell me something about your family," she shrugged. "What were your parents like? What did they do? It sounded like they were pretty important based on that message they left you on the globe."

"They were scientists," Kal shared. "They reported their findings directly to Council of Elders. They researched a lot of things over the years. I barely kept track. My father always wanted me to be more interested in his work, but I was too busy off practicing my dre fighting or —"

"Dre?" Lois asked.

"The official sport on Krypton," Kal supplied. "It was a lot more violent than baseball, but not nearly as gimmicky as wrestling. It would be the most similar to fencing, I suppose."

"Were you any good?"

"The best," he grinned, happy to be able to talk lightly about these things for what seemed like the first time. "Anyway, it was the main thing that I focused on. And my father kept telling me that a future First Lord should have more interests than just —"

"Wait, First Lord?" Lois asked.

He froze, realizing what he had let slip out.

"I wasn't planning on telling you that," he winced.

"You were First Lord of Krypton? Is that similar to the king?" Her eyes were wide in shocked disbelief.

"No," he protested. "Well, maybe a little similar. But it's not really that important, Lois. I would have been the head of government if I had taken over my post. I won't go into all the complicated genealogy, but I was next in line to a relative of mine, so I didn't have any real responsibility at the time. It was mostly just privilege —" He stopped, seeing the corner of her mouth twitch. "Are you laughing at me?" he asked.

"No! Not really," Lois spoke, smothering a smile. "It's just... You're the only person I know who would be embarrassed to admit that he's nobility."

Kal groaned. "Not nobility," he corrected. "Government worked differently on Krypton. My position came with a lot of honor, yes, and I would have held a lot of power, but unless the planet was in serious jeopardy, I would not have had the authority to wield it without others' support."

"Kal, I know you're trying to point out differences, but you're not really doing a good job."

"My father was always careful that I wouldn't let my position go to my head," Kal shared. "It was a difficult task to accomplish. People were constantly trying to build valuable connections with me to use as leverage when I gained political power, and people were willing to give me

a great deal of things if I simply asked for them. But my father always reminded me that I was just a person and that I was only worth as much as the quality of my character."

"He did a good job," Lois told him quietly. "We're all lucky here that he made sure you understood that."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, think about it, Kal. You can do pretty much anything here. With all the abilities you possess, you can take whatever you want and do whatever you want. Who could possibly stop you? Yet you choose to help us out. With whatever silly things we need. Even inhaling all the smoke from my apartment during the last time I tried to make cookies."

"I told you to set a timer," Kal chuckled.

"Yeah, you did. But even though you warned me, you were still willing to help me clean up from my mistake. And sure, you teased me, but you didn't complain at all. Your humility really is one of your best qualities, Kal."

"Thank you," he responded softly.

"Thanks for telling me more about Krypton," Lois replied, her voice even softer than his voice had been.

"Thank you for sharing about your family."

They had gotten very close, Kal suddenly realized. In fact, if he were to lean in just a little bit further ...

Lois suddenly leapt up from the bed.

"I'm going to go check and see if Martha needs any help," she explained in a rush, and then she scurried from the room.

Kal sighed and fell back onto the bed. It was for the best, he told himself. This is what it should be like between them. He had already made that decision, and he shouldn't go back on it now.

Kal sat back on the sofa, watching as Brian hovered over his wife, making sure she was comfortable and happy. Seeing his friend's devotion to Marli brought a smile to Kal's face. It was uncanny for Kryptonians to show such open affection, but he had grown to appreciate it during his time here on Earth. Their son, Adam, was playing on the floor with toy cars, and it combined together to make a charming domestic scene.

"Do you want some tea?" Brian asked his wife.

"Peppermint," Marli replied gratefully.

"Clark?"

"Yes, thank you," Kal replied. Once again, he accepted in order to be polite. Also, it was another way for him to make Clark Kent seem more believable.

"So, Clark, how's the new apartment?" Marli asked him. "When do we get to see it?"

"Not for a while," Kal confessed. "It's in pretty terrible shape, but I managed to get it cheaply, so I'm not really complaining. I'll just do some research and then get started on repairs. It shouldn't take me long."

"Maybe ten minute's work to renovate the whole thing, top to bottom?" Brian asked him from the kitchen.

"Give or take. I have to let the paint dry," Kal joked. Adam came over and started using Kal's shin as a highway for his cars. Kal picked up one of the cars and began driving it on top of his knees.

They deliberately spoke in general terms. Although Adam seemed to be absorbed in his private world, he was constantly surprising Kal with how much he picked up on the conversations around him. Which was also why they referred to Kal as Clark almost all the time, even when Adam was supposed to be asleep in bed.

“Where did you say it was?” Marli asked him.

“Clinton Avenue,” Kal replied.

“Good neighborhood,” she nodded. “Not the most upscale, but definitely interesting, which is much better, anyway.”

“Well, my landlord seems pretty interesting,” Kal agreed. “But that’s all I’ve met so far.”

“Here are the teas,” Brian announced, bringing three mugs into the living room. “Do you want anything else?” he asked Marli.

“I want to be able to see my toes without straining myself,” Marli spoke dryly. “But I don’t think that’s going to happen any time soon.”

“Any time now,” Brian encouraged.

“I keep telling myself that. I can’t wait to get this kid out of me,” she explained to Kal.

“Mommy says she’s going crazy,” Adam spoke up solemnly from the floor.

“I’m just getting a little uncomfortable,” she corrected sheepishly. “I don’t like being this immobile.”

“Hey, at least it’s giving you plenty of time to work on your jewelry,” Brian told her. “You should show Clark what you’ve been up to.”

“I’d love to see it,” Kal spoke up. He still struggled to grasp what made for good jewelry on Earth, but he always enjoyed seeing Marli’s designs.

“You’ll have to get it for me, sweetie,” Marli told her husband. “I’m not moving from this spot.”

“I’ll get it,” Brian agreed, getting up and walking down the hall.

“Oh, by the way,” Marli leaned in to speak to Kal. “A friend of mine is a big fan of Clark Kent’s stories. She buys up all the magazines that run them.”

“I had no idea they would be this popular,” Kal confided. “I really just started writing as a way to improve my English. Although I have to say I am glad to have the income.”

“Here it is,” Brian announced, entering the room. “Jeez, this box is heavy, honey.”

“Yeah,” she replied with a wrinkled nose. “It’s what they gave the stones to me in, so I just kept using it.”

“Let’s see what you’ve been doing,” Kal spoke, sitting up straight to get a better view.

“Let me just get the clasp ...” Brian fumbled with it for a moment, and then it clicked open. “Here it is!” he announced, opening the case and displaying the contents.

The only thing Kal was aware of was a flash of green as he felt a hot, sickening pain shoot through his entire body. The floor tilted to the side, and he heard muffled voices speaking, although he couldn’t understand them.

Then everything went black.

Part 18

The door flew open, and Lois was put face to face with a very frantic-looking pregnant woman.

“You’re Lois,” she guessed. “Thanks for coming.”

Lois stepped through the doorway. “Sorry it took me this long. Traffic, you know. Is he —”

“I’m fine,” came an irritated voice from the sofa.

“You passed out, and now you don’t have any powers,” the woman snapped. “We have reason to be concerned.”

Kal was stretched across the sofa, and Lois sucked back a gasp. She had never seen him look this pale and weak. No one looking at him would believe that he could possibly be Superman.

“Oh, I’m Marli, by the way,” the woman introduced. “Brian’s wife.”

“Hi,” Lois replied distractedly. She had already guessed the woman’s identity. “Where’s Brian?”

“Putting Adam in bed,” Marli explained. “He was pretty upset when Kal collapsed, and although he’s calmed down now, we figured he didn’t need to be here while we were talking about this.”

“So, what happened exactly? Are *all* of his powers gone?”

“Please don’t talk about me as if I’m not here,” Kal complained.

“Get some rest,” Marli commanded. Then she turned to Lois. “We think it had something to do with the stones I’ve been working with for a new client. I’m a jewelry designer. As soon as Brian opened the box, Kal collapsed. And although Kal didn’t exactly bounce back when the box was closed, he did look a lot better.”

“But nothing’s supposed to hurt you, Kal,” Lois spoke with concern. “Of all things that would, I wouldn’t think exposure to a rock would be the thing to hurt you.”

“Well, they were pretty strange rocks,” Marli commented, chewing her bottom lip. “Which makes me beat myself up even more. I should have asked more questions about where they came from, but it was such a good opportunity —”

“You’ve never seen rocks like those before?” Kal asked, cutting into her guilty speech.

“Glowing green rocks?” Marli’s forehead crinkled. “I don’t think there’s anything on Earth that glows all by itself like that. I think anyone would find them pretty weird.”

“I don’t,” Kal spoke quietly. “I don’t find them weird at all. They were as common back home as concrete is here.”

That sentence landed heavily in the small room.

“Kal, how did rocks from Krypton end up in my living room?” Marli’s voice was high and strained.

Lois had to ask the obvious question. “Who gave them to you?”

“A new client,” she replied. “His name was ... something Newtrich. He never gave me his first name. I have a phone number But it’s uh ... in the case.”

“You can get it out when Kal leaves,” Lois decided. “We don’t want to expose him again.”

“Oh, God, do you think those rocks would have hurt the baby?” Marli asked suddenly, turning a shade paler and placing her hand on her belly.

“No one else seemed to feel it at all,” Kal replied.

“They seem to only affect me.”

“Did those rocks ever hurt people back on Krypton?” Marli asked, still concerned.

“No,” Kal shook his head. “They were never a problem. In fact, they were often used as a power source.”

“Maybe they changed somehow when they came to Earth,” Lois speculated.

“I certainly did,” Kal shrugged. “Of course, now I appear to be as normal as before.”

“Kal, I’m sure that this is just temporary,” Lois told him, not really sure if it would be a reassurance to him or not. After all, not having any powers would definitely help him have a normal life on Earth.

Brian came into the room from the hallway. “Adam’s asleep,” he announced quietly. “What’s going on out here?”

Marli quickly filled Brian in on what they had discovered.

“So, you don’t know anything about this Newtrich

guy?” he frowned. “He just handed over some strange rocks, and you got right to work without asking any questions?”

“I was stupid. I know,” Marli admitted, guilt written plainly on her face. “I guess I was just so excited about the possibility of getting some solid, paid work that I didn’t ask as many questions as I should have. I hear about all the dangerous things that happen in Metropolis from you and Kal, but I never expected to face it myself.”

“It’s okay, Marli,” Brian comforted. “There’s nothing wrong with trusting people.”

“There is if my friends get hurt in the process,” Marli grumbled, refusing to let it go.

“I am fine, Marli,” Kal reassured her. “A little sore, maybe, but that’s all. I’m grateful you both figured out quickly enough that it was the stones that were hurting me.”

“Trust me — it was pretty obvious that those things were what caused the pain,” Brian grimaced.

“Do you think Newtrich knows that?” Lois pondered.

“What do you mean?” Marli asked.

“Well, let’s assume that he knew that the rocks came from Krypton. Would he have known that they would hurt Kal, or did he just think that he could make some decent money selling Superman memorabilia?”

“It would be one way to get around the copyright guidelines set out by the Superman Foundation,” Kal mused. “You can’t copyright rocks, and they would sell for even more than the toys the Foundation makes.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” Marli decided. “He never told me the rocks were from Krypton. If he wanted to sell them as a Superman product, he would have told me the truth, maybe hoping I could incorporate that into the designs somehow.”

“What exactly did he tell you to design?” Brian asked his wife.

“At first, all he wanted was a simple pendant,” Marli replied. “But the stone he gave me was interesting. I started to get ideas of other designs. I told him I would be interested in doing some more work with them, and although he didn’t seem very interested at first, he called me a couple days later asking if I could design some more things for him. He gave me the stones I have now and told me to design anything I wanted.” She frowned miserably. “I thought it was a dream job.”

“We need to find more about Newtrich,” Lois decided. “And about how these Kryptonian rocks came to Earth. I’ll have to go the Planet.” She checked her watch. “It’s not too late; I’ll head over there right now.”

“I’ll come with you,” Kal announced, standing up.

“Kal, maybe you should be resting,” Marli suggested gently.

Lois silently agreed. He had been unusually quiet while they were discussing all this. He was probably more tired than he was letting on.

“I have a headache, but I’m not critically ill,” Kal replied. “I may not be entirely used to feeling this way after months of invulnerability, but I’m more than capable of helping Lois. This is ultimately my responsibility, anyway.”

Of course, Kal probably wouldn’t rest until this whole situation was taken care of. Reluctantly, she nodded her head.

“We’ll need the number for Newtrich,” Lois reminded the couple. “We don’t know what kind of range those rocks have, so maybe wait for a few minutes before opening the box and then leave me a voicemail at work.”

“Okay,” Marli nodded.

“Keep us updated,” Brian requested. “And if you need anything from the MPD, just let me know.”

“Thanks,” Lois replied. “I think you’re going to be a lot easier to work with than Henderson.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Brian remarked grimly.

“I’ve got a personal stake in this, Lois. I’m going to be riding you pretty hard.”

Lois looked at the young couple. Marli was still clearly distraught at what she had found herself in the middle of, and Brian’s arm was gripped firmly around her shoulders, as if he could protect her from all the harm in the world just by standing next to her.

“Don’t worry,” she told them. “They don’t call me the best for nothing.”

“The Daily Planet has one of the best search databases in the country,” Lois bragged to Kal. Sure, he had been to the Planet a couple times before, but he hadn’t ever worked here yet, so she was giving him a brief professional overview of the newsroom. The city section was empty, so they had all the privacy they wanted. “When Franklin Stern bought it last year, he did a complete technical overhaul. Everything here is state-of-the-art. The best available.”

The corner of Kal’s mouth twitched as he sat down at an empty desk close to Lois’.

“What?” Lois asked.

“Nothing.”

“No, it’s something. You’re laughing. What are you laughing at?”

“This is the best computer technology available on Earth?” He ran a few fingers across the keyboard.

“Yes,” Lois replied defensively.

“Okay,” Kal nodded. The corner of his mouth lifted higher, stretching his face into a pronounced smirk.

“Let me guess — Kryptonians had mindreading holographs or something.”

“You saw the globe,” Kal shrugged. “That should give you an idea of what Kryptonian technology is capable of. Let’s just say that, to me, this looks like something Frank Flintstone would use.”

“Fred,” Lois corrected quickly, happy to jump on something he had gotten wrong.

Kal seemed unperturbed. “Luckily, I’ve been reading up on computer systems. I’ve needed to in order to write my stories. I shouldn’t have a problem using them here.”

“Okay, so we need to find any information that might lead us to finding out how those rocks would have gotten to Earth. You said you don’t remember them being at the site where you landed?”

“Not that I know of, but you would have to ask Jonathan and Martha. I was extremely weak and barely conscious when they found me. They took me and the ship back to the farm house, and waking up in their spare room is the first thing that I remember clearly.”

“So there might have been rocks there that could have gotten left behind and found there by someone else.”

“It’s possible,” Kal shrugged. “I haven’t been back to the spot since. It’s also possible that the rocks landed somewhere else. If debris from Krypton got caught up in the blast of the ship, it could have been taken along to Earth and scattered when it reached the atmosphere.”

“Well, how about we split up tasks?” Lois suggested.

“You can search for news articles dealing with any sort of cosmic activity around the time of your arrival and call

Jonathan and Martha. I'll see if I can dig up any information on a guy named Newtrich."

"Okay," Kal agreed, pinching the bridge of his nose and squinting his eyes shut.

"Are you okay, Kal?" Lois asked with concern. "Maybe you should go home and rest."

"I'm fine," he replied. "I have a bit of a headache is all, and it's been a while since I've had to put up with something like that. And I think ... I think I'm hungry," he finally decided, frowning as if it was a difficult thing to decide.

"You're hungry?" Lois blinked. "I thought you got all your energy from the sun."

"The sun has set. I must need the extra energy right now."

"The Kryptonium really took it out of you," Lois sympathized.

"Kryptonium?" Kal asked.

"Well, it needed a name," Lois defended. "What did you call it on Krypton?"

"You wouldn't be able to pronounce it," Kal told her. "Anyway, it's more of a meteorite than an element. Kryptonite would be a better word."

"Fine. Kryptonite," Lois agreed. She took two steps over to her desk and pulled open her takeout menu drawer. She grabbed her collection of menus and brought them back to the desk where Kal was sitting. "What do you think you want to eat?"

Kal shrugged. "I haven't eaten enough food here on Earth to really know."

"That's true. This is going to be your first meal here that really counts." Lois shuffled through the menus, determined to find the perfect thing. "What do you think about Thai?"

"I think it sounds just as good as anything else does. Maybe I'll just go down the street to that diner. They serve food there, right?"

"You really are hungry, aren't you? Trust me, you don't want your first meal to be from there. I know, we'll order pizza! It'll be fast, traditional, and I don't know anyone who doesn't like it."

"How fast?" Kal demanded.

The pizza came in record time, and soon Lois and Kal were sitting in the borrowed conference room looking over what they had managed to dig up while waiting for the food to arrive.

"Martha said that they might have seen something like we described the night they found me, but they can't be sure."

"And they didn't do anything about it?" Lois frowned.

"I think they were a little distracted by the alien and the spaceship. Rocks probably weren't high up on their list of priorities."

"Oh. Right."

"Anyway, they said they'd take a walk out there tomorrow to check."

"Good," Lois nodded.

"It would be good to know if the rocks are still there, but it doesn't give us a concrete trail." Kal took another slice and tore off a big bite. "There were several news stories talking about unexplained meteor activity around the time I arrived. I would guess that chunks of 'Kryptonite' landed in many different places around North America and possibly even elsewhere."

"How would that even work?" Lois asked. "There's no way the rocks would have been able to travel as fast and as

far as your spaceship."

Kal scratched the back of his head. "I don't understand enough of the science to really explain it to you," he shared. "But it is completely possible for the rocks to get caught up in the wake of the ship and travel all the way to Earth. They would only slow down when the ship was about to enter the atmosphere, which would explain the different locations and times that they fell."

"So there's no way to tell for sure where all the pieces of Kryptonite are. Newtrich could have gotten them from anywhere."

Kal sighed and kneaded his forehead.

"How are you feeling?" Lois asked sympathetically. "Any sign of your powers coming back?"

"No," Kal replied. "But I'm fine. It put me a little off balance to suddenly be back to normal, but I've adjusted now."

"How's the pizza?"

"It's good," he smiled. "Food on Earth is much better than what we had on Krypton. You take a lot more pleasure in making it than we ever did."

"There aren't a lot of articles about Newtriches, but I did manage to find out a couple things about a Gene Newtrich," Lois shared. "He's got a doctorate from Met U in Geology and had a research position at the university for a couple years before he was fired."

"Why?"

"His funding was cut," Lois shrugged, glancing at the article that told the story. "Apparently he wasn't getting good enough results. The only reason it was publicized was because he made a big deal about it. He threatened the Dean and vandalized his old lab space. Any chance of him being hired at another university would have died with this article."

"He sounds dangerous," Kal frowned. "I don't like to think of Marli being mixed up with that man."

"Me either," Lois agreed. "I couldn't find much else about him. We'll have to wait until Jimmy comes in tomorrow. I'm sure he can dig up some information about what Newtrich has been doing since he was fired."

"Okay," Kal agreed. "I suppose it can wait until then."

"We should probably call it a night," Lois suggested, more for his benefit than hers. Despite what he said, he still looked exhausted, and he probably wouldn't take a rest unless she forced him to. "If you want to meet me here again tomorrow, we'll talk to Jimmy about looking up Newtrich."

"We should call the number Marli gave us," Kal remembered. "He might not answer because it's late, but we should at least try."

"Okay." Lois grabbed the sheet that she had written the number on and punched the digits into the phone, setting it on speaker.

The phone rang several times, but there was no answer.

"He must be away from the phone," Kal guessed.

"Or he's got some type of caller ID and isn't going to pick up the phone for us," Lois added.

She was just about to hang up when the ringing stopped abruptly and a gruff voice came through the line.

"Hello?"

"Is this Mr. Newtrich?" Lois asked, sitting forward in her seat.

"Who's calling?" he demanded.

"I ... " Lois hesitated. If Newtrich was a dangerous person, she did not want him to know that Marli had been

the one to tell her about him. Yet she had to explain how she got the number somehow She probably should have thought this through before she called.

Her brief hesitation was too much time for Newtrich.

"I don't know who you are, but don't call this number again," he demanded shortly and then hung up.

"Wow." Kal's eyebrows lifted. "He really didn't want to talk to you."

"Yeah," Lois agreed. "I don't know who he is, but he's definitely got something to hide. First thing tomorrow, we're finding out more about this Newtrich guy."

Part 19

Lois had just come into the newsroom that morning when Cat snuck up to her, looking strangely agitated. "I need to talk to you," she whispered to Lois intensely. She grabbed hold of Lois' arms and steered her into the conference room.

"Cat, I just got in," Lois groaned. "Give me a chance get some coffee, check my messages, or at least take off my coat."

Cat slammed the door shut and plunked Lois down in a chair by the table.

"Okay, normally, I wouldn't talk to you about this. About anything important, really. But I could really use a friend now, and you're about the closest thing I have to one."

Lois stopped in the middle of forming her next complaint. Cat was actually acknowledging that she needed Lois? It must be something serious.

"What is it, Cat?"

Cat paced around the room, wringing her hands nervously. Finally, she blurted it out.

"Arthur asked me to marry him last night."

"What?"

"It was so unexpected," Cat continued. "He invited me over to his place for dinner, and I noticed that he put in a lot of effort to make the evening special, but then he got down on one knee, and he had a ring"

"What did you say?" Lois asked, her mouth dry.

"I told him I'd have to think about it. I mean, we haven't really been dating that long, and it seems way too early to be thinking about *marriage*, but there's some part of me that wants to say yes. Sure, I started dating him just because he was rich, but now things are so much deeper between us. I feel like I can be the real me when I'm with him. I've never felt that with *anyone* before. And the thought of us spending the rest of our lives together just makes me feel so disgustingly happy, you know? It's like there's nothing I want more in the world."

"You're going to tell him yes," Lois realized.

"I guess I am," Cat thought aloud, a dreamy smile floating across her lips. "Just thinking about it, it all seems so perfect, you know?"

Lois had to say something. Arthur Chow was still on her list of suspects of people who could have been responsible for the Prometheus sabotage. What if he was the new criminal mastermind in Metropolis?

"Are you sure you know him well enough to get married?" she asked Cat gently. "You can't possibly know everything about him."

"I know enough," Cat shrugged. "I know that I love him."

"But what if he was hiding something?" Lois continued. "Something bad that he's kept hidden from you?"

"What are you saying, Lois?" Cat asked suspiciously.

"It's just ... His name might have come up in an investigation," Lois confessed.

"Well, you didn't find anything." The way she worded it, it wasn't a question.

"No, but that doesn't mean any —"

"Yes, it does. It means that he's innocent. I can't believe you would do something like this, Lois! You pried into his private life."

"Cat, I just think that you're rushing into this too soon. Arthur Chow is a wealthy man with a lot of connections to some very powerful people. And I'm suspicious of that."

Cat shook her head in disgust. "Just because you haven't been able to find anyone who you're willing to love yet doesn't mean you have to sabotage my relationship, Lois. I came to you for advice, and you couldn't give me anything worthwhile. We're getting married, okay? I've decided that now, thanks to you. And I don't ever want to hear that you're investigating my *fiancé* again."

Lois flinched as the door slammed behind Cat.

It had taken Kal longer than he thought it would to get to the Daily Planet building. His powers had still not returned, and the traffic moved a lot slower when he was actually a part of it rather than observing from above.

In a way, it was comforting to be without his powers. He didn't have to think so hard about controlling himself, and he felt more like he used to back on Krypton. But at the same time, it was unsettling to be without them. He had gotten used to them. They helped him to feel safe while adjusting to this planet. Now, he was discovering just how many ways a person could have a serious accident on this planet. He had tripped over every stair that he climbed so far today. Apparently, his powers helped to make him more coordinated.

When he met up with Lois, he was surprised to see that her eyes were puffy and a little red.

"Have you been crying?" he asked her gently.

"Yes," she admitted. "Only a little, though. I just got in a fight with someone. Don't worry about it — it's just a personal thing between us. Have your powers come back at all?"

"I think I might have some fuzzy x-ray vision, but nothing beyond that." He watched her closely. She didn't seem too upset anymore, and he decided to just let it slide. If she wanted to talk about it, she would.

"Well, I'm sure they will." Lois patted his arm. "Did you eat a good breakfast?"

He mentally calculated all he had eaten. Three eggs, four pieces of toast, an orange, two large pancakes, and five strips of bacon. Did that count as a good breakfast?

He nodded. "I'm still getting hungry. I must need the extra energy to heal." He had wanted to eat more bacon, but he had heard about cholesterol, and apparently it was bad to have too much of it.

"I have Jimmy trying to find out as much as he can about that phone number and about Gene Newtrich," Lois informed Kal.

"Lois, that man is staring at you," Kal informed her.

Lois glanced back to see the man looking at her from behind the glass door. "That's Perry. My boss. Do you think you can watch out for yourself for a bit? I think he wants to talk to me about something."

"Sure," Kal shrugged.

"If my phone rings, answer it. It's probably the Kents."

She left him to twiddle his thumbs for a while until the phone rang.

"Hello?" he answered.

"You're not Lois," a strange voice replied.

"Uh ... No. I'm Clark Kent, a friend of hers. Do you want me to take a message?"

"A friend, huh? I've yet to meet a friend who Lois will let answer her phone. You must be some friend."

Kal didn't know how to respond to this, but it turned out he didn't have to, as the strange man continued talking.

"Anyway, tell Lois that I've got something for her that's juicier than Peking duck, and if she wants it, she'll have to bring me a double serving. Got it?"

"Uh ... yes."

"Good."

The man hung up, and Kal stared at the phone, puzzled. The world of reporting was certainly strange, he thought as he scribbled the message for Lois onto a pad of paper. He didn't want to take a chance of forgetting to tell her.

When the phone rang again, he answered it with hesitation.

"Hello?"

"Kal, is that you?"

"Yes, Martha. How are you?"

"Oh, we're fine, honey. How are *you* feeling?"

"Still no powers to speak of, but I'm feeling well regardless. Did you manage to find the rocks?"

"I'm sorry, Kal, no. We walked all over the field and didn't see anything."

"Oh."

"Well, it might not be as bad as you think. Maybe they got buried underground because of the wind or the snow or something."

"Maybe," Kal agreed, but he still doubted it. It seemed most likely that someone had come and found them already.

"Well, I hope you can find out more on your end," Martha told him. "Good luck, sweetie, and I'm sure that you'll feel better soon."

"Thanks." Kal hung up, thinking over what Martha had told him. He knew that the owners of the field he had been found in rarely went out on the property. They were both old and no longer had the physical ability to check on it regularly. As a favor, Jonathan often checked up on the property, but he wasn't there all of the time, and it would have been easy for a crew to slip in during the night and comb the field for any rocks.

"Clark?"

Kal turned around to see Lois standing there with her boss hovering beside her.

"Clark, I'd like you to meet my boss, Perry White," she introduced impatiently. "Perry, Clark. Clark, Perry."

"That'll do, Lois," Perry stopped her. "Why don't you get yourself a cup of coffee while Mr. Kent and I talk?"

Lois rolled her eyes but left anyways. Perry sat in the chair beside Lois' desk.

"What can I do for you, sir?" Clark asked, feeling a little nervous.

"It's Perry," the man corrected. "Only copy boys call me 'sir,' and I hope you'll be a lot more than that."

"Excuse me?"

"I've read some of your stories, Kent. Not only do I like them, but it seems the people of Metropolis like them as well. I'd like to offer you a column in the Daily Planet."

"Really?"

"I'm not sure what about yet. We can hammer that out

together. All I know is that readers will be happy to get more of you. What do you say?"

"That sounds great, Perry." Not only would the column give him steady work, but he would be working out of the Daily Planet office, a place that had always fascinated him.

"Wonderful. Now, I don't want Lois to hear this, but I'm hoping to pair you two up occasionally. I know you were here helping her with the pheromone story, and here you are again. It isn't often that Lois will willingly work with a partner, and having you around would be a good thing. Just don't tell her that."

"Um ... " Kal glanced up to where Lois was hovering over Perry, a cup of coffee clutched in her hand.

Perry looked up and winced. "Now, Lois," he began cautiously. "I didn't mean ... "

"It's fine, Perry," Lois shrugged. "Clark's one of the only ones who can keep up with me, that's all."

"Huh," Perry grunted, obviously pleased. "Well, Clark, if you come with me, we'll head down to HR."

"Here's everything I found out about Gene Newtrich," Jimmy announced, slapping a folder onto Lois' desk.

Perry chuckled, looking at the thick folder. "How about I leave you two to tackle this? HR can wait. And Lois, as soon as this story is ready, I expect to hear everything you won't tell me about it."

He got up and left to go back to his office as Lois flipped to the top page.

"Okay, here's the stuff about his early career we discovered last night. It seems that he worked a bunch of odd jobs for a while, nothing really related to his field of study. Then, just recently, he was hired by an independent company. ACL Mining."

"What does the company do?" Kal asked.

"I could hardly find anything on them," Jimmy butted in. "They must be really small time. There were a couple projects they funded overseas, but that's pretty much it. All I've got beyond that is an address." He pulled the information out of the pile.

Lois snatched the address from Jimmy's hand.

"Newtrich is too educated to be worrying about jewelry. And the fact that he's hired by a mining company makes me think that they're looking at more than souvenirs with those rocks. We'll have to go visit him," she decided.

"Lois, we can't just run into an office and start asking questions," Kal protested.

The phone rang yet again, and Lois grabbed it.

"This is crazy," Kal complained to Jimmy.

"It's Lois," Jimmy shrugged. "That's who she is. We've learned long ago not to try to stop her."

"That was Brian," Lois told Kal, hanging up. "He's meeting us there."

"Great." Between a reporter anxious to find the person responsible for hurting her friend and a police officer desperate to find the person who used his wife, Kal didn't see what a powerless superhero could do to stop this.

Brian was careful to park his car a few blocks away from the building. He wasn't here on official police business, and he didn't want any of his actions to get back to the station. At least he didn't have to wear a uniform anymore, so he didn't have to worry about changing.

He met up with Lois and Kal by Lois' Jeep. "Do you have a plan?" he asked the pair.

"Go in, make him give back all the Kryptonite, and get him to tell us who hired him," Lois replied.

“He probably won’t know what ‘Kryptonite’ is,” Kal smiled.

“I don’t know what it is,” Brian mentioned.

“Kal’s name for those awful rocks,” Lois replied.

“Look, let’s just go in, okay? I’m really good at winging it.”

“Are your powers back yet, Kal?” Brian asked as they crossed the street.

“I have a little bit of x-ray vision, but that’s pretty much it,” Kal replied.

“Well, at least it’s something.”

Newtrich’s office was upstairs in a rented building. It was possible that the other businesses in the building were part of the plan, whatever that was, but they had no reason to suspect any involvement, so it was best if they focused on talking to Newtrich.

When they reached the reception desk, Lois spoke for the group through silent agreement.

“We represent Lane Equipment,” she told the receptionist. “We supply ... uh, scientific equipment to researchers, and we would like to talk to Mr. Newtrich regarding his supply needs.” The receptionist gave Lois a blank stare, so she continued talking. “We guarantee we can give him a better deal than what he’s getting right now. I bet he’s paying twice as much as he should be for... test tubes and ...”

Kal gave her a subtle nudge, and she stopped talking.

The receptionist looked justifiably wary. “Do you have a card?”

“Unfortunately, we’re all out,” Lois shrugged apologetically. “There was a mishap with our printing order.”

“Mr. Newtrich is very specific about not letting visitors up into his office,” the receptionist explained. “The best you can hope for is to leave a number and see if he’ll call you back.”

“Fine,” Lois grudgingly agreed. She scribbled a number Brian didn’t recognize on a piece of paper and pushed it towards the receptionist. “By the way, we’ve had a long drive into the city. Are there any bathrooms on the main floor?”

Quick directions were given, and Lois led the small group off in the general direction, only to veer off towards another door that was marked as the stairwell.

“In here,” Lois beckoned.

“Lois, we’re not supposed to be here,” Kal protested.

“So? This way, we can get in to see Newtrich. He’s on the fourth floor — it’s not going to be that difficult to get up there.”

“I hate stairs,” Kal muttered. But he still followed Lois up the steps.

Brian followed silently. All he could think about was that he was going to meet the man who had placed his wife in danger. Whatever Newtrich was planning to do with the Kryptonite, it couldn’t be legal ... or good. What would have happened if Marli had stumbled too close to the truth? He usually considered himself to be mild-mannered, but something about this situation had awakened feelings in him that he hadn’t known he possessed.

They got to the fourth floor, and Kal stopped as they stepped out of the stairwell.

“I can feel Kryptonite,” he announced.

“You should go back,” Lois decided.

“No,” Kal shook his head. “It’s very faint, and I want to find out what this guy’s up to.”

Brian was barely paying attention at this point.

Newtrich was just on the other side of the door, and it was all he could think about. He needed to make sure Newtrich could never hurt his family again. In two steps, he had reached the door, and he flung it open. A man behind a desk looked up in surprise, rising to his feet and stepping out from behind the desk.

“Are you Newtrich?” Brian demanded.

“Yes,” the man replied, which was about all he could get out before Brian crossed the room and pinned him against the wall.

“Brian!” Lois shouted sharply, but Brian didn’t pay any attention to her.

Brian had feigned aggression in the past as a way to scare someone into talking. But he couldn’t remember ever feeling this genuinely angry before.

“Where did you find those rocks?” he demanded.

“Who’s funding you? What are you planning on doing with them?”

Newtrich made no reply. All he did was smirk and ask innocently, “What rocks?”

“Don’t pretend like you don’t know!” Brian snapped, pushing his arm further against Newtrich’s windpipe. “The rocks from Krypton. What are you doing with them?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Newtrich choked out, still infuriatingly calm.

“Brian, stop it,” Kal spoke calmly, although there was an underlying strain that indicated the Kryptonite was bothering him. “This is not going to help.”

“I’m going to make you pay for what you’ve done,” Brian threatened, still not backing off.

“I haven’t done anything illegal,” Newtrich replied serenely. “Even if I did know what you’re talking about, there is nothing wrong with carrying out research on some interesting minerals provided by a private employer. No matter how hard you search the law books, you won’t find anything.”

Brian’s arm sagged. Newtrich was right, unfortunately. Although his intentions were obviously impure, he hadn’t actually done anything illegal. And yet Brian was risking a lot by running in here and assaulting the scientist.

He took a step away from Newtrich. He glanced back at Lois and Kal. Lois looked relieved, and Kal was looking sick.

Newtrich stretched out the muscles in his neck and then stepped behind his desk. “Now, I believe you three were not invited up here by the reception staff. That means you’re trespassing. If you leave now, I won’t press charges.”

Brian threw a desperate glance back at Lois, but she appeared as defeated as he felt. Thanks to his blunt entrance, there was no way they could try a subtle approach. And Kal was looking steadily worse. They had no choice but to leave with no more information than when they came. Thanks to him and his uncontrollable temper.

Brian shook his head, trying to clear it. Normally, he never had a problem in dealing with all sorts of scumbags. But this time it was different. This time, his family was in danger.

Part 20

Lois shoved the hat further down on her head.

There was no way this disguise would pass for more than a moment, but Lois hoped it would be enough to keep Newtrich from recognizing her instantly and running off.

She took a sip of coffee, casually glancing towards the door. Marli had told her that she had a meeting scheduled

with Newtrich today, but what if their performance at his office had scared him off? This seemed to be her last chance — which was why she had slipped out from under the watchful eye of Kal and Brian. It would seem very suspicious if she had brought one of them here, and that would have tipped Newtrich off right away. Anyway, she was going to be perfectly safe. There were tons of customers here, and she wouldn't leave the building. And if it seemed really unsafe, she would call Kal or Brian or someone and get them to pick her up.

Out of the corner of her eye, she was able to see Newtrich enter the shop. She turned her face so Newtrich couldn't see her as clearly. She tensed with anticipation. She was betting on Newtrich not wanting to make a scene in a public place. That would give her ... how many seconds? Not long, anyway, until he left.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, startling her with his presence.

"I ... " She cursed herself silently. She had been so busy planning her tactics that she hadn't noticed him sneak up.

"I told you to leave me alone," he told her furiously, glancing around the café.

He looked different from the pulled-together man she had encountered before. Something must have changed. Was he perhaps feeling guilty?

"Newtrich, I want to know everything about those rocks from Krypton," she told him, deciding to try to see if he would give anything up. "What are you planning on doing with them?"

Newtrich glanced around the café again and then nodded quickly. "Look, I'll tell you everything, I promise. Just not here. Outside, where there's less chance of us being overheard."

As soon as Lois followed him around the corner of the building, she knew she had made a mistake. Rough hands wrapped around her tightly, and before she could even scream, she was thrown into the van, and they were driving down the street.

She struggled to break free, but her hands were forced into plastic cuffs which cinched tight painfully. Then she felt a cold pressure at her temple.

"If you even think about calling for help, I'll silence you right away," Newtrich informed her, his voice just as cold as the barrel of his gun.

He had never had any intention of giving her information, Lois realized. In fact, he must have been planning to kidnap her all along. He would have been prepared for this.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"Know what?"

"That I was going to be there instead of Marli. You must've known in advance."

"Good reasoning, Ms. Lane. There's a very simple reason why I knew in advance. I already knew that you couldn't possibly be Mrs. O'Hara because we already have her. She's been in our custody for the last two hours."

Kal drummed his fingers on Lois' desk. She still wasn't back. She had promised to meet him back here after she had gone to talk to her source. Why wasn't she back yet?

The elevator dinged, and Kal looked up hopefully. His heart sank, however, when he saw Brian enter the newsroom looking disheveled.

"Where's Lois?" Brian asked.

"I don't know," Kal admitted. "She's not back yet, and

she isn't responding to her pager. What's wrong, Brian?"

"Marli's missing. She was supposed to pick Adam up at my parents', and she never showed."

"Do you think ... " Kal didn't want to suggest it, but Brian seemed to have already reached a conclusion.

"Where else would she be but with Newtrich?" Brian snapped, waving his arms hysterically. "He probably realized that she got suspicious. We never should have gone to his office. Then he never would have suspected!"

"We'll find them, Brian," Kal promised, putting a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Somehow, we'll get them back."

It seemed to calm Brian down a bit. "Do you have your powers back?" Brian asked hopefully, bending in close to Kal to ensure privacy. "I know you might have been knocked out a bit with what happened earlier."

Kal tested his vision on the floor. For a moment, it melted away, and he could see the tops of the heads of the people below them. But then it snapped back into view, more opaque than even before. Kal swallowed and shook his head sadly. "No. I don't."

"Damn," Brian whispered softly.

"What would Lois do at a time like this?" Kal wondered aloud. "She's been in plenty of situations before when she's needed to find out the truth behind something fast."

"Kal, this is my wife we're talking about, not just a newspaper deadline," Brian spoke testily.

"Lois is more than just a reporter looking to get a front page headline," Kal replied. "She does all of that because she wants to help people. She's the voice for people who can't speak for themselves. She sees things that other people can't. I've never met anyone so dedicated in my life." The fervor he spoke with surprised him. True, he had always respected Lois and what she did for a living, but he had no idea he felt so strongly about her convictions until now. "Ever since I came here, I've seen her working tirelessly to uncover a corrupt businessman. She thinks that all of the criminal activity in Metropolis can be traced back to —"

He stopped, realizing what he was saying. If everything fishy in Metropolis could be traced back to one person, then it would make sense that the same person would somehow be connected to the Kryptonite jewelry.

Well, maybe. But if it was true, it was a leap of logic that Lois herself would be proud of. Anyway, it gave them a new angle to work with.

That man who had called him earlier. He sounded like he worked for Lois as a source of some kind.

"We need to find someone," Kal announced, starting to search for the piece of paper he had left on Lois' desk. How had she managed to cover it up this quickly?

"Who?" Brian asked desperately.

"A source of Lois'," Kal explained. "He called ... said he had a great scoop and that Lois owed him duck from Peking. Although I am a little confused because he should know that the name of the city has changed to —"

"You mean Peking duck? As in food?"

"Oh. I guess." Kal finally found the slip of paper and handed it to Brian to read.

"You didn't get a name?" Brian asked.

Kal shook his head. "He said she would know who he was. There's got to be something else here that will give us a clue." He began digging through the rest of Lois' desk, reading notes she had left containing story ideas and reminders to pick up dry cleaning.

"Uh ... CK?"

“What is it, Jimmy?” Kal asked, secretly wanting him to go away.

“Why are you searching through Lois’ stuff? You know she’s going to kill you when she finds out.”

Suddenly, Kal realized that Jimmy could help them more than he had thought.

“Jimmy, I’m looking for a source of Lois’. Do you know of anyone that she might pay with food?”

Jimmy’s eyes dropped, and he shuffled his feet. “CK, I know Lois wouldn’t really want me sharing her sources.”

“Jimmy, this is important,” Kal pressed. “We think Lois might be in trouble.”

The expression on Jimmy’s face changed. “What happened to her?”

“I don’t know yet. That’s why I need to get in touch with this guy. He might have some ideas.”

“Okay, yeah. I know there’s a guy that Lois is always getting food for. She’s pretty secretive about him, so I don’t know much. But his name is Bobby, and he’s in her Rolodex.” Jimmy gestured to the object on the desk. “Good luck getting a hold of him. Lois says he’ll only answer to her.”

Marli was tapping out the rhythm to “Hey Jude” with her fingers against the armrests of her chair. Being tied to a chair left limited options for entertainment. She had already gotten bored of “I am the Walrus,” and “I Want to Hold Your Hand” reminded her of Brian, and that was the last thing she wanted to think about now.

She was going to get out safely, she was sure. The alternative was unthinkable, yet she couldn’t bear to dwell on how Brian must be feeling right now. And Adam, too. Was it time for his supper already? Would he be missing her?

She bent her head down so her hand could reach to wipe the tears out of her eyes, wincing at the tender skin. She had already cried far too much today, and it was time to stop. That kind of thinking would only get her depressed, and she needed to pay attention. So, instead, she ran through the comforting lyrics in her head.

[Na, na, na, na-na-na-na, na-na-na-na, hey Jude ...]

The door cracked open, and light poured into the room where she was being kept. Squinting in the light, her eyes began to adjust as people filed into the room. There were four total. One was holding an ugly-looking handgun, keeping it trained on her. The other two were carrying the fourth. Not only was this person the smallest of the group, but she was also the only female. Marli had an awful suspicion about who the woman was, even though the men had placed a hood over her head.

“Enjoying yourself, Mrs. O’Hara?” the gunman asked, snarling at her.

Marli’s eyes finally adjusted enough to recognize him as Newtrich, but she decided not to give him the pleasure of hearing her respond.

Their captive seemed to recognize Marli’s name, as a muffled squeak came from beneath the hood.

“Put our guest by the other one,” Newtrich commanded. “Just on the floor — it’ll be good enough for her.”

The men dropped their prisoner, and the hood was yanked off, revealing a mess of glossy brown hair and a pair of livid eyes emanating heat from above a duct-taped mouth.

“Don’t even try calling for Superman,” Newtrich warned. “This room is being watched, and I guarantee you

that we can react faster than Superman could.”

The door closed, and Lois shuffled over to Marli on her knees. She bent her head, and Marli managed to grab hold of the tape and rip it off despite her limited ability to move her hands.

“Are you okay?” she asked Lois.

“A little bruised, but otherwise okay,” Lois replied.

“I’m so sorry I got you into this mess,” Marli apologized. “This is completely my fault.”

“Not completely,” Lois shook her head. “I sort of walked into this. Hey, do you think you can do anything about these?” She twisted around to show Marli the plastic cuffs that held her hands behind her back.

Marli picked at them ineffectually but soon gave up. “The plastic is too thick,” she told Lois. “You’re going to have to get scissors or something.”

“I figured something like that,” Lois grumbled. She pulled herself up and began roaming around the room. “Any chance of us escaping here?”

“None that I can see,” Marli replied, glad to have some company at last, even if the situation looked grim. “The chair and the table are bolted to the floor, and that light fixture looks too high up to reach, even if it could do us some good.” The room itself was small, with brick walls that had been painted an institutional glossy white. Concrete floors added nothing to the charm of the space, and the light was frustratingly dim. The only door in the room was thick and solid, locking definitively from the other side.

“Damn.” Lois obviously agreed with Marli’s assessment and kicked the table in frustration. It made a dense thump, and Lois stumbled a bit, trying to regain her balance with her hands still tied behind her back.

“Do you know how Brian’s doing?” Marli asked, unable to hold it in any longer.

Lois shook her head. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Marli shrugged, trying to appear less bothered than she actually was. There was nothing she wanted more right now than to be with her family.

Lois, meanwhile, had found the telltale red light that indicated where the camera was located.

“I know you’re there, Luthor,” she declared, fearlessly staring straight at the red light. “Why don’t you come in here and gloat like I know you want to do?”

“Luthor?” Marli asked. “How do you know it’s him?”

“This guy’s got a personal vendetta against me,” Lois replied. “Putting all this effort into kidnapping me? I should have realized that when it was only the Daily Planet that was targeted by that pheromone spray.”

Most of what she said didn’t make any sense to Marli, but before she could ask what Lois was talking about, the door to the room opened again, and Lex Luthor himself walked in, with Newtrich glaring shiftily by his side.

“Hello, Miss Lane,” Luthor greeted coolly.

“Luthor,” Lois spat back at him.

He smiled sickeningly and then turned to Marli. “Good of you to join us, Mrs. O’Hara.”

Marli wasn’t sure what to say, but thankfully Lois stepped in quickly.

“You were responsible for sabotaging the shuttle launch. And for Miranda’s death. And — ”

“Of course I was, Lois,” Luthor cut her off smugly.

“Honestly, I am surprised it’s taken you this long to figure it out. But I’m not surprised it took a plot against your favorite alien to get your attention. You really haven’t done

a very good job disguising your feelings for the thing.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Lois replied.

“Oh, come now, Lois. Anyone paying the slightest attention while reading your articles would realize that you’re hopelessly biased about the posturing egotist.”

Lois’ cheeks flamed, but she didn’t lose focus. “I meant that I didn’t know about the plot against Superman. Don’t you realize that nothing can hurt him? That’s what the whole invulnerable thing is about.”

Marli hoped that Lois knew what she was doing by bluffing like that. Lois knew as well as her that the Kryptonite was anything but good for Kal.

“Really, Lois, you can’t expect to fool me like this,” Luthor chided. “I already know the origin of the glowing rocks, and I do know that Superman would lose his powers while in their presence. At the very least, anyway. I haven’t had the opportunity to test them on the real subject.”

“And you won’t get a chance!” Lois exclaimed, finally appearing to lose her temper, and launched herself at Lex. Newtrich, however, seemed to have anticipated this reaction and caught hold of her by her wrists. He forced Lois down and held the gun pointed over her head.

“Now, Lois, it won’t do to make a scene,” Luthor grinned. “Calm down so we can have a rational discussion of your future. It will be short, so you might as well make the most of it.” Then Lex turned to Marli. “I am sorry you had to get involved in this,” he told her. “We tested the element on a lock of Superman’s hair that was put up for charity auction, you see, and if it was entirely up to me, I would not have even thought to turn the stones into jewelry. My instincts would have been to save all of our resources for something bigger. However, thanks to Ms. Lane, I do not have full control over all of my resources.”

“Ha!” Lois laughed. “At least I managed to do something to prevent you from doing whatever you want.”

“Yes, Ms. Lane, you’ve caused me injury,” Luthor snapped. “Thanks to you, I’ve had to rely on the *donation* of others to carry out all of my plans. And trust me; I will not let you forget how you’ve crippled me.”

“Oh, relax, Lex,” a female voice drawled from the doorway, speaking with a slight British accent. “You make it sound as if it’s a terrible thing that we’re together again.”

Marli could see how Luthor tensed up as soon as the mysterious woman had started talking. The cool, collected anger he had shown towards Lois had suddenly started to crumble in this new person’s presence.

“I thought I told you to stay in the back room,” Luthor spoke, putting in great effort not to take his eyes off Lois.

“Well, we’re business partners, Lex,” the woman shrugged. “That means I can do whatever I want.”

“Who are you?” Marli blurted out, forgetting her plan to stay out of the spotlight.

“Mrs. O’Hara, Ms. Lane,” Luthor ground out through a clenched jaw. “May I introduce my *ex*-wife. Arianna Carlin.”

Part 21

Kal was uncomfortable waiting in the shaded alley for Lois’ mysterious source.

For one thing, he was sure that he had stopped no less than three muggings in this specific spot, and he was feeling horribly conspicuous holding a white paper bag smelling of Chinese food with a grease spot in the bottom corner that was growing bigger by the moment.

But what made him most uncomfortable of all was the

knowledge that Lois was still missing, and that he was entirely dependent on what this man might have to say. He was Kal’s last hope.

“He’s late,” Brian remarked, checking his watch for the twelfth time.

“I know,” replied Kal, pacing around in a space a few strides wide.

What a pair they both made. Neither one of them had a clear head at this point, each concerned solely with the fate of the women they ...

They what? Brian obviously loved Marli, but what exactly was it that Kal felt towards Lois? Love wasn’t supposed to be an option.

And yet anything less suddenly felt too cheap.

“Hey, are you the guys?” A thin-looking man approached Kal and Brian cautiously, as if ready at any moment to turn around and run away from them.

“You’re Bobby?” Brian guessed.

He didn’t answer and just glanced nervously around.

“Look, I just came to tell you guys that things have changed. I don’t have anything to say anymore. And if you were smart, you’d let things drop.”

“You promised you’d help us,” Kal accused, his feelings of betrayal winning over politeness.

“Yeah, well, things change, buddy. I’ve got to look out for myself, okay?”

“Someone spooked you,” Brian guessed.

Bobby’s jaw hardened, but he didn’t speak again.

“This always happens,” Brian explained to Kal. “We get someone willing to come forward, but they suddenly change their mind, and we know that they’ve been convinced otherwise.”

“Look, I have to watch out for myself,” Bobby explained again, taking a step away from them. “I’m sorry, but —”

“Lois has been taken,” Kal blurted out. “And we think that you might be able to help us.”

Bobby froze. “Lois is in danger?”

“Yes. And we think my wife is with her,” Brian added.

Bobby hesitated but then seemed to find some sort of inner resolve. He closed the gap between them and beckoned them to bend in close.

“Okay, so the other night I was hanging out in a certain establishment I often frequent. And this guy sitting at the bar is ordering a lot and making some talk. You know the type.”

Kal wasn’t really sure what Bobby was talking about but decided to let him continue in hopes that he would start to be more specific.

“And he gets into a snit about people not respecting him enough, and it comes out that he used to be a cop but that he had to leave ‘cause he never had enough freedom. He wanted to take justice into his own hands.”

“Miranda? The perfumer?” Brian asked.

“Well, he never really came out and said it directly,” Bobby hedged. “But you could tell that’s what he was implying. Anyway, he said he was working somewhere else now that appreciated his talents.”

“Where?” Kal demanded.

“ACL Shipping,” Bobby replied. “It’s owned by an Arianna Carlin. They’ve got a building by the river. He says he does a lot more for them than just security.”

“Thanks, Bobby.” Brian grabbed the bag of food from Kal and shoved it at the man. “We really owe you for this.”

“Wait, I haven’t told you. Just a couple hours ago, this

guy's body was found in a dumpster. Whoever it is you're dealing with, it's serious business."

"We know," Brian nodded. "Are you going to be safe on your own?" he asked Bobby, remembering his responsibilities as a police officer.

"I've got a place where I can lay low for a few days," Bobby nodded.

"Good. If everything goes right, this should be over in a matter of hours." Brian led Kal out of the alley and towards his car.

"Uh, Brian," Kal began hesitatingly. "Even if we do know the place, I still don't have much of my powers. Not enough to take on whoever's holding Marli and Lois hostage."

"That's okay," said Brian, opening the driver's door and sliding in. "Thanks to Bobby's tip, we've got them on suspicion of murder. That means we can bring the full force of the Metropolis Police Department." Grinning at Kal, he reached for his radio.

The woman standing in the doorway was beautiful, of course, and was dressed in a well-cut suit that looked even more expensive than the one Luthor was wearing. She looked tall from Lois' position, still held as she was on her knees by Newtrich's meaty hand and his cold gun. She didn't like the way Carlin looked at her.

"Ex-wife?" Carlin questioned. "Now, that's not very loving, is it, Lex? And may I remind you that my legal name is still Arianna Carlin *Luthor*. Fitting considering I hold most of the control of your finances. Or *former* finances, I should say."

"You're working together?" Lois asked, not really believing it.

"Unfortunately," Luthor muttered.

"What was that?" Carlin questioned sharply.

"Nothing, my dear," Luthor recovered quickly.

She seemed unconvinced and slipped closer to him, staring at Lois in a way that made her very uncomfortable. Lois flexed her hands behind her back, but the tight plastic cuffs still held tight.

"Darling," she murmured into Luthor's ear, "can we just finish up here quickly? I have another way for us to spend the rest of the day."

"Not now, Arianna." Luthor brushed her off his shoulder. "I've waited a long time for this."

Carlin was apparently not to be shaken off so easily. "Darling, we've worked together well in the past, haven't we?"

"Yes," Luthor replied distractedly, never taking his eyes off Lois.

"Fooling Miranda was fun, wasn't it? And although the space station plan didn't go as we hoped, this jewelry thing will be perfect, I promise. Just imagine what will happen when everyone is wearing jewelry that incapacitates Superman when he gets close! It'll be only a matter of time before we can take him out completely."

"Yes, that will be nice," Luthor agreed. He patted her hand absently.

"So, why can't we put business aside just this once and enjoy our success?" Carlin pleaded. "You need to have a little fun." Her hand snaked across his chest and began loosening his tie.

"Not now," Luthor insisted, taking her hand off him. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Yes!" Carlin snapped. "I can see that. Just like you've

been busy ever since we got back together. Always plotting to get revenge on Lois Lane. Always thinking about her! It's been your obsession! God, it's like a twisted crush. Why don't you just skip all of this and marry her already?"

Luthor laughed. "My dear, you can't possibly be serious. Honestly, Arianna, I thought you were above all this petty feminine jealousy. I can see I was wrong."

"You think this is petty?" Carlin exploded. "I'll show you how petty I am!"

She elbowed Newtrich in the chin, snapping his head back until it hit the wall with a dull smack. Before he fell, she grabbed the gun he had been using to hold Lois in place and fumbled to get the proper grip on it.

Lois squeezed her eyes shut as she heard a deafening bang go off in the room. Marli gasped from her chair, and Lois counted out two beats with her eyes still closed.

She didn't feel any pain.

Cautiously opening one eye, then the next, she saw Carlin's body lying on the floor on top of Newtrich's. Luthor stood across the room holding a gun of his own. Marli was still sitting in her chair, struggling to take even breaths and straining against the ropes that held her wrists to the chair.

Luthor had prevented Arianna from killing Lois? Why? Was his obsession really because of some sort of buried attraction? As much as it made her skin crawl to think about it, maybe she could use it to her advantage.

"Don't think I did that for you, Ms. Lane," Luthor spoke, putting all hopes of that aside. "I've just waited too long to let anyone but myself kill you." The gun shifted in his hand, and Lois felt her stomach drop.

Scrambling across the cold floor, she managed to pick up Arianna's dropped gun.

Luthor laughed. "Good luck trying to shoot that with your hands tied behind your back."

Lois cursed her cuffs as she fumbled to get the proper grip. But even if she did, what good would it do when the gun was stuck behind her back?

"Where should I shoot you first?" Luthor mused.

"Somewhere painful, but not instantly fatal, of course. I need you to suffer."

"Bastard," Lois spat. Not really the most original of epithets, but her brain was preoccupied.

"Or maybe ... Something else will be more painful. You, after all, took away something I cared very deeply about. My money. Maybe I should take away something you care about."

His gun swung across to point at Marli, and Lois took the only chance she figured she was going to get. Dropping her borrowed gun, she ducked low and aimed for Luthor's legs, knocking him off balance with her body. He grabbed a fistful of her hair, and her head snapped back.

"Do you think you can beat me that easily?" he panted, squeezing her arm with his other hand. The gun was apparently forgotten, which was exactly what Lois was hoping for.

Being so close, it was easy for her the snap her knee up and hit him exactly where her self-defense instructor had taught her to. He doubled over, blood rushing to his head as veins popped out on his neck. Taking another swing, she aimed for his nose.

But he was ready for her this time and grabbed hold of her leg. She fell, her imprisoned arms once again being her downfall.

Her head smacked the concrete floor, and her vision

swam. Luthor was standing over her. She had lost.

Her eyes closed, and she forced them open again sluggishly. She wanted to be conscious until the end. Straining her eyes to focus, she peered at the open doorway in confusion.

People were coming into the room. People wearing black and with letters on their chests.

She couldn't hear properly. But Luthor seemed surprised. His hands were raised above his head as they were encircled with the strange people.

As hard as she tried, she couldn't focus enough to make sense of the noises in the room. She wanted nothing more than to just close her eyes

Then she thought she heard someone. Was it ... ?

Someone was holding her and brushing her hair away from her face.

"K ... " She didn't have the strength to speak, but she felt strong arms hold her tightly.

She looked up and saw a pair of glasses and, behind them, concerned eyes that made her feel completely safe.

Everything was okay. He had found her.

Her mouth tasted like pond scum. Dehydrated pond scum. She swallowed automatically and grimaced at her dry throat.

She needed water. But more than that, she needed something to take away her massive headache. Everything felt heavy and stiff. Her eyes opened a crack, and she slammed them shut in response to the bright lights. She groaned.

A chair near to her creaked. "Lois?"

"Kal?" she whispered, her hoarse voice cracking.

"Yes, it's me. Do you need some water?"

"Yeah." With great care, she pushed herself higher up on the bed, still keeping her eyes closed.

Kal placed a cup near her lips, and she sipped gratefully.

"Can you dim the lights at all?" she asked, her normal voice somewhat restored.

She felt the light breeze of Kal moving around the room and cautiously opened her eyes when the glow against her eyelids decreased.

"We're in the hospital," she observed, glancing at her IV and the bed she was in.

"You have a concussion," Kal told her. "How much do you remember?"

"The last thing I remember is you holding me. Wait, how's Marli?"

"At home with Brian and Adam," Kal replied. "She's shaken up, but she and the baby are still healthy. Newtrich is in this same hospital, actually, but he's handcuffed to the bed and isn't going to get very far out of here."

"Luthor?" She was almost afraid to ask.

"In police custody," Kal told her. "On suspicion of a lot of crimes which we won't let him get away with this time."

"He killed Arianna!" Lois remembered. "And I can witness to that. That's one thing for sure he won't get away with. Combine that with everything else, and we'll make sure that he's in prison for the rest of his life."

"More than he deserves," Kal grumbled.

"Kal!" Lois exclaimed, shocked at his behavior. He had never said something like that about anyone before.

"I'm sorry," he shook his head. "But seeing what Luthor did to you ... It brought out all sorts of feelings that I — I'm not used to feeling."

Lois watched him curiously. Something about the way he was acting seemed ... Different. He was holding her hand, she realized. He hadn't ever done that before.

"Kal, what's going on?" she asked him.

"Lois, when you were kidnapped, I was forced to imagine what my life would be like without you. And it was ... "

"Sad?" Lois guessed.

"Unbearable."

"Oh." Her brain had frozen. Could he really be going where she thought he was going?

"Today, I realized just how much you mean to me, Lois. And it's so much more than I thought. Lois, I love you."

"Really?" she asked, hardly daring to believe. "You *love* love me? Not like a friend would or a brother would?"

"I love you like a soul mate would," Kal told her softly, brushing his hand against her cheek. "And I was wondering ... If you would go on a date with me."

Lois blinked. Then, before she could stop herself, she burst out laughing.

Kal pulled his hand away, and although she immediately missed it, it didn't stop her from shaking the bed with barely restrained laughter. Her headache was forgotten for the time being.

"Lois?" Kal didn't look hurt, which was a relief. Just confused.

"You're asking me out on a date?" Lois choked out.

"Yes," Kal replied warily.

"So, that's it?" she asked. "You just say 'I love you, let's go watch a movie together'?"

"I thought that was the accepted norm."

"Kal, since when has our relationship even been normal?" Lois asked him, finding his hand again and bringing it back to her cheek.

"Never," he admitted, smiling.

"Look, I'm not saying you fly us off to Vegas right away so we can get married," Lois explained to him. "But I think we can skip some of the first date formalities."

"That sounds fair," Kal agreed. "So, no dinner and movie?"

"Well, I'm not saying we couldn't do something like that," Lois told him. "Maybe with an exotic locale thrown in. Assuming that your powers are back, of course."

"Back in full force. I guess I just needed time to heal."

"Yeah, you did," Lois agreed. "Just like you needed time to heal emotionally from what happened on Krypton."

"Yes," Kal agreed. "And I'm not saying I'm completely healed from that, Lois. I'm far from forgetting the loss of my home."

"No one's expecting you to," Lois told him. "That's always going to be a part of you. All I'm asking is that you're willing to make a new home here with me."

"I can certainly do that," Kal replied. "There's always been some instinct inside me to be with you, and now I've finally learned that there's no use in fighting it."

"Nope," Lois shook her head. "We're destined for each other, and there's no fighting against that."

"No," Kal, spoke, leaning in close, his breath tickling her nose. "Absolutely not."

"Now stop talking," Lois commanded, "and kiss me."

Out of all the things Kal had learned when he came to Earth, the most important was to never disobey Lois Lane.

So he did just as she said.

THE END